

how to spend it

Top five men's casual labels

Buying familiar men's casualwear brands to avoid wading through the sea of names might be tempting, says Luke Leitch, but a few niche labels are worth making time to get to know



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Why don't many men much care for fashion? Possibly, I'd say, because much of fashion doesn't seem to care for many men. The question arose via a stranger seated alongside me on BA flight 577 from Milan Linate to London Heathrow a few months ago. We got talking. He ran a fund management firm, he said, and, before flying from Milan, had been to the Venice Biennale, then to Florence, with his children. I offered that I was heading home after interviewing a fashion designer.

“Fashion,” he said with interest – before asking who I reckoned was on the up. Really, though, he knew as much as I did, from Saint Laurent’s unstoppable rise to the fact that the Chinese market has grown out of logomania, plus some intimate detail about Burberry’s bookkeeping mechanism. His fund, he added, had done well out of a long-term investment in the Kering group. Oh.

Although vaguely accountant-ish of mien (it was the wire-rimmed spectacles), he was dressed with counterintuitively maverick flair: white linen collarless shirt, biker-detail black jeans and no-nonsense black boots. So where did he like to shop?

“Fashion,” he said, but this time in a different tone entirely, before pausing. “I don’t care – there’s too much of it. I pick things up when I travel, or when I need them.” Gosh. A clothes-curious rich lister (I Googled him in the passport queue: Forbes says \$2.8bn) who invests in fashion brands but is utterly uninspired to wear them. If this holy grail HNWI can’t be moved to enter the paradise of attire at his fingertips, well, what’s up?

Every menswear buyer I know – especially after a drink or two – will hollowly attest that most men are creatures of habit who purchase the majority of their garments in navy blue, black or beige, and often in bulk to insure against the trial of repeat shopping trips. The exasperated implication is that most men keep their heads in the sand. They’re just not putting the effort in.

Really, though, it’s a case of mutual neglect. Because if it is clothes rather than the synthetic thrill of their acquisition that moves you, the process of shopping often veers between the overwhelming and the ghastly: too much bad music, too much salesmanship, too many brands shouting incoherent rhetoric rather than explaining the merits of their products.

Furthermore, there are now far, far more menswear brands than you could ever hope to know – let alone wear. On Yoox.com, one of the most comprehensive online fashion retailers, there are hundreds. There are 12 menswear designers whose Christian name is Alessandro, 22 brands that begin with the initial J and 123 whose names start with either a number or a punctuation mark.

Buying what you know, or not especially caring what you wear, is the easiest way to evade that overload. But it’s a shame, because lurking in the swamp are many easily overlooked designers and brands that make reliably wonderful clothes. These stand out because they are flattering, they are made of satisfyingly tactile fabrics that will become more so with wear, and they quietly emanate the often interesting – but often shouted over – point of view of the people who made them. So here, for that friendly billionaire and those like him – men who don’t care much for fashion, but are into discovering great clothes – are five of my favourite alternative fashion labels.

Massimo Alba

The great shame about Massimo Alba is that his clothes are not as easy to find in physical retailers as they are online. For once worn, they are very difficult to part with – and staring at them on a screen can’t compare. Alba, who lives in Milan, was at cashmere specialists Ballantyne for many years before founding this passion project under his own ensign. It’s little surprise, then, that signatures include cashmere sweatshirts and polonecks (first picture, \$1,030), which, dyed and dyed again, combine unpretentious easiness with a supreme wear-feel. He also has a fondness for jackets without lapels (sixth picture, \$1,420) that are shorn of any hint of Alpine oom-pah-pah; deconstructed and in his favourite fine corduroy, they lie light on the shoulder. Alba, who is a bit of a dreamer but heartfelt in his spiel, says: “What I do isn’t about being fashionable, it is about being comfortable. I want people to feel normal – exactly as they are – when they wear the clothes.” You could argue that many men won’t feel entirely

normal in his twist-seamed, straight-leg, ultra-light, deep-dyed velvet trousers (from \$250) – although these look entirely un-try-hard, despite how they sound – but it's worth giving them, and the rest of this designer's excellent output, a go. This is well-priced, bohemian-touched Italian menswear, which in my experience prompts the hat-tip question "Where did you get that from?" (the ultimate accolade) more than any other label.

Via Brera 8, Milan 20121 (+3902-7209 3420; www.massimoalba.com) and branches/stockists.

