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The New Rules for Airplane Dressing: Chic, Yet Comfortable

Like it or not, the modern travel uniform has become deeply casual. How to hack it so you're presentable but still feel good



ILLUSTRATION: CLARE MALLISON

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WHILE IN Manhattan this February for her baby shower, the newish Duchess of Sussex left her hotel wearing a markedly plebeian outfit: black leggings, Adidas running shoes and a black baseball cap. Despite appearances, Meghan Markle was not headed to the gym; she was en route to the airport. (By contrast, Princess Diana almost always wore heels to the airport in the 1980s, typically with skirt suits and stockings.) Considering that royals are among the last holdouts of etiquette and glamour, the Duchess's outfit seemed to confirm an unstylish truth: We now dress for air travel as indifferently as we would to step on a treadmill in our basement gyms.

Ms. Markle is just the latest celebrity flier whose transatlantic athleisure ensembles are feverishly chronicled in the tabloids. Photos of sweatsuit-clad newlyweds Hailey and Justin Bieber at international airports practically comprise their own genre. While mere mortals typically make little more effort, how casual is too casual? In the Great Leggings Debate of 2017, two teenagers were kicked off a United flight for wearing leggings; the ensuing public debate made it clear that travelers are split on whether the craving for midair comfort justifies any manner of dress.

If you're traveling for business—or pleasure—and still aspire to arrive at your destination looking presentable, here's the good news: Thanks to advances in fabric technology (and some styling tricks), it's possible to fly comfortably without stooping to sloppiness. There is a middle ground between dressing like a mid-workout Rocky Balboa and dressing to the nines à la Lady Di. A new wave of brands such as Paskho, Époque Évolution and Anatomie are creating clothes for travel that combine the benefits of sportswear—elastic waists, wrinkle-resistant/sweat-wicking/odor-eating fabrics—with neat, stylish cuts. “We're living for speed and comfort, and clothes need to follow that pace,” said Isabelle Alix, the co-founder of Offtrack, a new line of direct-to-consumer suede and leather leggings that attempts to ennoble the yoga-pant lifestyle.

Lizzy Brockhoff, 35, a co-founder of Masse, a peer-to-peer product-recommendation app that covers everything from books to beauty products to ballet flats, said that many of the most popular questions on the app are travel-related. “Users are looking for comfortable clothes for travel, and the majority of the recommendations received are comfy-yet-stylish athleisure options,” she said. Ms. Brockhoff, who travels frequently between New York and San Francisco, dresses for travel more casually after spending time on the West Coast, where “women basically live in athleisure.”

While she flew home to Australia in four-inch heels a few years ago, she now opts for leggings with an Alo Yoga turtleneck, a black overcoat and white sneakers. The look is sleek and certainly polished enough for business travel, but even so, she said she wouldn't wear it to work.

To target travelers, brands are coining style names like the Wander Pant, a slim cut from Athleta, or the Jet Set trouser, which Époque Évolution bills as “made for comfort on that red-eye flight, and for style at that 9 a.m. after you land.” Along with stretchy-yet-sophisticated standbys like the Row's scuba Thilde Pant, these options aim to fill the gap between a leggings and a trouser.

‘Thoughtfully styled, leggings can yield an outfit that’s comfortable yet pulled together.’

Designer and frequent flier Patrick Robinson, who once traveled in uncomfortable jeans, hated arriving at his Paris hotel looking like “an American slob.” As he put it, “people want more comfort, but they still want to look good.” So, in 2016, the former executive vice president of design world-wide at the Gap created Paskho—a line of minimalist travel separates made from techy fabrics—to offer an alternative to leggings, not to mention jeans. His wife, Vogue fashion director Virginia Smith, travels to Europe in the company's Escape pants, a wide-legged option. Like the brand's cropped Sanctuary pants, they look more like trousers than sweatpants but are made of spill-resistant and breathable nylon and elastane.

If you resist the idea of travel-specific clothing that's geekily techy and athleisure-adjacent, consider one of the many luxe alternatives. New York designer Gabriela Hearst makes a version of sweatpants rendered in ribbed cashmere and cut as crisply as fine trousers with a price tag to match. French house Chloé could supply you with a cashmere track pant and matching roll-neck sweater, and knitwear designer Ryan Roche offers a cashmere pant with a wide, cropped shape that's suitable for more than just lolling about. London-based stylist Francesca Burns, 37, wears Pringle's cashmere and wool tracksuit for trips overseas, paired with a Balenciaga puffer coat that “doubles as a sleeping bag.”

Athletic clothing has flourished at the airport for good reason. “I always joke that travel is a sport, so I dress accordingly,” said travel expert Brian Kelly, of the popular website the Points Guy. “I feel like I'm always getting a workout in the airport,” he continued. “No one likes running in Chelsea boots.” Mr. Kelly, 36, recommends being comfortable but keeping the realities of an airplane in mind: Make sure your top is on the longer side to avoid midflight mooning; and in ever-shrinking economy seats, where you're likely to be touching shoulders with your seatmate, wear sleeves.

However, Mr. Kelly, who will fly 250,000 miles this year, doesn't buy the theory that dressing up for air travel will ingratiate you with benevolent airline employees and get you boosted to business class. “The best way to get upgraded is to be nice,” he said. “That's much more important than looking nice.”