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BUSINESS / NEW ZEALAND

Remote control

The 2007 financial crisis brought fashion manufacturing in New Zealand to a close. Now a fresh group of brands is showing there is more to Kiwis than all black.

WRITER *Lee Suckling* PHOTOGRAPHER *David Straight*



You're not doing yourself any favours running a fashion label from New Zealand. Well, that's the opinion of a new set of brands that are based in the South Pacific yet sell their clothes around the world. Perhaps owing to such separation, the ascent of these brands to the global stage has been quiet; you're unlikely to see labels from Auckland or Wellington showing at Paris Fashion Week, nor hear many Kiwi accents at an industry party in Milan. Yet their isolation also means that these designers are resourceful, have a distinctive point of view and, increasingly, are finding their locally made products in the pages of *Vogue* or on the shelves of Saks Fifth Avenue.

The rag trade in the country was once thriving. In the early 2000s, however, production moved offshore, mostly to China, to remain competitive. The global financial crisis sealed the fate of its clothing-manufacturing industry. In 2009 the nation's two largest players, Pacific Brands and Lane Walker Rudkin, ceased manufacturing. Yet with careful digging, a handful of young brands have managed to keep their production in the country.

"Expenditure on luxury products is strong. New Zealand is a great place to trial things because people will pay for them"



"Good factories are a hidden industry in New Zealand – you can't just google them," says Maggie Marilyn Hewitt, founder of womenswear label Maggie Marilyn. The design and creation of its brightly coloured pieces takes place in Auckland and it is one of the country's biggest fashion success stories. Just two years since launching it is stocked everywhere from Neiman Marcus in the US to Net-a-Porter.

Fashion in New Zealand is still very much "who you know", says Hewitt. Her patternmaker has 20 years' experience and introduced her to quality manufacturers still operating in the country. "I could make my margins sweeter if I made in China," she says. "I want to be global but I want to be based – and manufacture – here."



Given the expense of manufacturing in New Zealand the brands that produce here tend to sit at the upper end of the market. Wellington-based Okewa Rainwear, for instance, sells all-weather jackets and coats for up to NZ\$1,000 (£595). "It costs 30 per cent more to manufacture here [than in China], which is comparable to what we'd pay in Europe," says Okewa co-founder Nick Leckie. "That predicated our need towards the premium space." Okewa items are all made at a Christchurch factory that makes uniforms for the New Zealand Defence Force; it's one of the few makers with the expertise to apply seam-sealing for full waterproofing. "Clothing manufacturing has faded; anything beyond the norm is too hard here," says Leckie.

Other designers have had to get similarly creative to keep production in New Zealand. Twenty-Seven Names, another Wellington brand, outsources to home-based seamstresses. They are highly trained but there are some things they just can't do. "There are limitations," says Anjali Stewart, co-founder of Twenty-Seven Names. "We recently wanted to do dresses with smocking, which is a technique of fabric gathering, and were told, 'Try this funeral parlour.'" Alas, the parlour hadn't done smocking since the 1970s.

Some companies have resorted to in-house training. Liam Bowden, founder of Auckland leatherwear brand Deadly Ponies, is aware of his company's isolation from the leather specialists in Italy and Portugal. "If we were [in Europe] we'd have skilled people readily available," says Bowden. To survive, Deadly Ponies runs apprenticeships to sustain in-house manufacturing so techniques are passed from skilled leathersmiths to workers with more general experience.

Another hurdle that brands must overcome is sourcing fabrics. Forty per cent of Deadly Ponies' leather is deerskin from the South Island; the rest is air-freighted from Italy at cost. Twenty-Seven Names buys dead stock from local fabric suppliers then develops its own prints. Klay, an Auckland label that produces workwear-inspired clothes, buys excess fabric from international designers such as Helmut Lang. "I'm only doing runs of 10 to 15 so I can afford to do this," says founder Kirsty McLay.

