

## SMOKESHOP REVIEWS

**Smoke Shop review Bogart's, Sydney**

By Samuel Spurr

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Visiting a cigar store is one of the best things a cigar enthusiast can do besides, of course, lighting up. A trip to any cigar store is filled with emotions that allow us to ponder with amazement and delight at all of the silent soldiers on offer. A visit allows us to immerse ourselves in what we imagine heaven to be like; St. Peter opening the gates to a smoke filled, VIP lounge, with God kicking back, feet up, humidor open, saying "help yourself," whilst puffing away on a Monte A. Opening the door to a cigar store also makes us come to the startling conclusion that we have chosen the wrong career path and need to surround ourselves with cigars to make a living.

I first came across Bogart's on the evening I was celebrating my 22 nd Birthday. I had smoked a few cigars previously but had not immersed myself deeper into the life. I was in the city, and was on the lookout for a cigar store. Not just a convenience store selling cigarettes, but a 'cigar store'. I inquired in numerous shops about the whereabouts of such an establishment. I was given directions to a shop front a few more Sydney blocks down George Street . I reached the outside of Bogart's, which at the time, was located in a much smaller premises than it is now. All of a sudden St Peter opened the gates and rather than finding God puffing away I was welcomed by store owner and cigar connoisseur Norman R. Stein.

Glancing around Norman 's bigger store now located in the Piccadilly Centre in the heart of Sydney , you can't help but be immersed in the world of tobacco. The store specialises in Cuban and non-Cuban cigars whilst also stocking accessories, pipe paraphernalia, hard to find tobacco products as well as the usual cigarettes. Two walls are laden top to bottom with goodies and with your mouth wide open you cannot help but feel like Charlie upon entering Wonka's chocolate factory.

Norman also stocks a stand-alone humidor with individual cigars that could only be called on for a big time smoking experience.

The best feature of any store be it cigar or otherwise is the warm relaxed nature of it. Bogart's definitely caters to novices and connoisseurs alike and the staff acknowledges that we all have to start somewhere, being more than happy to impart a few pointers regarding cigar selection. With access to a wide range of cigars, you are guaranteed to walk away with a smile, knowing your cutter and lighter are going to be busy soon.

Below is an account of this writer's visit to Bogart's and an encounter with Norman :



Norman Stein and Samuel Spurr

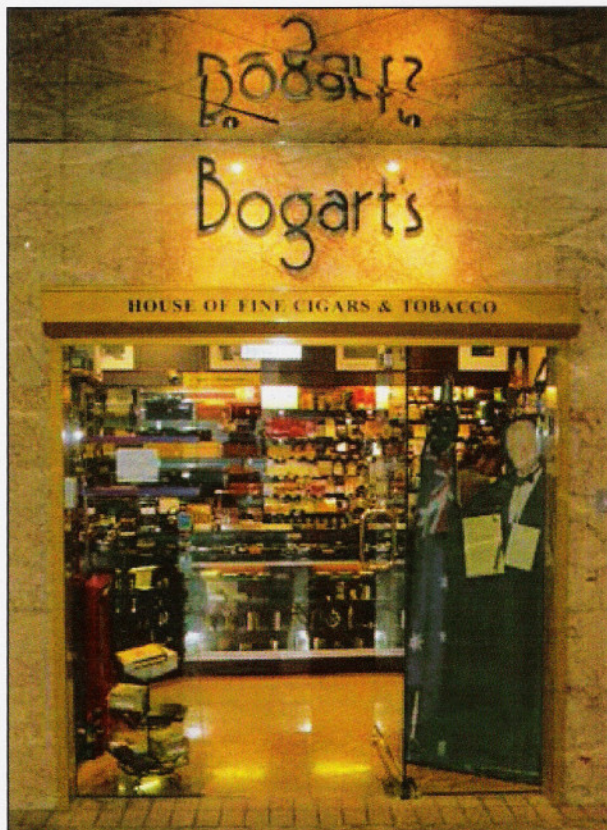
**Samuel Spurr:** How long have you been operating Bogart's and prior to acquiring Bogart's, what was your level of involvement in the tobacco industry?

