



Left: Giraffe skull. Above: Freeze-dried piranha. Right: Evolution manager Steven Bakur with a grizzly bear skeleton. Below: Just US\$189 and the "genuine alien skull" is yours. Bottom: Bakur — "the wonder of natural history transcends all ages and nationalities".



Looking for that something a little different to give your loved ones this Christmas? Perhaps a freeze-dried piranha would fit the bill. Or how about a raccoon penis bone? **ANDREW MERRY** reports.



Evolution for sale

PICTURES: ANDREW MERRY

REGULAR GIFTS such as socks, underwear, perfume and golf accessories seem to lack the symbolism needed to mark the last Christmas of the 1990s. Fortunately, those who live in New York City and are bored with the usual presents have a shop that specialises in bizarre, yet timeless giftware.

Its macabre inventory includes freeze-dried bats (US\$49), rats (\$95), piranhas

(\$19), bottled sharks (\$19) and a large collection of exotic insects. The shop also stocks more traditional taxidermy specimens, such as wall-mounted gazelles, goats and buffalo heads, and bearskin rugs. In short, it has everything to brighten up the more adventurous mantelpiece.

Located in the fashionable modern art mecca of SoHo, the shop is aptly named Evolution and is doing a roaring trade. The ghoulish-looking store manager, Steven Bakur, describes the six-year-old shop as a "natural history emporium", unique to New York. Although would-be entrepreneurs have tried to imitate the concept, they haven't come close to Evolution's dark twist on retailing.

The original idea for the shop came from the owner, William Stevens. Unhappy with his life in advertising, he turned an obsession into a business. His knowledge of advertising helped develop the immediate impact and identity of Evolution. SoHo is the perfect location, with its bohemian past and notoriety for the stylishly weird.

The store is like a museum from the time of Charles Dickens' Curiosity Shop, with display cases specialising in different subjects and species. One is full of reptiles, such as chameleons and rattlesnakes poised to strike (\$549). There are skeletons and skulls

'The store is like a museum from the time of Charles Dickens' Curiosity Shop'

of giraffes, lions, wart-hogs, beavers and monkeys, and a huge crocodile skeleton hanging from the ceiling.

Some of the displays illustrate the store's sense of humour: one sign reads "genuine alien skull \$189". Stock comes from all over the world — fossils from Morocco, zebra skins from South Africa, alligator products from southern USA. The shop stocks everything from raccoon penis bones (\$5) to a nest of 100 million-year-old fossilised dinosaur eggs (\$15,000). The only living items for sale are Venus flytraps (\$6).

Outside the front doorway of Evolution

hangs a human skeleton. The shop window features a three-metre grizzly bear skeleton, jaws gaping open as if captured mid-roar. Morbid curiosity lures customers into the shop. On the weekend there is an endless stream through the doors. "Many of the customers are tourists who are less interested in doing the Statue of Liberty thing and would rather explore the unusual side of New York," says Bakur. "A lot of them treat us like a museum, which can be annoying, but that goes with the territory. The wonder of natural history transcends all ages and nationalities. Kids love the place, especially the dinosaurs and alligator heads."

Lurking on the shelves of fossils and specimen bottles at Evolution there could well be the original Y2K bug in its pre-binary form. Evolution is a supermarket of ancient DNA, just waiting for a would-be Jurassic Park type of fossicker to release them from their fossil prison.

Above all, Evolution shows that good Christmas cheer can be expressed in many ways. So, if you discover a freeze-dried rat in your stocking this year, it's not necessarily a nasty threat. And next time you are stuck trying to buy a Christmas present for someone who has everything, why not get them a freeze-dried piranha? At only \$19 it won't bite into the budget. ■