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Michigan women travel south to hit boutiques of Baton Rouge

- By KAREN MARTIN
- Assistant People editor

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PATRICK DENNIS/The Advocate

Shaina Huitsing, 19, and her mom, Tami Huitsing, browse for rings at Merci Beaucoup. The pair are part of a group of 10 Michigan women who love to shop Baton Rouge's boutiques.

If Baton Rouge's economy shows an unexpected uptick this month, a group of women from Michigan just might be the cause.

While some women might venture across town for a good sale, this group traveled more than 1,000 miles to take advantage of great shopping at the boutiques and malls of Baton Rouge and the surrounding area.

Why, you might ask?

"Baton Rouge has incredible boutiques," said Amy Kogler Langelier, the ringleader of this merry band of hardcore shoppers. "You can find things here that you won't find anywhere else."

Langelier, 33, grew up in Baton Rouge but now calls Jenison, Mich., home.

Shopping in the North, she said, is more function than fun. Yes, you can get great coats, but when it comes to fun summer tops, handbags, sandals and dresses, Baton Rouge just can't be beat.

Over the years, a friend or two or five have come home with Langelier.

“In 2005, five of us came. In 2006, there were seven. This year, it’s 10 of us,” said Langelier.

Once here, the group was joined by Langelier’s mom, Jeannene Kogler, 60, of Baton Rouge; her sister, 25-year-old Allison Kogler Matherne, of Covington; and Julie Salguero, 25, a family friend from Baton Rouge. That made a total of 13.

They all stayed at Kogler’s Baton Rouge home.

And that took some organization. Fortunately, Langelier, a graphic designer and the mother of two, is an organizer extraordinaire.

That’s what it takes to get 10 women on the right plane and to shuttle 13 women in a three-car caravan from New Orleans to St. Francisville and back again, with many, many shopping stops along the way.

“She scheduled who’s rooming with who, and she made a bathroom schedule. You had to decide if you wanted to shower in the morning or at night,” said Jane Haney, 62. “She wanted to make sure we all had hot water.”

“And, we all have buddies,” added Tami Huitsing, a 43-year-old interior designer. “We have travel buddies and shopping buddies and meal-splitting buddies.”

“And we have tags on our towels so we know whose towels are whose, and we have water bottle koozies with our names on them,” said Olivia Studebaker, 25.

“Last time, we’d get in the van and nobody knew whose water bottle was whose,” explained Langelier, who always seemed to be smiling.

There were lots of big smiles in this group, which arrived on a Friday and left the next Tuesday.

The women ranged in age from 19 to 62, and included stay-at-home moms, interior designers, a pastor’s wife, a human resources assistant, a hair stylist and two graphic designers. Several were related — mothers and daughters, sisters and sisters-in-law. All the Michigan women attend Carpenter’s House Outreach Church. So the friendships are deep and dependent.

“Amy is our fashion consultant in Michigan,” said Huitsing, mother to fellow shopper, 19-year-old Shaina Huitsing. “She will call you and say, ‘I just saw something that would be perfect for you, so I put it on hold.’”

“And she’s usually right,” added her daughter.

Even more surprising than the lengths these women would travel to shop is how they paid. “We all are paying in cash,” said Langelier, noting she and her friends have been

relatively unaffected by Michigan's No. 1 unemployment ranking. "We've been saving up for this, so none of us would put it on our credit cards."

In all, Langelier figured the group spent a total of about \$8,000 on travel, food and lodging.

The planning began in earnest nine months ago when they bought airline tickets — \$300 each for round-trip fare.

Their Louisiana itinerary, neatly typed up by Langelier, included visits to Houmas House Plantation and Rosedown Plantation and lots of local restaurants, like Mike Anderson's and Boutin's, where some Michiganders got their first taste of crawfish.

"The owner was so nice," said Haney. "We asked about peeling them, and he looked in the tub and said, 'Your crawfish are too small,' and he went and got us some big ones." There were quite a few "drive-thru daiquiri" stops, too.

On the day we caught up with them, they fueled up at Another Broken Egg then headed out to power shop their way through Imelda's Fine Shoes on Jefferson Highway and Merci Beaucoup and other shops in Towne Center.

"We have boutiques back home, they're just very limited," said Tami Huitsing, who was on her second trip down.

This is the sixth trip for Paige Herrema, a 33-year-old stay-at-home mom who is Langelier's best friend. She's come down for both Langelier and her sister's weddings, as well as shopping trips.

"What I really love is that when people wait on you, they take the time to talk to you. To get to know about you," Herrema said. "Down here, people are just more involved with you."

Haney laughingly told the story of visiting the Corbel, a gift and interiors shop on U.S. 61 between Baton Rouge and St. Francisville.

"Karyn and I had finished shopping and were outside," she said. "Karyn sees the owner walk out with Jeannene's car keys and her bags. He starts opening her car and Karyn, afraid he's going to steal her car or something, says, 'Should we call somebody?' And somebody else said, 'No, that's just a Southern gentleman's way. He's putting her bags in her car for her,'" Haney said as they all laughed.

In addition to the pleasures of Southern hospitality, the women also enjoy the thrill of victory that comes with shopping in a different territory.

"I can guarantee no one in Michigan will have one like it," said Herrema, brandishing the multi-colored handbag she bought at Frock Candy.

“I love it when somebody asks me, ‘Where you get that?’ and I say, ‘Oh, I got that in Louisiana,’” said Tami Huitsing with a big laugh.

The trip also serves as “girl time” for recharging the batteries after months of snow and ice.

“I look at it as a nice Southern women’s retreat,” said Haney. Their husbands, who were minding a total of 17 children under age 16, sent the women with their blessings, said Langelier.

“They all get along and hang out while we’re gone,” she said.