**Norman Stein:** I have owned the store for approximately seven years. Previously I was in the corporate world and needed a change in lifestyle. I wanted to escape the grind and so I thought that this small business would be perfect.

**SS:** What were your first impressions of the business?

**NS:** Well the business was mostly geared around cigarettes and only dabbled in cigars and pipe tobacco, so I wanted to raise the profile of premium tobacco such as cigars in the store.

**SS:** How has the cigar scene in Sydney changed over the past five years?



**NS:** Over the past five years or so I've witnessed the scene change dramatically. The resurgence that occurred in the US, I think, has plateaued while in Australia the trend is still growing. There has definitely been a lifestyle move towards or I guess a greater awareness of cigars in Sydney. This has come as Australians are taking more time to enjoy the finer things in life. Australian wines are now recognised internationally. Gastronomically, our chefs are preparing quality international cuisine, so these things have also helped raise the profile of cigars. There has been a push towards leisure activities and enjoying the good life in our society so that people are inquiring about things such as cigars.

**SS:** In regards to retail and the general industry as it stands in Australia, what direction do you see the cigar industry heading in the future?

**NS:** Well if this trend and awareness continues I can only see the industry improving. More mature people are being attracted to cigars. By 'mature' I mean people in their late twenties and early thirties that are aware of cigars and are moving away from cigarettes, with more of a disposable income to do so.

**SS:** In reference to the Australian market, how do government taxes and duties impact on retailing and the industry as a whole?

**NS:** I think the Australian situation is quite interesting. We have one of the most heavily taxed markets in the world. Luckily these taxes and excises primarily focus on cigarettes and not the cigar market. But the taxation of the tobacco industry definitely plays a major role in our business and ensuring quality at a competitive price is a fine line. Australian legislation also prohibits the advertising of tobacco so that has also made us more aware of networking and word of mouth as our main advertising tools.

**SS:** You're involved in staging your own cigar events, how did that come about?

**NS:** Well as I said previously, it's all about networking and socialising with other smokers. It's great to get people together who share a common pleasure. I wanted to create positive smoking environments. I usually present a new line or make of cigars whilst also providing background information behind it. I also ensure interesting entertainment such as an artist's premiere of his or her works or a snooker competition coupled with the right selection in music to create a fantastic smoking experience.

**SS:** The Internet plays a major role in any commercial activity, how has the internet affected your business?

**NS:** The Internet has allowed international visitors to find out about Bogart's and I think obviously the information shared over the web is fantastic. Clearly it has allowed us to retail to clients in various locations around the world. They can easily email orders and enquiries to me and we can make the necessary arrangements to deliver anywhere promptly.

**SS:** What direction do you see Bogart's heading in over the next five years?

**NS:** I would like to think that the store will continue to grow and allow those people keen on cigars to be able to find a quality location to get their supplies.

**SS:** In your opinion, is the demand for Cubans higher than non-Cubans?

**NS:** Generally yes. There is of course the common perception that Cubans are the best. They are usually more fuller-bodied and robust than non-Cubans making them perfect for after a big meal when your palate is prepared. However the smoother, lighter cigars coming out of the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Nicaragua are quite popular as well.

**SS:** Do you have a favorite?

**NS:** Cuban, my personal favorite would be the Partagas line. Non-Cuban, would be El Credito of the Dominican Republic and the Torano line from Nicaragua. I also admire Padrons.

**SS:** A cigar is usually more than just lighting up and puffing away. What is a cigar experience all about?

**NS:** Cigars are such a sensual pastime. They obviously involve the senses, particularly the sense of smell and taste. For



Norman Stein

this reason cigars have a relaxing effect that allows contemplation. I believe cigar smoking allows you to travel off to a myriad of different places. Especially if you're accompanying it with a few drinks!

**SS:** Where is your favorite place to light up?

**NS:** In Sydney I love the Hemmesphere lounge within Sydney 's 'Establishment' club.

Bogart's is a Sydney cigar institution with locals and tourists regularly passing through the threshold to God's country. So next time you are 'Down under' pop in and say hello to Norman and the guys. You never know he may just be holding the humidor open and puffing away on a Monte A.

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