

REVIEWS / FASHION

SNOW-STOPPING STYLE

Bulgaria may have an up and coming ski infrastructure but it certainly enjoys a well-developed sense of fashion. Turn up in that tatty one-piece at your peril!

by Nadia Damon; photography by Ellis Brigham, Salomon, The Snowboard Asylum

As any fashionista the world over will happily tell you, image is everything and no more so than on the ski slopes, where your winter wardrobe will be given as much scrutiny as your technique.

If you're heading to one of Bulgaria's resorts this winter, or even further afield, you'll find that the choice of winter sports equipment and clothing available in Bulgaria is now extensive: allowing you to easily hold your own on the snow-covered catwalk also known as the piste.

The even better news is that Bulgarian prices are amongst the lowest in Europe, so you can pick up a top label for around five to 10 percent less, even more on occasion, than elsewhere.

If you're looking to update your look, or even get your first one going, you'll get off to a good start by shopping around and learning to mix and match your brands. These days it's seriously uncool, and this applies to both boarders and skiers by the way, to turn yourself into a walking advertisement for the likes of Burton or Salomon, so resist the temptation to kit yourself out from a single designer.

While it may be hotly contested by skiers, the sporty, casual look has been introduced to the slopes by boarders. According to Rositsa Karatoteva, the head of Energy Trade Ltd who are the exclusive Burton distributor for Bulgaria, fashion is not the only thing at work here. "Freeride skiers very often opt for snowboard wear because it's more functional," she explains.

Functionality is the key to ski and snowboard wear and this year you'll see this underlined with the emphasis on mobility, rather than bulk. Stretch fabrics are bringing a slinkier look to this season, assisted by tapered waists and seam-free shoulders.

This year, men's fabrics include pinstripe, houndstooth and plaid, as well as camo, while women's looks veer towards denim and paisley. Slate grey, white and brown continue to be in vogue in both the men's and women's ranges, although bright green, orange and scarlet have joined the male ranks, with pink, emerald and burgundy keeping the girls company.

Snowboard giant Burton has been predictably busy this year, unveiling its B by Burton line specifically for women, as well as a foray into "wearable electronics" with Motorola producing Bluetoothcompatible jackets for both men and women. The Audex range comes in a choice of black or brown for men and black or pink for women. It incorporates iPod docking technology, stereo speakers in the collar, and caller ID/track display in the sleeve. With a full battery, the iPod is said to last around eight hours. Skiwear manufacturer, Spyder, also offers wireless connectivity via its LTD Jacket. It comprises a 4 GB Colour iPod Nano with access to photos, podcasts and audio books: should you find yourself at a loose end.

Westbeach has notched up a first this year with the release of its Phenom jacket. Billed as the first ski jacket to glow in the dark, the fabric has been treated with a photo-luminescent coating. According to Australian manufacturer The Speciality Group, the technology only requires 12 minutes of charging in natural light for three hours of luminescence. This makes it a great option for night riding. Only 600 jackets have been made and Westbeach has the exclusive rights to the technology for the 2006/07 season.

Other hot picks include the Burton's Ronin ALS Hooded Jacket and its eponymous line with international rider Shaun White, as well as the Marharishi designs for Quiksilver. Founder Hardy Blechman is producing global designs under his DPM, or Disruptive Pattern Material brand and "Heritage" is first in the series offering camouflage prints. Meanwhile, Degre 7 offers women the laser-cut Century women's ski jacket: a seamless construction designed to enhance waterproofing and be more lightweight. The Roxy Dana Jacket is also certain to turn female heads, featuring a bold floral print and gold embroidered detail on the back. Women should also check out the Bonfire Flare Jacket and Burton's Concert Jacket.

Billabong also introduces its "Signature Series", containing jackets personally designed by five top snowboarders from its official team. Skiwear designer Rossignol has found its inspiration from outside the company, with its JCC, which is created by fashion designer JC de Castelbajac, and Pucci women's lines modelled on Jane Fonda's Barbarella style and the seventies heroine Wonderwoman.

Balkan couture bunnies will undoubtedly love Escada Sport's winter looks: dubbed "Ski" and "Helsinki Resort". The former is dominated by ski outfits featuring Japanese style embroidered dragons as well as Swarovski crystals. "Helsinki Resort" incorporates fox, coyote, cashmere and silk, as well as gold leather.

Last, but not least of course, you'll find plenty of choice for kids from Burton, Roxy and O'Neill who have all modelled their styles on their adult lines. Rossignol also features a junior range, as do Degre 7, Helly Hansen, Quiksilver, Spyder and The North Face.

Fashion Hothead

Ski hats are an essential part of your winter look. Beanies are again popular this year, both in chunky and fine-spun wool, although you'll also see plenty of balaclavas and bonnet-style hoods on the slopes too. According to ski and snowboard retailer Ellis Brigham, the Barts Tribe Bomber Hat is flying off the shelf and you can even buy a pair of Tribe Paws to match. If you're after the Cossack look, check out the uber-cool faux fur and fleece hats from Thaw.

The High Street Lowdown

You will find plenty of ski and snowboard wear in Sofia and the Bulgarian ski resorts. Sofia's City Centre Mall features several snowsports outlets so make that a definite stop. Escada fans should check out the brand's store on Vitosha Boulevard in Sofia. Burton is distributed in 19 stores across Bulgaria, mainly in Sofia, Borovets, Bansko on Pirin Street and Pamporovo in the Pelerik Trade Centre, Hotel Marconi, although you can also source clothing and equipment in Varna and Plovdiv. You will find major brands like Spyder, Rossignol and Salomon in all the resorts and the capital. If you would like to order online, check out leading UK distributors Snow+Rock Direct at www.snowandrock.com; Ellis Brigham at www.ellis-brigham.com; and The Snowboard Asylum at www.snowboard-asylum.com.