Snow attracts people to the outdoors because it reminds us of the fun and freedom of childhood.
Icebreaker



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Fortunately for the outdoor clothing and footwear brands who dedicate part of their autumn-winter collections to jackets, suits, trousers, hats, baselayers and boots that are specifically for wearing in winter weather, people all over the world still yearn for the peace and powerful beauty of snowy landscapes.

The enduring appeal of snow

The desire to go outdoors in snowy weather, at least among the young and young at heart, seems universal. Certainly when the first snows of the season start to fall, they contain a magic that captivates people. Bright white landscapes have a dream-like quality and the effect lying snow has on everyday noises (traffic-flow, footsteps, even voices) is also attractive. The urge to get out and walk, run and ski is strong, and provided people have the correct clothing, they should be able to stay warm and dry enough in even the most challenging conditions.

There are plenty of people involved in the design, manufacture and marketing of apparel and footwear for snow who know exactly what this urge feels like. Take Jake Thamm, the co-founder of Colorado-based snowshoe brand Crescent Moon. Talk of what the enduring appeal of snow is brings out the poet in him. "When it's snowing, hard and heavy, the only sound is the lightweight landing of crystals on trees and the ground and on eyelashes," he says. "No cars, no planes overhead, it's light but diffracted, or it's nighttime, but you can see; it's cold, but it feels fantastic. Everything is covered in snow, perfection reigns in that moment of muffled bombardment. All things are equal, there is no discrimination by the snow as it falls on cars and trees and lawns and streets and dogs and kids and covers them in a blanket of sensory indulgence."

Moment of reflection

A creative company, Crescent Moon has won plaudits for coming up with a single-pull-loop binding system for its snowshoes. It says the binding is the single most important component of any showshoe. But it's all a means to an end for Mr Thamm. He says getting out in the snow is "a diametric contrast to the rest of my life". He explains: "It's a moment of reflection and appreciation, like childhood is to adulthood, like silence is to chaos, like winter is to summer. It's all the best Christmases remembered at once; no details, just the smell and feel of your best moments. Like no other weather phenomenon, snow is transformative and can change your perspective completely for that hour or maybe more, if you're lucky, before it melts away."



Crescent Moon's single-pull-loop fully adjustable snowboot binding system.

Crescent Moon

A snowy childhood can clearly help the magic make its mark on a person for ever. Arc'teryx-sponsored snowboarder Dominik Betschart grew up in the canton of Schwyz in central Switzerland "at the base of two ski resorts" and says he has spent every free minute since the age of 12 in the snow. "At an early age, I started to really enjoy good powder days and this is what motivates me the most today. Even after I started competing (mostly at big air events), riding good powder lines is what I enjoy most. Nature offers me the playground where I have most fun."

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Fabien Manaranche, founder of French outdoor clothing brand Mountain Lion, agrees, saying that, for him too, snow serves as a reminder of childhood, when games and holidays seemed to last for ever. "It's snow that makes the mountains so impressive," he explains. "I love hearing the sound of my crampons sink into the snow and the crack of my ice-axe. I love how these trace my path and being able to look back from the top with satisfaction to see the way I have come."

Stark reminder

For some (people growing up in warmer countries), fun in the snow comes later in life. This may not apply to Sophie McKibben, a student at Red Cross Nordic United World College in Norway (which aims to promote peace and sustainability through education). A contributor to outdoor brand Patagonia's Field Reports, she talks about growing up "on a mountain in New England" (she hails from Ripton, Vermont) and counting the days until the snow came so that she could get back on her skis. Her friends often yearned for summer and the beach instead but, for Ms McKibben, the anticipation of the first snow of winter provoked in her "the same hungry excitement [with which] some kids looked forward to the next release of a Harry Potter movie".

Located in the beautiful fjord region of western Norway, her college has 200 students, aged 16-19, from more than 90 countries and there are plenty of neophyte snow fans among them. Ms McKibben recalls an early expedition on Jostedalsbreen, the largest glacier in Europe, for which her trekking partner was a 17-year-old called Rodrigo, from Costa Rica, who had never seen snow before. They were a mismatched pair in some ways because Sophie McKibben learned to ski just after she began to walk. "I was never a great racer," she says, "but my coach told me I had snow-feel, an unlearnable quality only present in those lucky enough to have grown up outside."

Rodrigo's first experience of being outside in snowfall came during that expedition, and he wasn't the only first-timer. "I saw on the faces of my friends the kind of sheer delight that I didn't know teenagers were still capable of, as they watched snow sift down from the sky for the first time in their lives," Ms McKibben recalls.

