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Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times
The Galleria at Tyler in Riverside on Black Friday, 2004. Some shoppers go out not for deals but because it's a family tradition.

THE GIFT ISSUE

Ready to shop?

Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, is one of retail's biggest days. Although experts foresee fewer bargains this year, the day is still a social event.

By Emil Vesiilind, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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THE true die-hards are up before the sun rises to hit the early-morning sales and snag gifts-with-purchase such as collectible snow globes (while supplies last!). By 6 a.m., the parking lots are jammed, the check-out lanes resemble Soviet-era bread lines, and the densely knit crowds ensure

there's no way you can outpace your great-aunt Frieda on your sojourn to the Gap.

It must be Black Friday.

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Sound enticing? Probably not. Still, for many people, shopping the Friday after Thanksgiving is a family tradition -- a way to spend active time together after a day of extreme inertia. For others, it's about taking part in a commerce-fueled holiday that's decidedly American (no one overeats and overspends like we do, baby).

And, of course, the real draw of Black Friday is the sales -- current-season merchandise that's deeply discounted for one day only. Serious markdowns are reason enough to brave any melée.

Or are they? Despite the 6 a.m. door-busters and limited-quantity discounts, retail experts agree that this year, Black Friday sales won't be what they used to be. Many stores will be discounting less profoundly on the day itself, or they've already started their markdowns and will continue them for the entire Thanksgiving weekend, and beyond. In many cases, experts say, the only difference will be amped-up holiday signage for sales that have been going on for weeks.

"Most of the merchandise on sale on Black Friday is left over from Veterans Day or even before," says Alyson Scott, owner of Style Chic, a personal shopping and styling company in L.A. that conducts tours for out-of-towners. "Years ago, the sales were great, and retailers would put new stuff out, but it's not worth it anymore. Now people almost like the misery of it. They like to have stories to tell."

Years ago, it was considered *verboten* to promote Christmas merchandise before Thanksgiving, but retailers such as Wal-Mart and Kohl's are now posting holiday specials earlier, in an attempt to blur seasonal lines in shoppers' minds. Which means from a value standpoint, Black Friday could be a bust.

But many retailers and industry watchers agree with Scott and say the average Black Friday shopper no longer expects bargain-basement deals -- or even to get much Christmas shopping done, really.

"It's become an event in its own right," said Jack Kyser, senior vice president and chief economist of the downtown-based Los Angeles Economic Development Corp. "It used to be that Black Friday was an indicator of how healthy Christmas sales were going to be, but that's not really the case anymore. . . . It's a social event."

In that case, you're better off going to the movies -- or the beach.

So far, there is no Tickle Me Elmo to stand in line for this holiday season, no new iPod or must-have Ugg boots to snag.

"Retailers haven't gotten shoppers excited," says Marshall Cohen, chief industry analyst for the NPD Group, a market research firm that studies consumer trends. "There's no hot fashion trends, there's no hot electronics." Warm weather is also adding to the holiday shopping malaise. Who wants to buy gloves and woolly sweaters when it's 75 degrees outside?

Retail sales on Black Friday typically increase 5% or 6% every year, but Cohen predicts a 2% decline this Friday.

A tradition since the 1930s

The origins of Black Friday -- the name and its shop-till-you-drop significance -- are hazy, but many historians agree that the tradition of stepping out to Christmas shop the day after Thanksgiving began in the 1930s. (President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving up a week earlier in 1939, to tack another week onto the Christmas shopping season during the Depression; Abraham Lincoln had formerly declared Thanksgiving to be the last Thursday of November.)

Black Friday's name is believed to be a reference to the start of a profitable season in retail, when shops came out of an unprofitable season (losses were marked in red pen by accountants) and started repaying their debts (gains were recorded in black).

But this year, retailers have had reason to jump-start the season. The war in Iraq, rising gas prices, a sagging housing market and a pervasive feeling that the good times are bound to end soon are likely to curb holiday spending. A report by the International Council of Shopping Centers last month noted that consumer confidence -- or willingness to spend -- was likely to be "a neutral to slightly negative factor" over the holiday season.

In Los Angeles, the Hollywood writers strike could curb spending as well.

Still, all this hand-wringing isn't likely to render shopping centers ghost towns on Friday. The National Retail Federation predicts that more than 150 million people will venture into stores this year. During the last decade, Black Friday has alternated with the Saturday before Christmas as the No. 1 sales day.

So where to start? According to spokespeople for many of Los Angeles' shopping centers, those looking to score deals would be wise to stick to traditional department stores -- many of which still honor the day's deep-discount roots. Although Black Friday is usually associated with malls, many of L.A.'s best street-side shops will be discounting merchandise for the day too -- a smart option for those looking to avoid a frenzied mall scene.

Scott, the personal shopper, recommends concentrating on a walkable boutique area such as West 3rd Street in Los Angeles or Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Venice. "The boutiques really have some good sales that day," she said but added that she wouldn't be caught dead out in the holiday bustle.

Of course, the Black Friday furor is easy enough to avoid: just stay home.

Rest assured, the sales aren't going anywhere.

emili.vesilind@latimes.com