Slowear

Slowear is a seductive proposition for no-nonsense men. It is the umbrella name for a group of labels, each of which specialises in its own field: trousers by Incotex (second picture and eight picture, from £230), jackets and outerwear by Montedoro (pea coat seventh picture, £755), knitwear by Zanone (crewneck ninth picture, £265) and shirts by Glanshirt. Incotex, founded in 1951, is the mother brand, and for decades its Venetian production facility was a subcontractor that produced trousers for other clothing labels. Those years allowed it to develop the Incotex chino into an object of factory-honed wonder, featuring internal hanger loops for easy, iron-reducing storage and offered in three cuts with seven fits (from anti-thrombosis slim to roomy but fitted). They are built like tanks: trousers for life (unless assassinated by grease stains). Once Incotex was in full flower, the founder's son bought the three other factories and asserted the same standards. Although unabashedly industrial, Slowear products are not austere, minimalistic or any of that tosh; the brand revels in applying innovative colour treatments and has a propensity for look-twice pattern and texture – these are wares pitched at the conservatively extrovert. Now, Slowear – which has its own midcentury, man-cave stores in several European capitals, is big in Japan (often a flag for seekers of excellent menswear) and is stocked liberally on Mr Porter – offers a fantastic one-stop option for just the kind of fellow those menswear buyers complain about. It's like a very high-quality Uniqlo.

58 South Molton Street, London W1 (020-7495 5678; www.slowear.com) and stockists.

Ami

Alexandre Mattiussi founded his label four years ago, following stints designing menswear for Givenchy, Dior and Marc Jacobs. What makes Ami so appealing, though, is the points of difference from these brands, rather than the similarities. "I was really happy during those 10 years or so," he says, "but I always felt a little disconnected from my own designs, because I could never afford them. It felt like being a chef who is unable to taste his own food." As well as shying away from producing clothes that he and his Parisian friends could not easily afford, Mattiussi has also elected to spurn styles that they couldn't easily wear. "If we are really honest, even people who work in fashion and have a strong point of view are not often into wearing high, high fashion. So little wonder people outside our world say it's ridiculous. Fashion can be so pretentious, exclusive and out of reach. I prefer cool and simple." Quality of production, fit, fabric and a fondness for the staples of casual masculine attire are Ami's hallmarks (as seen in the unstructured overcoats, third picture and thirteenth picture, from €620, relaxed-fit trousers, €280, and casual knitwear, €260, eleventh picture). Despite himself, however, his collections do feature the odd stylist's tic – such as this season's neon-orange overcoat (€1,320). For those in search of a youngish, urbanish, straightforwardish, French-ish maker of high-quality casualwear, Ami is your pal.

14 Rue d'Alger, Paris 75001 (+339-8244 4020; www.amiparis.fr) and branches.

Mark McNairy

Shoes aren't that difficult – for surely you can't veer far wrong between Jermyn Street/Northampton-made for smarter footwear and Niketown for something more colourful and casual? In the past decade or so, though, the once-unscalable divide between these categories has crumbled fascinatingly – and if any man is to blame/thank, it's Mark McNairy. In 2008 the American designer, then at J Press, debuted his New Amsterdam shoe collection. Made only in the US or UK (at Northamptonshire's Sanders & Sanders), McNairy's designs scamper, rather than trample, over traditional footwear codes. He loves to impose a jolt of colour, put a white Vibram sole below a brogue (example fourth picture, £315) or combine a crepe sole with a pebble-grain monk strap (such as the double monk strap, £300). He also rebooted the long-overlooked saddle shoe (example tenth picture, £245) – then risked accusations of heresy by producing it in corduroy. Traditionalists might balk, but his compulsion to remix classic men's shoe shapes, both American and British, has proved hugely influential: these days brands from Grenson to Giorgio Armani are following his lead. He also designs a full collection of clothes under the New Amsterdam label, which tends to be a bit shouty. For third-space footwear, though, his is a direction well worth stepping in.

www.markmcnairy-uk.com and [stockists](#).

Margaret Howell

Margaret Howell has spent 40 years thoughtfully developing her craft-touched, Islington-sleek, midcentury, ever-so-slightly period-drama sensibility. Working with best-in-their-field makers, including John Smedley and Mackintosh, she favours softened throwback fabrics, such as Ventile cotton and Harris tweed, with which she produces finely finished menswear rooted in workwear rather than Savile Row. This autumn's collection features Guernseys (example fifth picture, £595) and sheepskin car coats (example twelfth picture, £2,285), as well as high-collared linen/wool jackets (from £645) and her signature soft-collar shirts (from £345). Some trousers (example twelfth picture, £345) are debatably high hemmed, but worth taking a look at. Bright colour is a relative rarity in Howell's menswear; hers is a very British palette of pale blues, black and grey, spiked occasionally by mustard and ochres. These are clothes to wear for a wander through Tate Britain before a browse in Skandium. If Ian McEwan were a fashion designer, this is pretty close to what he'd come up with.

34 Wigmore Street, London W1 (020-7009 9009; www.margarehowell.co.uk) and [branches/stockists](#).

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