Drama and beauty

Berghaus brand president, Richard Cotter, is another who associates snow with childhood and fun and believes this is a strong part of the ongoing attraction it holds. "I think snow appeals to people on many levels. The sight of it brings back childhood memories of play, which can immediately make us feel happy. Then there's the undoubted adrenaline kick that activities such as skiing and snowboarding can give us, being able to move so fast without relying on an engine. Also, the drama and beauty of a snow-covered landscape can take the breath away and that is an essential element of winter's appeal."



Men's Mount Asgard Hybrid jacket with hydrophobic down and PrimaLoft insulation.

Berghaus

His company's Extrem range of clothing is designed to equip consumers for the most testing winter conditions; Berghaus invests time and money in the ongoing development of Extrem and Mr Cotter insists consumers will always find products in the collection that use the latest fabrics, features and designs to allow them to tackle their winter climbing and ski mountaineering adventures. For example, the company's innovation team, MtnHaus, has been putting great focus on insulation recently. For this winter it has introduced the Mount Asgard Hybrid, which it claims is the first jacket to combine Primaloft insulation with hydrophobic down, so even if the jacket becomes soaked in snowy weather, the down will keep working. "All of these developments deliver products that love snow just as much as we do," Richard Cotter says.

For snow apparel the main functionalities of general outdoorwear matter all the more: waterproofing, breathability, windproofing and insulation. Some of the key innovations for the autumn-winter 2011/12 season include developments in stretch fabrics for increased freedom of movement, the improved ability of boots to grip on snow and ice and membrane technology for waterproofing.

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New membrane

At this year's international trade fair ispo in Munich, Japanese industrial group Toray launched a new membrane technology with its product Dermizax NX, which the group claims is completely waterproof and windproof, up to 200% stretchable and more breathable "compared to conventional materials". Steffen Meiler, manager for brand communication at Toray International Europe says the new membrane will "revolutionise the sports garment market". For autumn-winter 2011/12, Dermizax NX is now on the market and is being used exclusively by European ski brands Kjus, Bergans of Norway and J.Lindeberg.

Norwegian ski apparel company Kjus has used Dermizax NX in its ski jackets for men and women, in combination with its 'hybrid insulation' concept. The women's Desire jacket features different sections of insulation, which Kjus describes as "optimal placement of heat-retaining down, combined with moisture-managing Primaloft insulation". The front and back part of the jacket is insulated with 90% down, 10% feather insulation, while the shoulder and hips have 100g Primaloft insulation, and the side parts and lower sleeves have 60g Primaloft insulation. In using Toray's new membrane technology, the jacket has a water column of 30,000 millimetres. The outer material is 100% polyester, while the lining is 88% polyester, 12% spandex. The corresponding Kjus jacket for men, the Detour, also features the Dermizax NX membrane, along with the same level of waterproofing and breathability as the 'Desire'. Unlike the women's version, however, the Detour does not feature Kjus's hybrid insulation, but instead has 70 grammes of Thinsulate Platinum Flex for warmth.

Own brand

Canadian outdoor company Arc'teryx has updated its Gamma line of technical soft shell jackets. The jackets, which come in sizes for both men and women, previously featured Polartec's Powershield fabrics, but from autumn-winter 2011/12 onwards, they feature the brand's own soft shell fabric, Fortius. Arc'teryx describes Fortius as: "A membrane-free, air permeable four-way stretch-woven nylon fabric laminated to low profile, mid-weight four-way stretch fleece." The fabric comes in three versions. Fortius 1.0 is a stretch woven fabric for high energy sports. Fortius 2.0 is used in the classic Gamma MX and AR lines, and has a polyester brushed lining, laminated to a stretch woven nylon face fabric. The adhesive used in the lamination process adds wind protection but is still air permeable and breathable. Fortius 3.0 is intended for use in colder climates and is used with a warmer lining.

The new fabric is made in a small Japanese mill, meaning that Arc'teryx has more control over its specifications than over the Polartec's Powershield fabric. In the new Gamma jackets, Arc'teryx uses its own-brand synthetic insulation in the shape of Coreloft, a polyester-based synthetic filling. The jackets are also durable water repellent (DWR). As well as updating its Gamma jacket range, Arc'teryx has also updated and renamed the Hercules jacket. Now known as the Hyllus, this mid-layer fleece jacket uses Polartec 02 High Loft, which is a textured fleece but with a hardface outer. The jacket is laminated with nylon for snow shedding and wear resistance, and the polyester fleece is on the inside, but the product is more fleece than soft shell, as it is breathable and has limited wind resistance.



The Alpamayo softshell jacket from Vaude uses Polartec's NeoShell fabric.

