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Black Friday shopping tips

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When it comes to Black Friday, one person's claustrophobic hades is another's madcap scavenger hunt. For those looking to make a day of it in the L.A. area, here are a few tips from the experts:

Decide who you are

Are you in it for the discounts or to spend time with family? Don't confuse the two. If you're digging for deals, go early -- most malls are opening around 6 a.m. -- and go alone (others will only slow you down!). If you're in it to socialize, head to one of the more upscale malls such as the Grove and South Coast Plaza, which offer fewer blowout sales but attract a less ambitious breed of shopper.

Ditch the list

If you're a premeditated, meticulously organized shopper, this is not your day. The fun of Black Friday lies in shopping where the sales take you. Plus, the mall meanderers -- aimless wanderers there to (gasp!) relax -- will drive you mad. This said, it's good to have a general game plan. Debra Gunn-Downing, South Coast Plaza's executive director of marketing, suggests checking department store sales online before setting out.

Eat to ride the Indy 500

You'll be on your feet for hours -- power-walking, strolling, standing, hovering, even traipsing, perhaps -- so fuel your body accordingly, says L.A. nutritionist Charles Rosenberg. While you may be inclined to gobble down leftovers for breakfast (the pumpkin pie will be looking awfully good), most of what was on the dining room table the night before will only enervate you. If you're packing a meal, turkey-on-wheat sandwiches are a good option, said Rosenberg, but abstain from sugar and caffeine, which will only drag you down after buzzing you out. If you plan to eat out, Rosenberg suggests logging on to [HealthyDiningFinder.com](#), a website that targets the most healthful menu options for a wide cross-section of restaurants.

Start at the core

If you're hunting for bargains but want to bypass the crowds, keep in mind that shopping centers closer to the city's core tend to be less busy in the early hours of Black Friday than more suburban centers, according to spokespeople from area malls. Typically, the more suburban the center, the more families there are with small children. And tiny tots get tired and unwieldy by midday. Meanwhile, centers in the city's heart ramp up a little later. (The Grove is even offering free muffins and juice in the early morning to lure shoppers.)

Dress to undress, not impress

Even if you think you're shopping exclusively for other people, you're bound to find some trinkets for yourself as well. Personal shopper Alyson Scott says she's constantly shocked at what people put on to go shopping ("I see women in Barneys wearing stilettos -- I mean, come on!"). Boots may be comfy but don't exactly slip on and off. Instead, Scott favors sneakers or ballet flats, teamed with jeans and "a great bra." Enough said.

Hand over your keys

Winding your way up through crammed parking structures at 2 mph isn't worth the hassle. Besides, this is L.A. -- our malls know how to valet. The elevator next to the valet at the Beverly Center shoots you straight up into the heart of the mall; Westfield Century City gives you a beeper to press when you're almost finished shopping, so your car is waiting when you get there. The valets at the Grove and South Coast Plaza offer store-to-car bag-carrying service (just drop your bags anywhere, Princess); Glendale Galleria is offering \$5 all-day valet service at Macy's and Nordstrom for the entire weekend. Want to ditch the car entirely? Check into the Westin hotel across the street from South Coast Plaza on Thanksgiving night and stroll over the next morning.

Spread cheer or else

If you already know the long lines, swarming crowds and nutty traffic patterns are going to drive you to bark and snap at people like a hungry Rottweiler, do us all a favor and stay home. It only takes one Scrooge to sour an entire store.

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