BRAND PROFILE: MOUNTAIN LION

French outdoor brand Mountain Lion insists that it will keep its supply base as simple and as local as possible while still producing "interesting and intelligent" clothes for enthusiasts across Europe. In future, it aims to have a similar production network serving the markets in Asia and the Americas too.

Local focus

For someone who has travelled so widely, Fabien Manaranche, founder of outdoor brand Mountain Lion, has stayed close to his roots. Based in Strasbourg in eastern France where he grew up, his company's collections comprising jackets, hoodies, trousers, T-shirts, gloves and a range of accessories contain fabric he sources mostly in and around France: fleece and material enhanced with Outlast temperature-regulating technology from Balas, ceramic membrane from Lorraine-based Heim Textile Concept et Diffusion, and so on. He pays high levels of attention to detail, crafting each of his products carefully. His previous job, you see, was as a carpenter, working with his father in the family firm, meticulously and lovingly fashioning items of furniture from wood; he has brought this level of care to Mountain Lion. He has always loved drawing, and was curious and observant by nature, so launching an apparel brand seemed a feasible challenge, he says.

Mountain Lion products are full of details that the founder says are aimed at meeting the specific needs of outdoor enthusiasts. Jackets have elbow protection elements, but nothing that can encumber the movement of hands or arms. There is a small bag in water-resistant material, designed specifically for gloves for winter sports or mountain enthusiasts. If you take wet gloves off and put them into your rucksack, everything in there can quickly get wet; the bag keeps all your other gear dry.

These touches also include the omission of hook-and-loop on clothing, with zips and, in a number of cases, magnets fulfilling the same function. A pair of Mountain Lion trousers, in use already among groups of elite troops in the French army, are long but convert to shorts by means of rolling up the legs and hooking them into place with magnets. "We knew this would work for them," Mr Manaranche confirms, "because Mountain Lion people test everything first."

Out of Africa

The name of the company comes not from Alsace but from Africa. Always a serious outdoor enthusiast himself, Fabien Manaranche has been on expeditions to Mount Kilimanjaro and was greatly impressed by the ways of the Masai people who acted as his guides. At night, after a long day's walking and climbing, the Masai would wrap themselves up in a traditional woollen blanket as an aid to recuperation. One of the products he has developed is a blanket-type fleece garment, complete with hood and sleeves, to mimic this.

Mountain Lion products are made with the needs of outdoor enthusiasts in mind.

Mountain Lion



The brand was one of the official sponsors of the Polarlys expedition to northern Greenland in summer 2010.

Mountain Lion

His commitment to the European fabric and components sector is strong, but he has a vision of selling Mountain Lion products globally in the future. This will mean moving not just finished products but his whole production set-up to different parts of the world, manufacturing in Japan or China or Australia for the Asian market, and in the US or Canada for the Americas. Meeting the needs of clients is at the forefront of his corporate philosophy.

"This is the reason for choosing ceramic membrane, in this case Gold Reflect Line from Heim, for protection against moisture," Mr Manaranche explains. "I want to develop Mountain Lion products without constraint to make sure I can meet all the needs of our customers. We tested the membrane in real conditions, mountaineering, climbing and during Arctic expeditions and the results were astonishing. For me to choose any material, it has to be pleasant to wear, strong and lightweight. We make all our products to follow the body and its movements and we found that the ceramic membrane was entirely in keeping with this aim." He goes on to explain that working with suppliers in France has given him the chance to speak directly to the research team involved in developing a product like the ceramic membrane and to have discussed in detail with them their contention that the material can add around 5% to muscle strength. He says this was another reason for making the choice.

Being a small company is an advantage here, he believes. Being able to share information quickly with suppliers is the key to creating what Fabien Manaranche calls "sincere and lasting links" along the supply chain. "Our main trump card is our loyalty," he adds, "and this is helping us improve our performance. We consider our suppliers to be part of our team."

