

# see buy fly



Amsterdam/Schiphol has a very distinctive brand of airport shopping. **Yinka Jan Sojinu**, one of its employees, looks at its success and how it has developed over the past 60 years.

**W**hen you pass through Europe's fifth busiest airport - Amsterdam/Schiphol (AMS) in the Netherlands - you either arrive or leave having passed by or through part of its shopping area, better known as See Buy Fly. This shopping centre is one of the oldest and most successful examples of its kind in the world, and has been an inspiration to many others over the years.

See Buy Fly is part of Schiphol Group's AirportCity concept, which aims to make its passengers' time at the airport entertaining, convenient, and useful by providing them with the most modern and essential facilities. The duty free element has greatly influenced Schiphol's overall growth, development and success. This statement can be easily supported by the fact that the €86 million earned by See Buy Fly in 2006 accounted for over one third of the airport's entire annual revenue that year.

### History

Schiphol's See Buy Fly shops came into existence in the late 1940s when commercial aviation was experiencing strong growth after World War Two, although at that time they were just selling souvenirs and general goods. Many airports still offered little or no entertainment or shopping facilities and hence there were no extra revenue streams.



In 1951 Shannon Airport in Ireland became the first in the world to offer a duty free store. At the time Shannon was an important refuelling stop for various transatlantic flights and the move was seen by many as a clever way of generating more income. In the Netherlands, AMS was becoming an important transit hub for its home carrier KLM (Royal Dutch Airlines) and it gradually embraced this concept and opened its first duty free See Buy Fly shop in 1957, the first of its kind in mainland Europe.

With the creation of these highly popular shops, passengers now had something to occupy their transfer time while simultaneously obtaining large discounts on items such as alcohol, tobacco and jewellery. It was not long before the range of goods grew to include electronics, food delicacies, flower bulbs and confectionary.

The duty free idea was made possible due to newly introduced customs regulations which meant that all foreign citizens (domestic citizens were added later) departing from an airport were able to purchase items subject to little or no tax for the country in which they were bought. They were also not to be subject to tax in the passenger's destination nation unless the value of the purchase exceeded a pre-set tax-free import limit.

Expansion of the See Buy Fly brand at AMS continued over the coming decades and its success was such that from the 1980s it began to win numerous awards and was widely regarded as the best airport shopping experience in the world. It won top honours at the Business Traveller awards for a straight decade.

This upward trend continued until the 1991 Gulf War when the downturn in traffic resulted in a considerable decline in

▲ Lounge 2 has two levels, unlike most other parts of the terminal. All of the shops are on the lower level, while upstairs are various eateries, bars and other facilities. (All photos author unless stated)

◀ In a departure from previous practice Amsterdam/Schiphol has included brand name stores in the refurbished Lounge 1. (Schiphol Group)

◀◀ See Buy Fly's distinctive yellow and blue carrier bags really stand out and are the perfect example of good marketing. (Schiphol Group)



▶ Lounge 3 is now being refurbished, but will retain the distinctive Sky Islands – as illustrated here.

sales. But things got a whole lot worse in 1999 when new EU rules were issued that prohibited tax-free shopping within the European common market. As a result many passengers assumed that duty free shopping as a whole didn't exist anymore and questioned the benefits of the See Buy Fly shopping centre, as it seemed that only passengers bound for non-EU flights would benefit.

Other airport duty free areas around the world, such as those in Asia and the Middle East (eg Singapore/Changi and Dubai International) continued to grow and became serious competitors. Schiphol Group's See Buy Fly offering responded to the combination of decline and competition by reducing its prices to compensate for the extra duty EU-bound passengers were now having to pay on a wide range of products and by putting extra focus on entertainment facilities in the lounges. Bi-monthly special offers were also offered to encourage sales.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the US and the SARS outbreak the following year led to a dip in passenger traffic resulting in another challenging phase for AMS's airport shopping. To counter this, it introduced another range of service

improvements. Travellers making a round-trip to a European destination could make use of a 'pick-up-on-return' arrangement, which as the name implies enabled them to collect their purchases when they came home.

