



PHOTOS: TAKASHI TOMITA

Rubber Fetish

Mount Kurihime, Tommy Yamamoto and the Quest for the Perfect Wetsuit

For a host of surfers plying their trade in cold water, it's become axiomatic: the best wetsuits in the world are Japanese. Yet, in the U.S., a land of Wetsuit Plenty, they've been nearly impossible to access. The mainframe wetsuit makers build their suits from less expensive Taiwanese neoprene in massive, extremely efficient Asian and Latin American factories. And, thanks to constant engineering and materials breakthroughs, the results have been impressive. Competition is fierce. Surfing's name-brand suits are warmer and more flexible than ever, and collectively they have pushed surfing up and over the polar ice shelves. The advances these companies made from the early '90s to today are mind blowing. Yet, according to a sampling of cold-water specialists, there's a higher, warmer rung on the ladder.

"Japanese wetsuits are superior," states Joe Curren. With ice-breaking bona fides including surf trips to winter-time Lake Superior and northern Japan, Curren is uniquely suited to levy praise. "Check it out," he says, fondling a custom 4/3 he grabbed from the back of his car. "The workmanship is unreal, and the stretch..." He pulls on the sleeve and it gives like taffy. I grab hold, and the smooth-skin rubber is supple indeed, almost melting from the heat of my hand. "I don't really know anyone who doesn't wear Japanese," Curren says.

I'd heard about Japanese suits for almost ten years. Friends who surf or shoot photos professionally raved.

Basically, anyone who knew about them had one. But the comments weren't universally glowing. For starters, they were—and remain—prohibitively expensive. All but the most obsessively committed or cashed-up will have a hard time justifying doubling down. And despite top-shelf warmth and flexibility, they had a rap for short life. A fingernail nick or parking lot pebble could rip right through the soft neoprene. This might account for reticence on the part of the major companies. Such customer service nightmares don't endear a brand to retailers in a hotly contested market. But things have changed in Japan too. New neoprenes—like those from the Rolls Royce of rubber, Yamamoto—are as crazy-pliable as ever, but (according to their makers) durable enough to last longer than many mass-market suits. "The wetsuit will take care of you," says Axxe's American representative Eric Koike, "as long as you take care of it. Give them a fresh-water rinse after every use and hang out of the sun on a thick hanger. They're worth it."

Many longtime surfers agree—and are willing to pay for the privilege. The Internet is opening the door for companies like Boz from Peru, which uses Yamamoto neoprene exclusively. You can log on to their site, punch in your 22 measurements using their PDF form, and have a custom-fit hooded 4/3 in your hands by the time the first Aleutian swell hits. Others, like Matuse, Patagonia, and Axxe, are available in select retail shops. Axxe is giving fitting clinics to employees at shops like Mollusk and Thalia so they can measure for custom suits.

If everyone who surfed looked like Bruce Irons, custom wouldn't be an issue. But unless you're lucky enough to match a specific company's fit model, you're never going to be as warm and as loose as you will be in a custom suit. That's because a stock suit will inevitably have a bind or a void somewhere in the cut. That's a place where the neoprene is stretched (reducing its insulating properties as well as its resilience) or overly loose (causing water pooling and rashing).

Whether they provide a custom fitting service or not, most of the high-end wetsuit companies share a similar look, with a fair amount of slick-skin neoprene evident.

"You know," says Joel Tudor, "a lot of it started with aesthetics. I hated most wetsuits I saw. They made you look like a jock superhero covered in logos. Plus smooth rubber is warmer when there's any wind at all."

At least one U.S. company is bringing Japanese *ichiban* (number one) quality to the States. Matuse, a high-end San Diego concern, has forged a partnered relationship with the esteemed Yamamoto. They access a limestone-based (as opposed to petro) raw product called Geoprene. "It's mined from the base of Mt. Kurohime in Japan," states CEO John V. Campbell, "from a 3,000-year supply."

There's been a lot of talk about limestone since Patagonia made it the focus of their wetsuit rollout. Originally pitched by some companies as a more environmentally friendly alternative to oil-based neoprene,

the extraction methods and the fact that it's a fossil source raised some charges of "greenwashing." In an online positioning statement, Patagonia's Todd Copeland confirmed that in many ways limestone versus petro-rubber was, environmentally, a push. Instead, he writes, Patagonia is focusing on the lining and jersey materials. "We have reduced the environmental impact of our wetsuits by using recycled polyester and chlorine-free wool in the lining. These materials are more environmentally friendly than virgin polyester or chlorine-treated wool, respectively. For example, Patagonia's 3mm suit is as warm as a typical 3/4, reducing the amount of polychloroprene in the wetsuit and, proportionately, its environmental impact."

Matuse is more bullish on the benefits of Geo. "The best way to look at it is from a durability perspective," says Campbell. "Geoprene sucks less water, breaks down slower, and thus lasts (longer) than an oil-based suit." Canadian photographer Yassine Ouhilal could only speak to the more practical points. "I just got in from five hours of water shooting," he said in a call from mid-winter Norway. "I was in a Matuse 5-mil and cold wasn't an issue."

While surfers are finally looking at their equipment with an eye toward sustainability, comfortable warmth—and thereby performance—remains the first filter.

Hearing of my research, renaissance surfer and lager enthusiast Andrew Kidman weighed in. "Well, if we're talking about the best, you have to check out these things from Axxe."

"Neil Purchase Junior and I took some to South New Zealand. That place is cold as—just horrible, eh? And these suits were incredible. We were laughing in them. When I got home, I rang them [Axxe] up and said, 'Man, you guys can have anything you want from me—photos, writing, whatever. Just take it. But send some suits, OK?'"

A high-end spin-off from Japanese stalwart BreakerOut, Axxe plays second fiddle to no one. A custom Axxe suit is entirely bespoke, using hand-blended glues and cut angles specifically engineered for each customer. Proprietary neoprene compounds and hand-cut liners made from corn and recycled plastic bottles are just the beginning. Master seamstresses sew each suit so artfully that taped seams are rendered moot. Both Eric Koike and Axxe's master designer/artisan Shinro Takahashi use the same descriptive when speaking to the hand, or feel, of their suits: buttery. Even Axxe's competitors in the high-end wetsuit space defer to their quality. Of course, they're not free. Including a custom fitting session and international express shipping, a 3-mil full Bohemian model runs between five and six hundred dollars.

Questions arise: How much more will a surfer pay to go from an A-minus suit to an A-plus? How much care do surfers want to give their suits? Does custom utterly outclass off the rack? The answers, as always, will be decided in the marketplace. The outcome will be seen in the lineup.

—Scott Hulet



AXXE: AXIEWETSUITS@GARTHINK.NET BOZ: BOZWETSUITS.COM MATUSE: MATUSE.COM PATAGONIA: PATAGONIA.COM

Exceptional craftsmanship and the highest quality materials underscore the work of Japan's leading edge wetsuit makers. While low production levels and attention to the minutest details don't make for inexpensive suits, the surfers that can afford them look to the land of the rising sun to meet their cold-water requirements.