Vaude

Room to breathe

Better news for Polartec is that German outdoor brand Vaude has incorporated into its Alpamayo softshell jacket Polartec's NeoShell fabric, which was announced last year but is new onto the market this winter. Polartec NeoShell breathes actively due to its sub-micron fibre membrane. Unlike traditional shell fabrics it does not require heat and pressure to build inside the garment before the membrane begins to work. Vaude's Alpamayo jacket has a soft synthetic backer which gives the jacket more of a soft shell feel, as well as adding insulation. The bi-elastic material is waterproof (10,000 mm water column), windproof and offers a high level of breathability. The jacket also features water-repellent zip closures and ultrasonically welded seams.

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A natural alternative

New Zealand-based company Icebreaker has launched a new mid-layer version of its lightweight, insulating Realfleece line. The Realfleece 320 outer wear line debuted in autumn-winter 2010; for autumn-winter 2011/12, Icebreaker has introduced the Realfleece 260, describing it as "a functional mid-weight insulation layer that gives consumers a natural alternative to a synthetic fleece. It has a very high insulation-to-weight value, which means it is exceptionally lightweight considering the level of insulation it provides".

Realfleece is made from premium merino wool grown in New Zealand's Southern Alps, and Icebreaker is confident it will be a success with consumers. "Consumers loved the warmth, softness and functionality of Realfleece 320 outer wear, and there was a demand for a Realfleece mid layer that could be worn over Icebreaker Bodyfit base layers and under a technical shell," says creative director Rob Achten. "Realfleece 260 is the biggest story of our autumn-winter 2011/12 collection. Like Realfleece 320, we expect it to be an instant classic." The Realfleece garments have an interior terry knit construction, with loft that has been brushed to create air pockets that trap air and lock in body heat. The outside has a smooth, air-permeable jersey finish.

Life in the mountains

A former secretary at a construction company in San Sebastián, Basque climber Josune Bereziartu had earned world fame by becoming the first woman to complete a climb with a degree of difficulty of 8c+ in the Yosemite Decimal System, following this in 2002 by completing a 9a climb, another female first. For someone who has climbed on every continent and achieved such important milestones, her excellently written blog now paints a picture of a more laid-back approach to loving life in the mountains. But it's also clear that she cannot stay away.

For example, in an entry for last winter she describes an ascent of Arnales, one of the Pyrenean Three-Thousanders, that was, at first, difficult until she put crampons on her boots, but on which her mood seemed to grow lighter the higher she went. "The sun on this little col [Collado de Pondiellos] is warm enough to tempt us to lapse into idleness, but we fight the temptation off," she writes. "Shadows begin to turn the white banks of snow a bluish colour and the snow is starting to freeze. I put my skis on and because it's my first descent [on skis] of the season, I feel a little nervous, but this sunshine and this snow are my allies and they allow me to slip down the mountainside easily, even with a touch of grace. Viva. At the bottom, I am still a short walk away from the stone cabin, part of an old spa, that serves as a mountain refuge. My companions are there, waiting with glasses of beer, but concerned that I have taken so long. When I arrive, they break into smiles as wide as the ski-trails we have left on the mountain."

For mere mortals

Of course, not everyone can operate at Ms Bereziartu's level. In September, adventure footwear brand Teva launched the Forge Pro Winter Mid, a mid-cut boot that the company says will help protect less extreme outdoor enthusiasts from slipping in snow and ice. The boot features technology that Teva has called Hypergrip Icelock, which consists of fiberglass-infused pods strategically placed along the length of the sole. These pods increase the shoe's grip, even on ice or snow. Each Forge Pro Winter Mid boot also includes 200 grams of Thinsulate material for warmth, and waterproof membrane technology to ensure warm, dry and comfortable feet. The boots are waterproofed with Teva's TIDE Seal membrane, and have a gaiter-inspired heel collars.



Icebreaker's Terrain Zip Bodyfit base layer utilising 260 g/m² 100% pure Merino wool.

Icebreaker

Reach for the summit

Putting the practical to one side, Mountain Lion's Fabien Manaranche says that snow has other meanings for him. It's synonymous with summits, he explains, which can be cold and remote places, and sometimes even dangerous, but that doesn't stop individuals and businesses from aiming for them. Mr Manaranche founded his own business after taking part in trekking expeditions in Africa, which even inspired his company's name. Sitting at campsites at night on the way to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro he was impressed by the way his Kenyan companions used wool capes to shroud their whole bodies to keep out the cold and he has modeled a Mountain Lion product, Massai's Lion, on this idea. However, this brings him to another point. Snow is also essential for life and balance on planet earth, and things are changing. "It's sad to say, but the reality of Mount Kilimanjaro today gives the lie to the impression Ernest Hemingway gave in his 1936 story The Snows of Kilimanjaro. The snows there are not eternal."

Perhaps there is a warning here for everyone, that climate change may alter our expectations of snow in future, in which case it makes sense to enjoy it as much as possible while we can.

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