

Bag Ladies

By Amy Lynch



Annual Vera Bradley Outlet Sale attracts thousands of shoppers to Fort Wayne

Throng of screaming, mostly female fans — some traveling from great distances, others camping out in the parking lot the night before. High-energy music fires up the crowd. Anticipation builds as they eagerly wait to get inside.

A Taylor Swift concert? Nope. This is Fort Wayne's annual Vera Bradley Outlet Sale.



Shani Mixon's been to four of these events, most recently driving in from Toledo, Ohio and bringing along her two tween daughters for the first time in 2023. "When the doors opened, they got really excited," she says. "It's such a fun way to shop a product we love and trust, and so much of it. It's an action-packed experience. Coming into the building, everyone is cheering like you're on *The Price is Right!*"

In Indiana's second largest city 120 miles northeast of Indianapolis, Vera Bradley is more than a hometown brand, it's a whole culture. You can't walk through an airport or across a college campus without spotting the lifestyle company's iconic quilted bags, duffels, purses and lanyards. Devoted fans chase these products like the Holy Grail, thousands of them descending on the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum for a few days each spring to load up on their favorite retired patterns and overstocked items at deep discounts.

"We always have fans who arrive early to be the first in line," says Greg Jaeger, Vera Bradley director of PR and marketing. "Some gatherings of girlfriends and family members make t-shirts. We love to see all the fun ways our fans get hyped for the event."

From humble, practical beginnings

It all began back in 1982 when co-owners Patricia R. Miller and Barbara Bradley Baekgaard decided that women deserved cuter, more versatile luggage choices and endeavored to do something about it. In the four decades since, the Vera Bradley portfolio has expanded to include all manner of bags plus wallpapers, stationery, bedding, footwear, pajamas and accessories in sets of whimsical collectible patterns.

"The love for Vera Bradley typically

passes down through generations," Jaeger explains. "We hear all the time from customers who received their first Vera Bradley bag as a child or young woman, and still have it later in life. It's a sisterhood; people feel comfortable and safe around others who share their love of the brand."

Continuing to treasure the first pink floral duffel bag she got more than a decade ago ("I'll never throw it away!"), Mixon credits her mother with introducing her to Vera Bradley. Now it looks like her daughters are becoming fans as well, loading up on shirts, slippers and bracelets at last year's sale and carrying the purses they picked out to school.

"They've already asked me if we can go back again," Mixon mentions.

For the unquestionably loyal customer base, the annual Vera Bradley Outlet Sale (May 1 through 5 in 2024) is like Christmas, birthdays and Valentines all rolled into one sprawling celebration. Many attendees use it as an opportunity to stock up on gifts they distribute at the holidays and throughout the year.

Once inside the Memorial Coliseum, imagine a mannerly free-for-all — this is the Midwest, after all. Customers cruise the aisles, stuffing oversized shopping bags with anything and everything they can get their hands on at up to 70 percent off retail prices before retreating to a quiet spot at the perimeter of the 100,000 square-foot sales floor to sift through their finds. Discards are tossed back into strategically placed bins and restocked to constantly refresh the inventory, and flash sale announcements lend even more excitement, keeping shoppers on their toes.

Feeding the local economy

Back in 2023 after a three-year Covid pandemic hiatus, this multi-day shindig is Fort Wayne's biggest tourism draw,

IF YOU GO

- The 2024 Vera Bradley Outlet Sale is scheduled for May 1 through 5 at the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum.
- Tickets go on sale Feb. 20, 2024 at Ticketmaster.com, authorized Ticketmaster locations and the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum Ticket Office.
- Plan to make reservations as far in advance as possible; local hotels often sell out during the event.
- Mixon's advice: "Wear comfortable walking shoes!"
- For more information, visit verabradley.com/pages/annual-outlet-sale.

pumping more than \$5 million into the local economy each year and attracting 40,000+ attendees from all 50 states and a handful of countries. A far cry from the very first outlet sale held in 1983 in a 10-foot square tent.

"The city is always buzzing with Vera Bradley fans who are spending time at the sale and also engaging with our community," Jaeger mentions.

A convention-friendly town, Fort Wayne's had plenty of practice managing large group events, rolling out appealing options to supplement visits with a diverse variety of local restaurants, the world-class Fort Wayne Children's Zoo, a downtown brimming with cool public art, riverfront recreation, the emerging Electric Works multiuse development in a former General Electric plant, and Minor League Fort Wayne Tincaps baseball games.

"We help the Vera Bradley team coordinate bus group promotions and handle the ticketing, providing special lanyards and helping them navigate the sale," says Jessa Campbell, Visit Fort Wayne's marketing and communications manager. "We also promote the sale outside Fort Wayne with our regional travel partners and media. It truly is a community-wide effort with Vera Bradley leading the charge, the Memorial Coliseum as the venue, our hotels with welcoming guests, and Visit Fort Wayne helping to bring in the people."

Where to stay? The Bradley Hotel, of course. These elegant boutique accommodations established downtown in 2021 immerse guests in the Vera Bradley spirit all year long with locally sourced art, a trendy rooftop bar and colorful décor that shows off the brand's bold signature prints to full advantage.

"The cute patterns, the quality of the products, the fun sale, and just the overall feeling of kindness – I'll always be a Vera Bradley fan," Mixon attests.



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