Join the club

Product testing in the field will also continue to inform the choices the brand makes. It wants customers to sign up to the Mountain Lion Club. To become a member, you have to commit to doing three serious sports activities, mountain-climbs or trails to walk and while you are doing them you commit to carrying out three environmentally helpful tasks. An example would be bringing other people's rubbish down off the mountain. As an incentive, members of the club will be among the first to try out product prototypes, with their feedback contributing to ongoing product development.

"This is a long-term initiative," the brand's founder continues. "We've had around 50 people sign up so far, although we haven't had too much communication with them about it yet. What I will say is that the Mountain Lion Club is no marketing gimmick, but an effort to show a real example. It will be a real community of people, people who love nature and are keen to try out our products. It's part of our philosophy, part of our way of looking at the environment that surrounds us, and a gesture of humility. Just to give you another example, I no longer have a car. I prefer to go around by bicycle, but I have also signed up for a car-share scheme that the authorities have set up in Strasbourg."



Protective Lion (left) and Big Lion (right) jackets.
Mountain Lion

Fame spreads

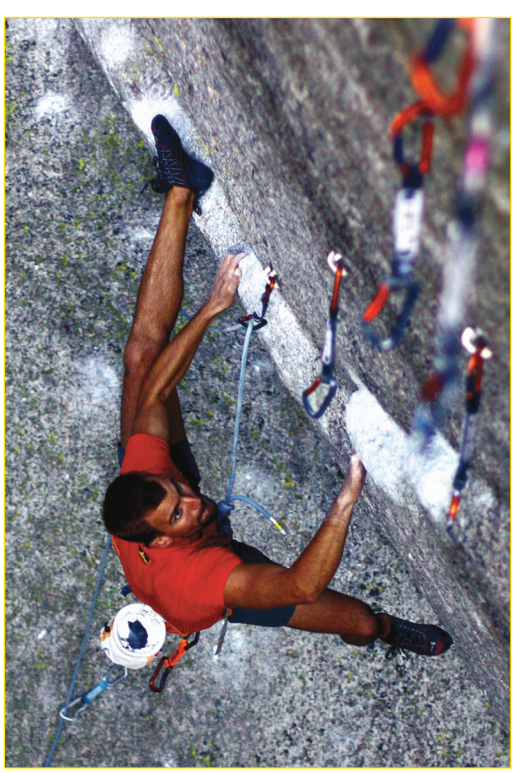
Ideas like the club are helping to win renown for Mountain Lion. Mr Manaranche describes himself as an amateur of the outdoors, but a demanding one, so he knows the needs of his users because he is one himself. "I'm very pragmatic," he explains, "and this is one of the main qualities I try to instil in Mountain Lion products. Our aim is to make products that are interesting and clever. It's also one of the reasons why we canvass opinion on the products among the members of the team."

In doing this, the brand has turned elite heads too. One of the most recent exploits of explorer and wildlife photographer Pierre Vernay was to travel to northern Greenland this summer as part of an expedition called Polarlys, for which Mountain Lion was an official partner. Mr Vernay said afterwards that he has never worn a thermal T-shirt that performed as well as the Lion's First Skin product he wore on this trip. "I'm very proud of that," says Fabien Manaranche, "because Pierre has tried out every make in the market."

Further compliments have come from Pierre Bollinger, an elite climber from Alsace, who says Mountain Lion products have made him feel as light and free as though he were wearing nothing. And another climber, Yann Corby, has started calling Mountain Lion tops "the T-shirts that make you strong".

Perhaps it will take time for this fame to spread internationally, but Fabien Manaranche is happy to take it one step at a time. "For now we are happy to concentrate on Europe," he says. "We want there to be a minimum amount of transportation between us and our suppliers. Our ambition is to be the first company in the outdoor industry to meet that challenge for all our collections."

At the moment, Mountain Lion is happy to hold back from becoming a global brand, but it seems likely that demand will take it to other parts of the world sooner rather than later.



Alsace climber Pierre Bollinger says Mountain Lion clothing makes him feel as light and free as if he were wearing nothing.
Mountain Lion