Today, the AMS See Buy Fly shopping centre comprises 75 stores, selling over 140,000 different items, employing approximately 1,200 staff and is open 365 days a year.

**Lounges**

The See Buy Fly shopping centre is considered to be the heart of Schiphol's airside AirportCity concept. Other facilities, such as bars and restaurants are interwoven and built around it. There are four departure lounges that, together with the corridors and Schiphol's seven piers, form the airside area. These have been gradually added over the years as the airport has grown. The oldest section, which is currently known as Lounge 1, dates back to 1967, when it replaced Schiphol's first terminal (built in 1928) sited at Schiphol-Oost (Schiphol-East). Seven years later increased demand led to the expansion of the terminal and with this came Lounge 2 in 1975.

Lounge 3 was then opened in 1993 and

▼ The single terminal layout is clearly shown in this map, but it's over a mile-long walk from one end to the other. (Schiphol Group)



▲ The author waits for his next customer at one of the small See Buy Fly outlets beside the Rijksmuseum along the Holland Boulevard.

**a personal view**

In the nine years that I've worked as a weekend employee in the See Buy Fly shopping centre as a Camera, Electronics and Gadget store salesman, I soon discovered that every working day seems to be full of excitement and variation. The place is always in motion as thousands of passengers pass through. Many passengers drop in with the idea of buying something to take on their flight and that is where I come in. Talking to my customers enables me to suggest items that best meet their requirements. At the same time I must anticipate the different needs of customers, as they all have their own reason for flying – ie on business, leisure or holiday or for more personal family considerations. This makes the job much more interesting as you hear all different anecdotes which make you wiser. For instance some customers are heading for the tropics and when they step off the plane within minutes they will need a water resistant camera. Another might be a city council businessman going to possibly buy a fleet of brand new electric buses valued at €1 million each. He'll need a quality camera for images that might help to influence the council's decision. See Buy Fly salesman and women are like the rest of the airport staff – they are ambassadors for Schiphol. Therefore, the Schiphol Group Consumer Department invests many resources to keep staff familiar with the hospitality codes by providing training on this subject at different stages in their careers. This means more homework for the employees, but it is worth it. The fact is that the See Buy Fly shopping centre is the best selling point in The Netherlands, and for some product lines, the best in Europe. Language can present problems due to the high level of transit passengers who originate from all around the globe. Most will certainly not speak Dutch and many don't speak English either. In the beginning most sales staff (including me) faced difficulties in finding a way to bridge this communication barrier. But as time goes on you learn to use all kinds of creative communicating skills, such as the capability of convincingly demonstrating items – seeing is believing, as they say. As the shops are open 365 days a year and usually between 0330 (an hour before the first departure) and 2300 (until the final departure has left), shift working is essential. Occasionally you see famous film stars, football players and even Presidents and Royalty passing by your shop. Sometimes you are called upon to serve them, which can add interest to an otherwise routine day. Looking back on my career I can conclude that while working in a shop might sometimes seem a bit dull and 'static', working in See Buy Fly has been one great pleasure that has enriched my life enormously. The many different people from all around the world have inspired me with all kind of anecdotes about their adventures and taught me new things every day.

extended the total shopping area from 21,528sq ft (2,000m<sup>2</sup>) to an impressive 43,057sq ft (4,000m<sup>2</sup>). This lounge also has direct access to an in-terminal/airside hotel. But by the end of the 1990s both Lounge 1, which is now exclusively used for flights within the Schengen agreement countries, and Lounge 2 had almost reached their maximum capacity. Therefore, Schiphol's consumer department refurbished and expanded Lounge 2 (its busiest part) in 2000. The new complex was designed by British firm Virgile & Stone and featured an internet centre and a larger selection of bars and restaurants. In 2005 Lounge 1,

