



That's me in the scarf and sunglasses. My fellow shoppers: (from left) Christie Weller, Kate Shifrin, Lauren Watson, Laura Glenn and Hannah Weller. (Above, far right) Bonnie Shifrin.

I believe I can flea

I didn't think there was a way to make Chicago-area flea markets more fun—until I hopped into a bus and headed to Grayslake with other shoppers I'd never met.

Fog cloaks farm fields as our bus hums north toward the Grayslake Antique and Collectible Market, where hundreds of vendors await an hour northwest of Chicago. Seasoned flea-market-goers, we've put our entire day and our shopping success in the hands of Come Flea with Me, a Chicago-area flea-market tour company.

Owner Kate Shifrin hands me a steaming cup of coffee and a basket with a muffin and peach tucked in a checkered napkin. Nice touch. But I'm hungrier for her look—a ruffled peasant blouse, brass-buckled boots, a chunky turquoise necklace. Someone in the back pipes up, "Can we shop for what you're wearing?"

I don't know these women yet, but clearly I'm in the company of kindred spirits.

Since 2000, Kate, a fashion stylist, and her sister, artist Christie Weller, have hosted five or six trips a year to flea markets throughout the Chicago area. They offer a luxury bus (with plenty of space to store your finds), snacks, shopping totes and on-call style advice. The price: \$115, about what I'd spend on a massage. Except this is an entire day of me time, spent shopping.

It's funny, though. I'm not a tour group kind of girl, not given to easy chitchat with strangers. But the women on this bus are such an eclectic, enthusiastic group. Two women are looking for dolls. Another needs a birthday gift for a friend. A third is into jewelry. I might hang with her.

We arrive when the gates open at 8 a.m. and make a beeline for the pavilion. My eyes dart to

the many wares: a chipped blue-painted iron bed (\$120); a Red Wing pottery crock (\$35); wood picture frames (\$20) and a candy-shop red gumball machine (\$19). Hmm. That gumball machine would look so cute holding my golf ball collection. I'll think about it.

Ten minutes pass. I head back—and it's gone. I call Kate on her cell. "You thought about it too long," Kate says. "You can spend \$20 on a bad lunch, so why not get something you love?"

Later, I spy a 1950s gas station Coke cooler inside the crowded pavilion and call Kate. "I'll be right over," she says, and looks the \$150 item over before pulling me aside. One of the original bottle cap openers is still attached, and the legs go on and off easily, she reports.

"That's a really good price for that," Kate says. I snap it up. Across the aisle, shopper Laura Glenn tries on a vintage mouton coat (\$70) and mink-collared wool jacket (\$43). Kate checks the linings carefully. "At these prices, I can afford to buy both," Laura says.

Kate's cell rings with more shoppers' questions. They've found things they

like, but aren't sure how to decorate with them. Kate asks about their style, and brainstorming begins. "We can teach you how to bargain and help you create your own style with what you find, giving those treasures a second or even third life," Kate says later.

Back on the bus, we share our finds and try to barter. Louise Argianas, who flew in for the weekend from New York in search of antique jewelry, won't give up her \$20 silver Victorian marcasite ring. Lauren Watson refuses to take cash for the silver engraved tray she plucked off a dealer's end-of-day "free table." Kate uses it to serve us prosecco, sparkling apple cider and chocolate cupcakes for the ride home.

That trip was months ago. My Coke cooler has become a toy box, but I'll use it at a four-generation family picnic this summer. And I still get e-mails from those ladies, fun reminders of our special outing whenever they score a cool flea-market find. ■

To plan your trip, call 773/281-5283 or visit comefleawithme.com.

(From left) Christie Weller scores a pair of cute boots. Kate Shifrin, Lauren Watson, Laura Glenn and Hannah Weller (kneeling) strike a pose.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Bring cash to bargain for better pricing.

Get cell numbers of the other shoppers on your trip in case you want a second opinion on a find.

Ask dealers for discounts if you're purchasing more than one item.

Bring the measurements of spaces you're looking to fill in your home (bring a tape measure, too).

Get to the market early before crowds arrive and plan to leave late, when many dealers drop prices.