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Well-Suited

Bespoke Threads, Sorted BY MIRIAM CAREY

Each spring, London's most coveted fashion czars host appointments in the US – and they can fit you in.

Consider the absolute power of a hand-tailored suit. Its cut flatters every effort you've put into your workouts yet seamlessly hides the uncanny slope your left shoulder acquired from years of schlepping a laptop. It gets noticed, this suit, eliciting a slight element of surprise and

commanding just a bit more attention. It is different. It is better.

Heads of state, actors, chairmen and royalty have long understood the importance – the necessity – of conveying an immediate sense of superiority with a bespoke (hand-tailored) suit. To add visibility to titles either earned or inherited, the elite have long traveled to London's Savile Row. Just a few yards from Piccadilly Circus,

this quiet street has welcomed leaders of commerce and heads of state for fittings on the showroom floor while cutters, coat makers and finishers sew by hand in Dickensian rooms behind the scenes. But Americans needn't travel all the way to Piccadilly to acquire this level of elegance – Savile Row tailors bring their showrooms-in-miniature to luxury hotels in major U.S. cities each year. >

PHOTO COURTESY OF (FROM LEFT, CLOCKWISE) KILGOUR FRENCH STANBURY, DAVIES & SON, KILGOUR FRENCH STANBURY

OFF (WITH) THE RACK

Savile Row caters to a small but exclusive set of Americans – each clothier that travels here services about 300 customers – by making frequent visits for fittings. Regular customers appreciate the convenience, but those hoping to enhance the quality of their wardrobes should leave the rack shopping behind and consider the advantages of getting on the appointment list. A visit with a Savile Row representative will make the guy with the measuring tape at the department store's Armani section seem like a bad memory.

“Shoulders must be kneaded to produce balance and the collar carefully worked to fit the neck in any posture,” notes Lara Mingay of Savile Row’s Kilgour French Stanbury. “Critically the cutter must assess the customer’s figuration and cut the suit to enhance what he sees.”

Alan Bennett, Managing Director of James & James and Davies & Son of Savile Row makes an even better argument for the hand-made suit. “You don’t know what it’s like until you’ve had one,” he says, adding, “People are not conscious of wearing a bespoke suit, they just know they look smart – as good as the chairman.” The difference, he claims, is not only in the look of the suit, but also in its construction. Off-the-rack suits – even expensive brand names – are factory-made for the mythical “average man” in each size category and are often constructed with industrial chemicals to fuse inner linings and poor-quality canvas bases that can make the suit lose its shape the first time it’s subjected to a dry-cleaner. Bespoke suits are hand-sewn from the inside out to fit the exact shape of the customer, making use of the highest-quality fabrics and sewing techniques which extend the lifetime of the suit to well beyond your own.

ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP

Quality comes at a price and a Savile Row suit is an investment of both time and money. On the first visit, you’ll negotiate the details of the suit and spend a good amount of time being measured. One or two fittings will follow – you’ll see a “baste” or skeleton suit take shape over a period of at least three months – before the finished product is delivered. More than 60 hours are put into each suit, which leads to a financial commitment of at least \$3700. Fitted shirts, ties, cufflinks and accessories will be fitted into the package you choose. For a job of this size, it is important to find just the right cutter – a task that can become slightly more complex if you’re shopping from the US.

Each shop on Savile Row has its own style and, while “bespoke” implies complete adherence to a customer’s specifications, it’s wise to find the shop that best represents the

cut and overall style you’re looking for. Styles range from Kilgour French Stanbury’s extremely fitted waists, to Davies & Son’s conservative English style, to James & James’ recognizable “Duke of Windsor” flare. Henry Poole & Co. invented the jacket that became the Tuxedo. The hippest kid on the block is Gieves and Hawkes which boasts a sense of freedom and commitment to “cool” that sometimes gets a sideways glance from the more austere neighbors down the street, but this house seems to best understand the desires of their US customers.

Visit websites, then e-mail suit makers to request a catalogue or additional photos of their products. Talk with the tailor you’ll work with to narrow the field, and schedule a meeting.

Nominated for two EMMYS for her work as a costumer designer on the Sopranos, Juliet Polcsa works hard to match her cast with appropriate tailors to achieve just the right look for the show. “A tailor is like anyone else you let into your life,” says Polcsa, “their taste and personality need to jibe with yours.” Flexibility is among the most important

personality traits to look for in a tailor, she notes, but the final decision should be made face-to-face. “If you like the way he looks, that’s a good sign,” says Polcsa. “He is his own best salesman.”

Most Savile Row tailors who visit the US do so a few times a year, so it is possible to complete the entire transaction here. “A customer can place his order in January, have a fitting in March, and then we’re back in June,” says Bennett, who travels with a sewing kit to do alterations on-site in his hotel room. In the best-case scenario, he notes, a customer will be able to visit London for a final fitting, or the suit will be shipped once the final details are taken care of. Because of customs laws, tailors cannot deliver the suits to their US customers personally.

Of course, once you smash ‘em in the boardroom with your new bespoke suit, you’ll feel like a beggar in anything less. You’ll acquire a taste for a fitted coat, a new set of casual sports jackets and something nice to wear to the skeet shoot. Don’t worry, while the shops on Savile Row are very old-fashioned, they do take credit cards. **ME**

>>> HITTING THE MARK

As the costume designer for *The Sopranos*, Juliet Polcsa has walked the uninitiated through the tailoring process, helping them understand the nuances of choosing fabrics, surviving fittings, and helping them to develop good relationships with tailors. Here are her suggestions for surviving your first bespoke suit:

- Most people don’t know what a “good fit” is, and Americans tend to want baggy clothes. When clothes fit you well, they will seem a bit tight.
- Trust the tailor. If there’s something you really want – like vents – and he’s shying you away, trust his judgment.
- Don’t try to “fool” the tailor (by sucking in your stomach or standing too straight and tall); he needs to take in all your defects in order to compensate in the final product. In the end, he can make up for what nature didn’t give you.
- Unless you truly believe double-breasted is right for you, go with a single-breasted suit.
- When buying a first suit, go conservative with the cut – even if you’re tempted to get something wild. You can make up for it by going wild with the lining because people so rarely see the jacket lining and – like women’s lingerie – it can be your secret.