also accessible from lounge 2 via a passport and security control, was next in line for refurbishment. It last had a makeover in 1987. This second refurbishment could better be described as an entire rebuild since the whole structure was enlarged and the lounge received a completely restyled interior. Several top brand stores, among them Ralph Lauren and Swarovski were included, marking a new departure for the See Buy Fly concept. Lounge 4, which opened in 2004, caters for the M gates and the LCC H gates and is an extension of Lounge 3 and can only be reached from there. The M gates are

solely used for low-cost flights within the Schengen agreement countries, access is usually allowed without passport control, but in this case passport checks are needed to reach Lounge 3 first. Lounge 4 has its own bars, Internet facility and a See Buy Fly store, but with a limited selection of goods. Arriving passengers who have AMS as their final destination are not allowed by law to purchase duty free items here. This is why purchases can only be made on the production of a valid boarding card. However, arriving passengers can still purchase fully taxed items, notably in the landside Schiphol Plaza that was commissioned in 1995. This shopping area is integrated with the arrival halls and railway station and gives access to the Panorama Terrace (a large observation deck) and the Planes @ Plaza aviation shop which has on display a Douglas DC-9-32 cockpit section (formerly from TWA's N929L) plus a DC-10 engine and landing gear. See Buy Fly staff members aren't allowed to purchase duty free goods either, but most of them can make use of the discounted crew shop in the Skyport complex.

**The See Buy Fly concept**

Being able to stand out from the crowd is essential in establishing a thriving business. See Buy Fly did just that when it settled on its name all those years ago. The catchy title is easily remembered and by offering quality service it has built up an enviable reputation over the years. The basic idea that involved 14 (currently nine) totally independent and different

◀ Lounge 1 was refurbished in 2005 and is now used solely by passengers travelling between countries that are part of the Schengen agreement. (Schiphol Group)



▲ The delicatessen in Lounge 2 sells a wide variety of foods, including local delicacies such as various Dutch cheeses.







▲ Electronics and gadgets are very popular; this is the main See Buy Fly electronics store in Lounge 2.

▼ The shape of things to come – the shopping wall. This example, selling MP3 player headphones, is located on Pier D.

shop companies/owners (separate from the Schiphol Group's consumer departments), was to combine them in one large department store all using the same marketing brand - See Buy Fly. All staff wear similar uniforms, shops have the same layouts and prices for all items are constant across all of the outlets at the airport.

**One terminal**

A second reason for See Buy Fly's success is the desire of Schiphol Group to maintain the 'one terminal' concept at AMS. This is unique for an airport of this size - although

there are four departure lounges they are all part of one large building, thus enabling passengers to roam and explore, and of course to browse all of the shops. And it certainly helps passengers to stretch their legs - the walk from one end to the other is about 1.3 miles (2km). This is of particular relevance to transit passengers since they don't have to waste time moving to another terminal but instead can spend the time more productively.

Floor space amounts to about 6,458,557sq ft (600,000m<sup>2</sup>), but unlike most other international airports, almost all of it is on one level. Departing and arriving passengers

are not segregated on different floors - thus simplifying transfers - however, those travelling to Schengen countries are kept apart in Lounge 1.

The Netherlands is home to around 16 million people. However, in order to appeal to travellers from all over the world all marketing and advertising for See Buy Fly is done in English. This extends to the shop staff, all of whom speak English as well as Dutch, and in most cases a third language.

Schiphol's Consumer Department has made great efforts to combine the shopping area with several complementary entertainment facilities like the Holland Casino, the Rijksmuseum exhibit, a Holland Excursions travel agency desk and most recently a Library, which was added in 2010. These are all located on the recently restyled Holland Boulevard (see *Airports of the World*, Issue 33, p14). This part of the airport acts as a 'corridor' linking Lounges 2 and 3 and has further facilities, such as public showers, a meditation centre/general prayer room, a baby care room, a play garden for kids and massage facilities.

