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Toys

A couple of weeks ago we visited a very large toy store in Central London. We passed by two weeks before that, and mentally noted it for our list of places to visit before Christmas. This was an outing that definitely had to be done now and not too near to Christmas, when we would probably have had to struggle through the Christmas shopping crowds. As it was a Monday, it was relatively peaceful, with just enough youngsters about to ensure we were not the only ones cooing over the huge variety of toys on the shelves.

The entrance and ground floor were entirely taken over by soft toys, the most welcoming and friendly sight there could be for families and children entering through the main double doors. It was very clear that teddy bears are as popular as ever but they were greatly outnumbered by a complete Noah's Ark of other creatures, including soft toy versions of vultures, ostriches, crabs and spiders. There were some large soft greeny yellow grasshoppers with dangly legs, not for cuddling and comfort, but a character for a more adventurous story and also, unfortunately, possibly a weapon with which to tease or torment a more sensitive sibling. I think I would need them to pay me to take that one home!

We started on the top floor and worked down. I was intrigued to see a very realistic looking crown, with all its jewels, which on closer inspection turned out to be made entirely of Lego building bricks. On turning around, I then saw a half life-size seated Lego figure of Queen Elizabeth on her throne, with her corgi dog at her feet. There were even more royal figures in Lego looking out over the stairwell, namely Prince William and Catherine Duchess of Cambridge, Prince Charles and Prince Harry. When I had Lego I used to build small houses, although they were somewhat limited by the small number of window and door frame pieces I had. It was of great importance to have enough of the interlocking red roof tiles, including the half size edge pieces and the ridge pieces, and not much fun to find myself one tile short of a complete roof, although cardboard from a cereal box folded over made quite a good replacement.

The store was full of playful and friendly helpers demonstrating some of the toys to everyone who showed an interest. I kept seeing boomerang type Frisbees being flown around, safely as it was high

up over the shoppers, and tiny remote controlled cyber flyers (drones) buzzing over the stairwell like dragonflies. Fascinating magic snow was appearing almost from nowhere as soon as the tiny granules were wetted. One corner was dedicated to creating your own bear from all the components, clothes and accessories, with a little red or pink heart inserted into the bear before it was stuffed and completed. There were spongy paintbrushes that produced rainbow lines on the paper, and an illuminated clear glass tablet that caused the magic marker scribbles to light up with a fluorescent glow. Lifelike butterflies sat on a log and flapped their wings up and down. Inflatable dinosaurs promised hours of prehistoric fun and a T-Rex bedroom guarding model that would roar when disturbed and project dinosaur images onto the wall. A small suspended plastic cow was flying in circles with thin fabric wings flapping up and down. I even had a go at driving Thomas the Tank Engine, in front of a screen that gave a driver's view of my progress along the track and countryside.

It seems that toys are really not much different from years ago, except that they are constructed differently, with greater choice and variation, and with more emphasis on "collecting them all". The main categories seem to be unchanged: soft toys regardless of species, construction toys from stark space stations to cosy homes and gardens for families of little characters, craft work to make usable or decorative items, and action toys and costumes to live out stories or exercise the mind or limbs. The best action toy I saw was a pair of heel skates, with two side wheels per foot. My attention was instantly grabbed when I saw one of the store helpers whizzing past with illuminated feet, lit up by the LED wheels by each ankle, flashing circles of whirring rainbows, making circuits of the stairwell endlessly on the smooth flooring.

We arrived back on the ground floor and made our way to the exit, past the giant animals, including an enormous and rather expensive camel with a four-figure price tag. It would be a talking point but may be difficult to include in games and stories. Once outside, the rainy street seemed a lot greyer, despite the colourful shops, and I did feel that I could possibly get to the underground station much faster if my heels were on wheels. I resisted the temptation to go back in and I had to tell myself that walking is much better exercise. (839 words)