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With catalogs, you can shop from the sofa

I'm thinking of buying a black jacket for traveling but can't quite make up my mind. Should it be a Warren's Classic Travel Blazer from Travelsmith made of a wrinkle-resistant wool/polyester blend, with four inside pockets for valuables ($149); a pretty Merino Box Cardigan in soft wool jersey knit from The Territory Ahead ($125); or a chic Italian-designed, Hong Kong-tailored Bourde Knit Blazer from J. Peterman (on sale this summer for $400)?

Her world

SUSAN SPANO

All three are from catalogs, so I don't have to look at myself in any of those unflattering fitting room mirrors or get off the sofa to go shopping. It's ironic that I'm such a couch potato when it comes to seeking out just the right outfits, money belts, insect repellent, hats and sleeping bags for my travels. But I prefer to shop at home for my trips. It's convenient and economical because you often don't have to pay state sales tax when you make mail-order purchases.

For me, it's glorious fun — lying in bed or the bathtub leafing through catalogs, imagining myself climbing Mount Kilimanjaro or alighting from a cab at the Paris Opera looking like Lauren Hutton. Such are the impossible fantasies inspired by today's slick and sophisticated travel catalogs.

The most clever and romantic catalog surely is J. Peterman. His catalogs, which are called "owners' manuals," evoke exotic places as part of the sales pitch.

John Peterman started the Kentucky mail-order house in 1987 by selling horsemen's coats he found in Wyoming. Business got a big boost when (with no warning) he was used as the basis for a character on Seinfeld.

Almost as literate and worldly-wise is the catalog from the Territory Ahead, which has a store in Santa Barbara, Calif. Though the company started as a mail-order clothier for men, it expanded into women's apparel in 1985, and this year dedicated the catalog to the intrepid Victorian travel writer Isabella Bird.

Then there are the more practical travel gear catalogs, which seem to land on my doorstep almost every week. Magellan's, started a decade ago by a former travel agent, hooked me recently when someone in the Santa Barbara headquarters pointed out that seven of the 10 simple items I travel with are in their catalog. Now I look to Magellan's for items such as space-saving collapsible water bottles, key rings with hidden compartments for cash, and foldable, reliable Panama hats.

To augment my travel wardrobe, I turn to Travelsmith in Northern California. Travelsmith offers a wide range of clothes designed to be packable, easily maintained and wrinkle-free. The company suggests a mix-and-matchable, go-anywhere, six-item wardrobe composed of a skirt, jacket, trousers, two tops and Travelsmith's signature Indispensable Black Travel Dress (also available in midnight blue).

I like the Tilley Endurables catalog, too, sent down from Don Mills, Canada. The Tilley clothing line isn't strikingly chic, but it's sensible, attractive and exceedingly well made.

Walkabout Travel Gear in Utah produces a catalog chiefly for the backpacking set, with sleep sacks for use in hostels, adapter plugs and backpacks interspersed with useful travel tips, such as how to find the bridge over the River Kwai in Kanchanaburi, Thailand.

Most of these travel gear companies have Web sites for shopping and purchasing, while others, such as Travel Supplies and the women's travel outfitter Christine Columbus have cast their lot with the Internet, dispensing with paper catalogs almost altogether.

For outdoor gear I favor Campmor's bargain-basement approach or the big catalog from REI, a cooperative founded in 1938 by a Seattle mountaineer in search of a better ice ax.

But my favorite catalogs are from travel bookstores such as Distant Lands in Pasadena, Calif., with its useful system for rating guidebook series.

Here's how to get the catalogs mentioned above: J. Peterman, telephone 1-800-231-7341, fax 1-800-346-3681, http://www.jpeterman.com; Territory Ahead, tel. 1-800-882-4321, fax 1-800-222-9882, http://www.territoryahead.com; Magellan's, tel. 1-800-962-4943, fax 1-800-962-4940, http://www.magellans.com; Travelsmith, tel. 1-800-950-1600, fax 1-800-950-1656, http://www.travelsmith.com; Tilley Endurables, tel. 1-800-363-8737, fax 1-800-845-5394, http://www.tilley.com; Walkabout Travel Gear, tel. 1-800-852-7105, fax 1-888-722-0587, http://www.walkabouttravelgear.com; Christine Columbus, tel. 1-800-280-4775, fax 1-800-863-5103, http://www.christinecolumbus.com; Travel Supplies.com on the Web at that address; Campmor, tel. 1-800-226-7667, fax 1-800-230-2153; REI, tel. 1-800-426-4840, fax (253) 891-2523, http://www.rei.com; Distant Lands, (626) 449-3220, fax (626) 398-7070, http://www.distantlands.com

Susan Spano writes this weekly column about women's travel for the Los Angeles Times.

It's tourists' turn now to troop through Normandy

NORMANDY from L-1

Ireland and Britain. Omaha Beach is a protected historic landmark.

