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From candy to travel, the best of the best to the best

NEED A solar-powered pith helmet for a trip to Africa? Want to listen to classical music — underwater? All these wishes are at your fingertips this holiday season.

In the "Courvoisier's Book of the Best" (Lord Litchfield, editor; Salem House Publishers), the jet set advise on where to find the best of everything in your search for the perfect — if extravagant — gift for your friends and family.

Whether the advice is from Joan Collins or Bill Bliss, it is witty and sage.

Helen Gurley Brown, our Cosmopolitan woman, suggests Christmas shopping (or any kind of shopping) on Manhattan's Madison Avenue.

For the spectacular shopping spree, book your loved one into the Ritz Carlton in Boston, Mass.

In addition to the hotel's traditional elegance, the staff provides ice skates for those who wish to glide across Swan Lake in the adjoining public garden.

AMONG THE suggestions we aspire to give some Christmas morning are:

- A dress by Mary McFadden, Geoffrey Beene, Flora Kung, Norma Kamali or Oscar de la Renta. No pouts please.
- A hat from Jay Lord Hatters in Manhattan, where the king of hats, Tom Wolfe, shops for his fedoras, as do Miles Davis and Richard Avedon (212-947-6655).
- Lingerie, whether silk tuxedo pajamas or bustiers in silk brocade, must look as if it were made for Jean Harlow. Among the book's favorite Manhattan pedigree purveyors are Graziella (212-532-9310) and Wife Mistress (212-570-9529).
- Let's not knock Bass Wejins, but when it comes to shodding the sveite foot, there's only two to count: Maud Pissani's wacky pumps and Roger Vivier's perfectly beaded or sequined evening slippers. (Diana Vreeland gives her cast-offs to the Met.)
- If Nancy Reagan wears them, so can you. Galanos Originals are chic and outrageously expensive with pure silk linings and beading done by former costume designers at MGM. For the thinnest of the thin.
- Concoctions of hand-made lace, from hats for Brooke Shields in "Pretty Baby" to custom headpieces for Nastassia Kinski. It's a must-stop at New Orleans' Yvonne La Fleur (504-866-9666).
- Wines to bring home from Napa Valley for that little cellar you've been planning should include Mondavi's Opus 1, 1979, 1986; Beaulieu Pinot Noir, 1974; Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon and from Sonoma, the 1982 Sonoma Cutter Chardonnay.

BUT DON'T let your imagination stop with the book of the best.

The Neiman Marcus catalog offers the sublime and seductive, but you have to pay for the privilege of shopping here. Of course, it's a great place to browse for ideas.

Among the wonders of the pages are \$100 acrylic boxes, filled with 10 pounds of epicurean candies, from chocolate éclair caramels to butter-scootch toffees. (No kidding, all that for sweet tooth success.)

Or sweeten the horizon with two Futogs, the traditional guardians of the Buddhist temples, translated in statues of frosted full lead crystal from France for only \$700.

Mix up the living room decor with a single Southwestern flute in the shape of a cactus from Hilton MacConico for only \$210.

And for those whose expectations soar, give them a his or hers hot air balloon. This Cloudhopper can be yours for only \$18,000.

FOR THE little one, perk her imagination with a dream trunk replica of the old theatrical suitcase, packed with colorful costumes and accessories to dress up as a Japanese Lady, Brazilian Sweet Tooth, or even a Queen of Hearts.

Lingerie must look like it was made for Jean Harlow — something like this net and maribu two-piece gown and robe. The sleeveless gown has a V-neck, satin cord tie. The long robe ties with white satin belt. But both can be worn without belts. \$120. Bobette Shop, 945 W. Huron, Pontiac. For more information, call 681-2727.

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