

FEATURES

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2009

From the outside, Treasure Hunt Flea Market (尋寶跳蚤屋) near Guting MRT Station (古亭捷運站) does not look as promising as its name would suggest. A tangled pile of old clothing fills one crate; tatty jewelry lines another. A peek inside the store is a little better — a table topped with colorful bric-a-brac dominates the front room.

But it isn't until you climb a narrow set of stairs or walk across an alleyway into a second maze-like group of rooms that Treasure Hunt really reveals itself. Taipei's largest secondhand store contains 600 pings [1 ping = 3.3m²] filled with nearly 30,000 vintage items from the US, Europe, China and Japan stuffed into nooks and crannies that shoppers can (almost literally) lose themselves in. Items range from old postcards, Brownie cameras and typewriters to traditional Chinese-style wooden window screens, a vintage Coca-Cola vending machine and entire living room sets from the 1950s.

Treasure Hunt was opened seven years ago by Tiki Lin (林宜芝), who began collecting vintage items as a university student and continued hunting for them when she lived in Virginia.

"There were a lot of yard sales and antique stores there. I wanted to capture the spirit of yard sales, because in Taiwan people don't really have places to hold them. But I didn't just want to open a thrift store because that wouldn't be profitable here,"

says Lin. She explains that many items people are willing to part with are from night markets or otherwise cheaply made and unsuitable for resale. Selling vintage items and imported antiques provides a revenue stream — and lures customers in.

Treasure Hunt started as a chain of five stores, but Lin merged all of them together into her Roosevelt Road location when an additional 300 pings of property became available to rent behind the original storefront. To add to the flea market atmosphere, even antiques are placed out in the open instead of behind glass. Staff members, however, encourage shoppers to browse around the different rooms by themselves. "We don't follow customers around because it makes them uncomfortable," says Lin, pointing out that the store's most valuable items, such as a heavy 100-year-old music box from Switzerland (NT\$388,800), are nearly impossible to shoplift.

Customers are free to open and close the multiple drawers in a traditional Chinese medicine cabinet (NT\$38,000) or leisurely flip through stacks of hand-carved wooden window and door screens (NT\$4,000 to NT\$7,000 each). Two American barbershop seats are NT\$298,000 each and a wooden door with a stained glass window is NT\$98,000. Shoppers

looking for a smaller financial commitment can browse vintage Japanese rotary phones (NT\$700 each), old photos and postcards (NT\$30), or a View-Master toy from the 1950s (complete with circular slides) for NT\$680. Daytime visitors might run into Chocolate, Lin's gregarious schnauzer, or Meow Meow, her tabby cat who prowls the store.

Lin makes buying trips once every few months. She moved her focus to Europe last year because she says her finds in the US were drying up.

"In California, for example, there are only a couple of auctions per week, and if I wanted to fill up just two shipping containers, I'd have to stay for two months. But in Europe, I can stay for three to five days and come back with four or five shipping containers filled with things," says Lin. She rarely visits flea markets, which she says are for amateur thrifters, and goes instead to antique warehouses or auctions, where she purchases entire estates of goods at a time. Treasure Hunt also takes secondhand items, which customers bring in to sell or donate (proceeds from donated items are given to local hospitals).

Lin relies on her 25 years of experience in dealing with secondhand goods to determine the worth of each piece. When she makes a buying trip, Lin also visits local antique dealers to see how much they are selling items for. She says she then slices a bit off that amount so that her Taiwanese shoppers don't feel like they are

paying a premium for imported goods.

"If your prices are too high, then your store is just a museum with stuff on display that no one buys," says Lin. "Besides, anyone can go on eBay and see how much something is really worth."

Before opening Treasure Hunt, Lin worked in the real estate market. For 20 years she purchased, refurbished and resold foreclosed properties.

"That's how I first became interested in interior decoration and that is also one of the reasons I really got into searching for secondhand items. The previous owners of those properties often left a lot of things behind, so I'd take them out, restore them and use them myself or give them to friends," says Lin.

Every piece of furniture in Lin's nearby apartment is secondhand, including her son's bed. One of her favorite periods is the 1950s and she is especially fond of a dining booth in her store from that era, which was purchased at an estate sale in Texas. The set, which now sits in the back of Treasure Hunt, was Lin's own dining room table in her US home.

"I was born in 1962, so I grew up surrounded by things made in the 1950s,

like the refrigerators in my store. I feel a real connection with those things," says Lin. Her other interests include items produced during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, which mix traditional styles with an art deco influence.

Despite the rarity of thrift stores in Taiwan, Lin says that Taiwanese consumers have become more accepting of used goods over the last two decades. "I couldn't have opened this store 20 years ago, but seven years ago it wasn't particularly difficult. I just built it up step by step," says Lin.

Aside from the charm of vintage styles, Lin also touts the environmental benefits of buying secondhand things.

"If something like a lamp with a crystal lampshade is still intact after a hundred years, the reason someone took care of it is probably because it is a special item," says Lin. "Sometimes people spend a lot of money on trendy home decor, only to get sick of it when it's no longer in fashion and trash it. That's a burden on the planet. Vintage goods, on the other hand, have proven their worth."



Treasure Hunt owner Tiki Lin frequently travels to the US and Europe, where she purchases entire estates at antique wholesalers and auctions.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Hand-carved wooden window screens are among the traditional Chinese-style furnishings at Treasure Hunt.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Treasure Hunt's eclectic assortment of items includes vintage Japanese dolls, vending machines, barbershop chairs, old comic books, coin banks, old photos, ceramic figures, foreign currency and rotary phones.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



This sewing machine and Yao Surong record are among the 30,000 vintage items from Europe, the US, China and Japan available at Treasure Hunt.

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STORE NOTES:

WHAT: Treasure Hunt Flea Market (尋寶跳蚤屋)

WHERE: 38, Roosevelt Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路二段38號)

OPEN: Daily from 11am to 10:30pm

TELEPHONE: (02) 2391-2100

ON THE NET:

www.goodtrade.com.tw



On the secondhand prowl

Treasure Hunt Flea Market brings the atmosphere of US and European flea markets to Taipei

BY CATHERINE SHU
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