When Sir Francis Drake sailed round the world, in 1580, he described the Cape as "a most stately thing and the fairest cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earth" — now a South African company based in the Cape is upcycling sails to ensure it stays the fairest.

Choob, Mwezi and Poka start a new life

by David Buirski

It was like a scene out of a 'Toy Story' film. The lights had been turned off for the night at the Waterfront in Cape Town. All the bags on display in the Sealand Gear shop decided it was time to wake up again.

"So what was the strongest wind you faced in the round-the-world yacht race?", asked Mwezi (she had a Swahili name that meant Half-Moon).

Choob thought about this for a moment. "Probably 110 mph." Choob had originally been one of the sails that were used in that race in 2016. "But, as you see, I've now retired and decided that being a functional bag — and a very attractive one — would be less of a strain."

Poka was suitably impressed — she had only ever sailed around Robben Island in Table Bay.

Choob, Mwezi, Poka are in fact the style names of some of the bags in the Sealand collection. They are all starting a new life, part of an extraordinary upcycling programme that underpins the young company. It was the brainchild of Mike Schlebach and Jasper Eales, who in 2015 decided that they should be doing something creative with the sails that yachtsmen around the world needed to replace. The fabrics are clearly tough and eminently reusable. The two partners, both with a keen interest in surfing and outdoor pursuits, had been considering the concept in the Tavern of the Seas, a nickname for the iconic city at the southern tip of Africa.



Part of the waterfront in Cape Town. With Table Mountain rising over 1,000 metres above the city, it attracts yachtsmen from around the globe and is home to one of the world's largest sailmakers. Old sails became the inspiration for upcycling company Sealand.

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Upcycling is seen by the company as a better use of resources — why throw away something that has a useful life in another form, why send it to landfill or spend more time and money on deconstructing and reprocessing — and making bags and accessories that can last and are built for life must be environmentally smarter, even if it is not necessarily an easy goal. "Our material and designs allow us to reuse the waste material of others in a new composition, a new contextualisation," suggests Mr Eales.

The source of the company's materials are principally used sail cloth, which still retains good resiliency, high abrasion and UV resistance and good flex strength, and advertising billboard mesh or ABM. The latter is a lightweight polyester, PVC-coated material that allows crisp and colourful printing. "Billboards need to have low wind flow resistance which gives us the advantage of a lightweight, flexible and highly durable fabric for our products," the duo explain, "and they are often used as linings for our bags. They also add a surprising touch of colour and graphics."

Bedouin stretch tents are another source of fabric, providing Sealand with a waterproof, stretchable material that is easily washable and comes with antimicrobial and anti-mould properties, along with various UV stabilisers. The company also uses vinyl truck tarpaulins that are often coated with a flame-retardant finish. Nylon ripstop is also included in the palette. The nylon-threaded material resists tearing and is commonly water resistant when used in camping equipment, including the outer shells of sleeping bags. It is also the fabric used for hang glider and parasail wings, as well as parachutes and hot air balloons. It is not surprising that the principals do not anticipate any stress failure in the fabrics used for their products.

Highly individual

With so many sources of material to upcycle into new products, the final products have a very individual flavour, even though the overall size, construction and design of each specific style in the collection is identical. "They take on a personality of their own," says Mr Schlebach, "which in turn allows the consumer to appreciate that they have bought a highly individual and unique item. All of our bags and accessories are one-off items made from several different waste material types. Finding two of the same items is nigh on impossible." This individuality can be a problem for some retailers who could expect all the units delivered of a style to be absolutely identical. It becomes a matter of them having to understand, and appreciate, the principles on which Sealand is built.

Now in its fourth year it is expanding into Europe — it already has distribution in New Zealand, Japan and the United Kingdom (currently its largest export destination). New Zealand is an interesting choice as it has been claimed that Auckland has the largest number of yachts per capita of any city in the world, and it should be an excellent source of material to upcycle. The company clearly has ambitions to take its upcycling thinking to a wider audience abroad; the designs are aimed at people who combine their outdoor activities with modern business and relaxed living. An appreciation of sustainability and sound environmental credentials helps adds extra appeal.

A constant source of material

Ensuring a steady stream of materials has been one of the biggest challenges faced by the entrepreneurs. Sealand believes it has solved the problem and has created strong links and partnerships with the manufacturers of advertising banners, tents and sailmakers. Because of the city's overwhelming beauty, and proximity to some of the most famous wine growing areas, it has made Cape Town a magnet for national and international conferences. The expansion of its international airport and sporting links (South Africa hosted the FIFA



The zip pouch Poka, top left, highlights the zig-zag stitching that is a consistent style feature of the Sealand collection. Top right: the Mwezi handbag utilises Bedouin stretch, yacht sail, and/or advertising billboard mesh. Choob, the long duffel bag, can vary in weight from 1.0kg to 1.35kg depending on the material being used for the body. It is internally lined with specially suited advertising billboard nylon, while its rip-stop base material adds more durability.

Sealand Gear

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men's football World Cup in 2010) has helped make it one of the most desirable tourist destinations, too. Every occasion demands more advertising banners, all of which have a limited life after use for their original purpose once the conference attendees have moved on. The result is that the company has a ready supply of used banner material and has forged strong links with the local company producing them.

Something even more dramatic has happened with their most in-demand fabric: sail cloth. The company is now working in partnership with one of the largest sailmakers in the world that has its major manufacturing facility in Cape Town; it has similar views on sustainability. Offcuts and fabric that might not have met the exacting standards of yacht sails become available to Sealand. The process has taken a further step forward. Used sails that come back to the sailmaker by the container-load from its sail lofts around the world goes to the upcycler for "disposal" and new sails are shipped back abroad in the empty containers. It becomes a virtuous circle.

The company has added a limited range of clothing items, too. It includes hand-knitted beanies and T-shirts. The ribbed beanie uses 100% Merino wool, grown and spun in South Africa; the T-shirts are a blend of 55% hemp and 45% organic cotton. "We chose hemp as it needs very little water to grow and needs no chemicals," says Jasper Eales, "and it fits with our personal ethos." There is no doubt that the clothing side will grow. In this case it will be a matter of using recycled fibres and yarns in the merchandise.

It is also the company's ambition that its manufacturing base remains in South Africa, specifically Cape Town. It now employs 25 people. The machinists come from a variety of cultural as well as manufacturing backgrounds; some have arrived in the city from countries to the north of South Africa. Training and schooling has been essential. Working with such a variety of fabrics requires different techniques and, with frequent changes of needle and thread, even someone who had worked in a clothing factory would require extra training and upskilling. Working with industrial sewing machines can be far removed from ordinary garment making.

With the company structure in place and its supply base assured, Choob, Mwezi, Poka and friends can look forward to being part of a growing family.



Mike Schlebach, left, and Jasper Eales, the two surf and outdoor enthusiasts who came up with the idea of upcycling fabrics from old sails, out-of-date billboard advertisements and camping gear into long-lasting, environmentally sound bags and accessories.

Sealand Gear





Not your usual textile-based factory: employees need to have an eye for the finished design as well as the right skills to create the highly individual products that are a hallmark of the company.

Sealand Gear

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