With vast numbers of passengers coming from all around the world, notably those making transfers, it is vital that the airport has clear signage. AMS uses a mixture of direction boards and signs enhanced by pictograms, selected colours and limited English text which were designed by Bureau Mijksenaar and introduced from 1991. Such clear signage is obviously useful to the See Buy Fly outlets. This so-called 'way finding' system has been so successful that it has been employed at many other airports around the world, including New York/JFK, Newark, Washington/Dulles and Frankfurt.

**Promotion**

Schiphol's Consumer Department uses many methods to promote the See Fly

Buy concept outside of the actual airport. For example the past two summers saw part of Lounge 2 shops converted into a temporary television studio. The popular Dutch television programme *On Air* was recorded here giving the lounge daily air time on the Dutch Channel Three.

During special occasions such as Christmas and Valentine's Day all lounges are decorated with a specific theme, special offers are introduced and several performing artists walk around entertaining the passengers. However the most obvious advertising comprises the distinctive yellow and blue (formerly yellow and red) plastic bags, which are made of extra strong high-quality plastic, which is not only intended to protect the traveller's purchases, but also encourages re-use of the bag, thus increasing the awareness of See Buy Fly.

**The future**

While See Buy Fly shopping has enjoyed many years of success, at Schiphol - trends and consumer demands change. Customers today tend to prefer fashionable brand stores above the simplicity of a selection of branded items in an airport-run outlet. Schiphol Consumers Department acknowledges this and as a result See Buy Fly is slowly evolving by incorporating more and more brand stores.

The See Buy Fly name will continue to live on at the tobacco & alcohol and cosmetics & perfume stores which still benefit from the name's reputation. The 'department store concept' however has been reintroduced at the shops on the larger piers under the name Vizz!t. These former See Buy Fly branded stores offer a selection of almost all the products sold in the lounge shops to enable and stimulate last-minute purchases. Recently a self-service 'shopping wall' was installed on Pier D, based on advanced



▲ Vizz!t stores are now positioned along the piers and are aimed at stimulating last-minute purchases.



vending machine technology and selling music player headphones. Another change is the reduction of participating companies as Schiphol Group's new strategy is to operate several major shop branches itself, instead of granting new concessions to third parties.

The time between refurbishments of a Schiphol lounge is on average around 20 years. Therefore, work on the refurbishment of Lounge 3 (last done in 1993) has just got under way. This lounge will not undergo an extensive rebuild as was the case for Lounge 1. Some of its main elements, such as the 'sky islands', will remain. But considerable cosmetic changes will take place so as to update the whole area. Business Area Retail coordinator, Mrs Liesbeth Mahieu confirmed that the work is due to be completed in June.

For now plans for a satellite terminal (known as Pier J) which was to have been built on the other side of the A4 (Amsterdam-Rotterdam) highway and would have included a See Buy Fly outlet, have been shelved owing to the current financial climate. Work on a people mover to connect it with the main terminal had already begun on the top level of Lounge 3, but has been suspended. Should the

satellite be resurrected in the future the people mover will be finished.

With increasing competition for passengers' duty free business picking up pace around the world, the Schiphol Group realises that good is no longer good enough and excellence combined with innovations and good value is what both passengers and airlines demand. Therefore AMS strives to remain Europe's preferred airport. Schiphol Group's Senior press officer Mrs Kathelijne Vermeulen added that: "Apart from the logistic developments in and around Amsterdam/Schiphol Airport that are vital in accomplishing this goal, it's clear that the See Buy Fly shopping centre and its facilities will yet again play a key role in the airport's success in the coming years."

AMS has been at the forefront of airport development and trends for decades, notably in the retail and duty free areas. It's See Buy Fly experience continues to evolve and will no doubt continue to be a great success. ✕

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◀ The traditionally popular duty free items, such as alcohol, tobacco, chocolates and cosmetics, are still among the most lucrative areas for the airport. (Schiphol Group)