Normandy is forever tied to the D-Day invasion and related events that so ravaged the region, but now, through tourism, they contribute to its prosperity. Our group is visiting on an overnight trip from Paris and sampling everything from surviving cathedrals to World War II memorials.

Two days are just enough to whet the appetite. Normandy, in northwest France, stretches for more than 11,000 square miles, with about 375 miles of coastline. It's divided into Upper and Lower Normandy and into five departments: Calvados, Eure, Manche, Orne and Seine-Maritime. Normandy has been under the rule of the Romans, the Vikings, the English and the French.

We start in Caen, a two-hour train ride from Paris. Largely flattened by two months of bombing during the war, several buildings were miraculously salvaged, including two abbeys and a fortified castle.

A university town of nearly 200,000, Caen also has the Memorial Peace Museum, one of more than a dozen museums in Normandy dedicated to the war.

The stark, modernistic museum opened June 6, 1988, to address not only World War II and D-Day but also the war's aftermath. In front of the building are the flags of all the countries that fought in the war. Visitors walk down a symbolically darkening spiral while viewing memorabilia from World War I to World War II.

Three audio-visual presentations are powerful. The first features a split screen. Composed of archive footage and excerpts of fictional films, it shows the simultaneous unfolding of events on both the German and Allied sides.

The next shows actual pictures in chronological sequence. The presentation is complemented by a succession of huge animated maps that track Allied progress through France.

The last film, called *Hope*, recalls the major milestones of modern history, contrasting hope and despair. The theater's darkness is appreciated as most guests wipe away tears.

Another area features a gallery to Nobel Peace Prize winners; it's housed in a former German bunker beneath the museum.

We move on to Bayeux, the first town liberated by Allied troops. But Bayeux's past is woven into another military invasion — literally.

The town's big attraction is a 231-foot-long tapestry illustrating the history of William the Conqueror's invasion of England and defeat of Harold at the Battle of Hastings. Created in the 11th century, the Bayeux Tapestry is the only masterpiece of its kind in the world.

A visit to the Museum of the Tapestry of Bayeux includes a cinematic explanation of the embroidery on linen, with a scene-by-scene description of each section, before visitors view the actual tapestry displayed behind glass.

The story of each of the 58 scenes then is retold on guests' headsets.

From Bayeux to the American Military Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer at Omaha Beach is a short drive. We briskly walk down the path leading to the beach, by-passing for now the memorial and cemetery.

The beach is empty. After solemn moments of reflection, we return to the memorial, a semicircular colonnade. At both ends of the structure are large maps and narratives explaining the military operations. In the center is a 22-foot-high bronze statue called "The Spirit of American Youth Rising from the Waves." It overlooks a reflecting pool and mall area, and faces a round white memorial chapel.

Also in front of the memorial is the cemetery, laid out in the form of a Latin cross. Each of the 9,386 graves (including those of four women) is marked with a white stone cross or Star of David made of Carrara marble. Another 1,557 are remembered on the east side of the memorial in the Garden of the Missing, where names are inscribed in the wall.

Of the 33,000 Americans who died, about 40 percent are buried here.

Across from a visitors center at the entrance is a time capsule embedded in the lawn to be opened June 6, 2044. It includes sealed news reports of the Normandy landings.

Accommodations that night are at the Chateau d'Audrieu, an 18th-century house built in Caen stone and surrounded by a 60-acre English-style park.

Coutances is the first stop the next morning for a tour of its hilltop Norman Gothic-style cathedral built in the 13th to 15th centuries. Tours allow visitors to climb the narrow stairs to the upper galleries and nearly to the top of its famous 135-foot lantern tower.

Then it's a three-hour drive across the beautiful Normandy countryside to Rouen. This is where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake in the Old Market square, called Place du Vieux-March. A 65-foot cross marks the spot.

We quickly walk down the crowded pedestrian-only Rue de Gros-Horloge, past what we are told is the town's oldest building, now a McDonald's. We marvel at the clock tower with its ornate one-handed clock, built in 1389, that tells the hour and week.

Short on time, we take a whirlwind tour through the Cathedral Notre Dame, which shows the evolution of Norman architecture over 1,000 years and features remarkable stained glass.

Now it's time to catch the train from Rouen back to Paris.

After watching Spielberg's compelling account of the war, I marvel that Normandy has anything left to see, but there is more.

Much more.

Historic beaches. Tourists roam the beaches of Normandy, where troops landed on D-Day, the most massive amphibious invasion in the history of warfare.

If you go

THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

■ **GETTING THERE:** Rail Europe offers a variety of passes. Up-to-date fares and schedules can be obtained on the Web at www.raileurope.com, or by calling 1-800-438-7245, press 2.

■ **STAYING THERE:** Gerard and Irene Lery-Level welcome visitors to their family estate, the Chateau d'Audrieu. For more information, call Relais & Chateaux, (212) 856-0115.

■ **INFORMATION:** Contact the French Government Tourist Office, 676 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 3360, Chicago, Ill. 60611-2819; (312) 751-7800.

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