BRAND PROFILE: NAU

Launched by the founder of Marmot, the brand takes its environmental credentials seriously and touts an 'insulation revolution' with its recycled down collections.

Nau targets new generation of urbanites



The non-sports-specific brand is a combination of outdoor and lifestyle.

Nau

US brand Nau describes meeting its recycled down supply chain partners as "luck", a collaboration that would enable an "insulation revolution" for its autumn-winter 2015 collection after several years of testing and refining. "We live in a world where innovation happens really quickly in electronics but, in base technologies and fibres, we've been working with the same palette for years, so to have any significant improvement in innovation, sustainability and process is really exciting," says Mark Galbraith, general manager at Nau. "This recycled down is a major breakthrough that has strong implications for sustainability."

Nau's partner in France collects and separates the goose and duck feathers from used duvets and pillows and then sends them to a sorting facility near Budapest in Hungary to be graded and cleaned, resulting in a product that is comparable with virgin down, states Nau. Head of materials Mary Jane Murphy explains, "Recycled down gets us one step further to where we want to be as a brand and allows us to give our customers what we stand behind."

Sustainably minded

Describing themselves as "idealists, doers, experts and seekers", the company was set up in 2007 by Marmot founder Eric Reynolds, whose core ideas centred around sustainability, philanthropy and a direct-to-customer distribution model. The collection is compact, but includes hard and soft shells, shirts, wool coats and bags, a genre that "addresses the needs of sustainably minded, active urban dwellers". The concept drew a number of people from other brands in the wider outdoor and performance apparel industry to start the company. "Our location in Portland, Oregon, has a lot to do with our

ethos," says Mr Galbraith. "Portland is known as a progressive, sustainability-orientated town, so we are in an environment that helps stimulate and is supportive of breakthrough ideas and technologies that are environmentally sound."

In 2011, Nau was awarded the ISPO Brand New award ('new' because it had recently launched in international markets) and was described by judges as combining "urban style and high-end outdoor functionality on an unprecedented level". It works with "like-minded partners" to develop fabrics that "challenge industry standards", including organic cotton, recycled polyester, merino wool, Tencel and French Terry - a blend of organic cotton, Tencel and spandex.

"The materials are everything," Mr Galbraith tells us. "They are the make-up for the majority of the environmental impact that clothing has so we have strict sourcing standards for all of our fabrics. All of the fibres we use are either natural and renewable or recycled synthetics. All of our renewable natural fibres are produced in the lowest impact manner possible and the main synthetic fibre we use for technical performance fabrics is recycled polyester. We use the worldwide standards and global certifying bodies like USDA Organic, GOTS, Oekotex, and bluesign to ensure all of our materials are the most sustainable they can be. We also have a restricted substance list that keeps harmful chemicals that are often used in apparel production out of our fabrics."

Its waterproof wool is bonded with a breathable laminate and the wool in the outerwear collection comes from factories in Prato, Italy, which turn wool cuttings and selvedges into recycled wool yarn, a material it says is indistinguishable from new wools. It also uses Cocona, a blend of recycled polyester and activated carbon derived from coconut husks, as a down alternative.

For the launch of the recycled down collection last August, about 50% of the 650-fill jackets contained recycled down. From autumn-winter 2016, this will jump to 99% of the collection.

"Regarding future developments, we would like to see more apparel companies using sustainable fabrics and materials," adds Mr Galbraith. "Specific advances in new sustainable materials are important; however the most impactful development would be shifting the vast majority of fabrics to more sustainable materials and methods to achieve the level of scale and awareness to have a real and lasting positive impact on the industry."



Previously Responsible Down Standard-certified, almost all 650-fill jackets will be made with recycled down by late 2016.

Nau

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Tapping into a movement

In a similar manner to philanthropic companies such as Toms and Patagonia, 2% of sales are donated to select charities or organisations: The Conservation Alliance, which protects threatened wild lands and waterways in North America; Ashoka, a project that encourages leadership skills in children; emergency relief provider Mercy Corps; Ecotrust, an organisation that "builds economies through knowledge, technology and capital"; and People for Bikes.

The team, and the collection, are still comparatively small, selling most of the product online. "We just opened our first in a series of Nau stores in our hometown of Portland, Oregon, which has been an incredibly exciting experience. The store will allow us to have an even closer and more direct relationship with our fans to make sure we are always developing the products that they most want to see from us. It's also a great opportunity for us to connect with new potential fans and introduce them to the brand."



Nau Women's Copenhagen trench coat incorporates organic cotton, recycled polyester and down.

Nau



Boone and Christine Speed/Nau

Collaborative working

In recent years, Nau has joined forces with companies and designers it admires, including Japanese-style textiles company Kiroko and bow-tie brand Harding and Wilson, to launch collections with collaborative influences. Nau designers Peter Kallen and Carma Ferrier explain the thinking behind a new tie-up with Japan-based camping and backpacking brand Snow Peak.

"We are big fans of the brand and its aesthetic, sensibility and attention to detail. We've always been attracted to the way they reference classic camping and outdoor gear, but done with better materials and with a more refined and minimised approach. When they opened their North American headquarters in Portland, a conversation started, and it seemed like the perfect opportunity to share design sensibilities from different platforms. Blending the brands was actually pretty seamless because of our aesthetics and how refined both of the brands are, so bringing them together was just natural. We saw it as a new opportunity to explore this blurry genre of fewer things doing more – breaking down the barriers of what is expected around a campsite.

"The sense of interaction with the garment is one of the biggest cues that informs new design for us. Fabrics, always. Cuts, old references to Japanese heritage, but making them modern and applicable to life today. Versatility, always having the right piece for layering. A reductionist, minimalist approach, so you end up with an item that is just perfect for what you need. We love how the pieces layer together, how the dimensions work with each other. The mix of fabrics, too. We love how everything can work in the outdoors as well as an urban setting."

Its focus remains on the US but it is looking to expand internationally, with distribution in Canada, Europe, Japan and Korea. "We have a growing and enthusiastic group of customers that really appreciate the fact that performance apparel does not need to look technical and that sustainably designed and produced garments can look great and function at the highest level," says Mr Galbraith. "Across the board, people have been very receptive and positive about the brand and the product, which is very encouraging. There are, of course, constant improvements and refinements to be made, but it seems clear that we're on the right path and are serving a need for our customers."

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