BRAND PROFILE: LL BEAN

Outdoor apparel brand LL Bean will mark a special anniversary in 2012: the company will have been in existence for exactly 100 years. It is celebrating its centenary with a special commemorative collection of products that it will make available along with its spring-summer 2012 lines.

Centenary season

Outdoor products ranging from decoy ducks, snow-shoes to a green canoe and the spruce paddle to go with it are part of a commemorative set of products that outdoor brand LL Bean showcased in the summer, and will start selling at the end of the year or at the start of next, to mark its upcoming centenary.

The company opened for business for the first time in 1912, when Leon Leonwood Bean began his one-room operation in the state of Maine selling a single product, the Maine Hunting Shoe, the first to stitch a long leather upper onto a rubber work boot. He came out with the catchline that no-one could expect success hunting deer or moose of their feet were not "properly dressed". It's now a $1.5 billion-company, selling high-performance activewear for women, men and children (rainwear, fleece tops, shirts, trousers, skirts, dresses, shorts, down jackets and so on), as well as the shoe (it's still going strong) and a wide range of other outdoor footwear.

Its 100th-anniversary Product Showcase includes a limited-edition version of the Maine Hunting Shoe, naturally, with an authentic 30-



Maine-based clothing, footwear and equipment brand LL Bean is celebrating 100 years of "exploring the outdoors" in 2012.

LL Bean

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Sunset over Acadia national park, a love of the outdoors in Maine has been inspiring LL Bean for 100 years.

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centimetre leather upper and a rubber vamp, rawhide laces and the original brick-red coloured outsole. Mr Bean designed the footwear himself, making it clear that the idea of combining leather uppers with rubber bottoms was the fruit of 18 years as "a hunter who has tramped the Maine woods". The rest of the items in the special centenary line-up are things he may have taken with him on his treks, including five very special sets of shotguns at $75,000 per set. Fishing rods and a variety of hunting knives are also part of it.

This eclectic collection of heritage outdoor products will add interest to the LL Bean spring-summer 2012 collection, but there is plenty in that collection itself to show that the spirit of the company's founding principles is alive and well. Outdoor gear in the collection includes a range of tents, sleeping-bags and kayaks for those as intrepid as Leon Leonwood himself. For ordinary mortals, clothing components include, for women, the trail pants, trekking pants and the long-sleeve, BeanSport quarter-zip pullover in breathable, quick-drying, moisture-wicking fabric, suitable for a wide range of sporting activities, including hiking, walking, running and yoga.

Another women's top is the Tropicwear lightweight shirt, with an ultraviolet protection factor (UPF) of 50+ for women. The trousers offer the same level of sun protection, as well as quick-drying, moisture-wicking fabrics and a choice of crop-lengths. Alternative bottoms for colder weather come in the shape of the Mountain Laurel soft shell pants. These have a high-pile fleece interior for warmth and a shell of water-resistant, wind-resistant and breathable fabric.

For men, highlights include the Pathfinder Performance Pants, designed for everyday wear, but also for hiking. They are made from 96% nylon and 4% elastane, are quick-drying, breathable and have the same UPF 50+ sun protection as the women's trousers. "We've been making these in cotton-canvas for aeons," says the LL Bean product line manager for men's apparel, Don Rogers. "This new version is about getting people off the sofa and onto the trail." He describes the stretch fabric as "really excellent" because it pulls the seat area in and prevents the knees from bagging out. Clothes are usually designed for people who are standing, he points out, but we sit down for most of the day, changing the shape of many of our garments.

A high-performance trail shirt called Coolweave is another of his favourites, with design elements such as a hidden-zip, securable pocket to prevent the nightmare scenario of a car key lost in the wilderness from becoming reality at the end of a long, hard hike. Also blending into a classic look are stretches of cooling mesh fabric at the neck and shoulders for extra moisture management in areas that might come into contact with a backpack. "It's a mountain-or-Main-Street shirt," Don Rogers says, "lightweight enough to wear it on the trail and smart enough for when you sit down to dinner later."



Mountain Laurel soft shell pants - water-resistant, wind-resistant and breathable.

LL Bean

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Women's lightweight Tropicwear shirt with 50+ sun protection.
LL Bean

Next on the list of products he wants to highlight is the Timberledge shirt, a jacquard top with built-in silver-based antimicrobial odour-management technology, flat-lock seams to minimise friction and prevent chafing and UPF 50+ sun protection. LL Bean describes it as an exceptionally breathable performance shirt, built for "unrestricted comfort" for a variety of outdoor activities. To complete the look, there are also Timberledge pants, canvas-effect, but made from lightweight fast-drying nylon. The knees are reinforced for durability and articulated for flexibility and, again, there is a hidden pocket for car keys. Other pockets include large-sized ones at the back, one of which has a special wallet pocket cut into it; hikers are keen to stop their cash and credit cards from falling out too.

To return for a moment to the Maine Hunting Shoe, a brochure LL Bean has published to mark its centenary relates that the founder was proud of the boots, and offered his 18 years' experience of the woods and the wilds had contributed to their making as something that should give his first customers confidence in the product. So confident was he that he guaranteed them "to give perfect satisfaction in every way". However, of the first 100 pairs he made, 90 came back to his one-room shop because the leather upper had broken away from the rubber bottom, despite the local cobbler's stitching skills and he had to refund the purchase price.

This might have put him out of business, but the original LL Bean borrowed more money, made more Maine Hunting Shoes (with improved stitching) and pushed onwards to success. He died in 1967 at the age of 94. *The Wall Street Journal* named him as one of the top ten entrepreneurs of the twentieth century.

Almost 100 years on, Don Rogers sums up the legacy by saying that LL Bean is a trusted brand. "It's a challenge, particularly for a product developer like me," he says, "but we still offer the 100% satisfaction guaranteed."