When production gets into three or four-figure runs, however, designers must look overseas. Wellington womenswear label Kowtow has its textiles sourced – and clothes made – in India. To create an ethical product, the brand's raw materials only come from cotton producers in Calcutta and Mumbai, whose products can be Fairtrade certified. "We secure our yarn direct from the farms, which is very manual – like coffee beans," says Kowtow founder Gosia Piatek. All of Kowtow's fabrics are designed in-house. The team specifies the weight, the



colour and the material of each yarn. "We've designed every bit," says Piatek. "Nothing is off the roll."

The Kiwi aesthetic was once all black thanks to pioneering brands such as Zambesi but the styles are now brighter, whether it's Maggie Marilyn's trousers, Kowtow's patterned dresses or Okewa's vivid trenchcoats. "We go for colour," says Okewa's Nick Leckie. Helpfully there is a large domestic pool of customers waiting to snap up these designs. New Zealanders will pay for high-quality, highly priced items and often buy full wardrobes of designer gear rather than mixing designer items with cheaper high-street pieces. "We're affluent, we're in the middle of nowhere," says Piatek. "Expenditure on luxury products is strong. It's a great place to trial things because people will pay for them."

Most shoppers are buying these clothes in multibrand boutiques or online; only a few of these Kiwi designers run their own physical shops. Running a shop here is a tough gig but some brands are succeeding. In March, Kowtow opened its flagship store in Wellington; Deadly Ponies, meanwhile, has three shops in Auckland and one in Wellington. And Murray Crane, managing director of menswear brand Crane Brothers, runs shops in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

When it comes to finding stockists further afield, international agents are a must. Wynn Crawshaw, founder of womenswear label Wynn Hamlyn, is about to start working with a European agency. "When you think to yourself, 'How am I going to get into this store in Paris?', it seems like climbing Everest for a Kiwi designer," says Crawshaw. "These agents already have buyers' trust before they take you on."

Then there's the problem of seasonality. As spring starts in Europe, New Zealand dives into autumn. This means Kiwi collections have many trans-seasonal pieces. It is merely another challenge for the nation's entrepreneurs to relish.



Clockwise from top left: Kowtow founder Gosia Piatek; Maggie Marilyn Hewitt working with a fit model; Maggie Marilyn jacket; Deadly Ponies flagship in Auckland; Deadly Ponies is known for its sleek leather bags; Wynn Crawshaw, founder of Wynn Hamlyn; Klay founder Kirsty McLay; Okewa co-founders Nick and Nevada Leckie; raincoat model from Okewa; (L-R) Rachel Easting and Anjali Stewart of Twenty-Seven Names

FOOTWEAR / GLOBAL

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KIMONO / JAPAN

National treasure

The retail market for kimonos in Japan has dipped since its 1981 heyday but some entrepreneurs are keen to bring the beautiful dresses back to the masses.

WRITER *Jurichi Toyofuku*
PHOTOGRAPHER *Kohji Take*

Having a national costume is something to be proud of but the modern world hasn't been kind to many traditional outfits. Japan and its kimono – an item dating back to the early eighth century – are one such example. In 2017 the kimono retail market was valued at an estimated

¥276bn (€2.1bn): less than one sixth of its peak in 1981, when it was worth ¥1.8trn (€14bn). Back then there were more occasions for donning the kimono: people wore it to Noh theatres, shrines and dinner parties. But modern lifestyles have changed and these rather formal items have been left at the bottom of wardrobes.

Against this backdrop, young entrepreneurs in Kyoto are trying to revive interest in kimonos by experimenting with fresh business models. Mizhana, a kimono-sharing company that launched in April, is a standout example. "I love fashion and I have an admiration for kimonos in the same way as I do for beautiful dresses," says Mizhana's 28-year-old founder Yukie Ota.

After university, Ota worked at a kimono retailer where she learned how to put on a kimono by herself

(an intricate process that requires a lot of practice) and saw first hand that, for many people, cost was a barrier to embracing kimonos. "I saw a gap between the kimono retailer and potential customers. There are many people who are interested in wearing kimonos but are not ready yet to spend ¥200,000 (€1,500) to buy one. I wanted to reach these people," says Ota.

Eyebrow-raising price tags aren't the only hurdle. Kimonos are high-maintenance garb. In a humid country like Japan, the delicate silk gowns have to be properly folded and carefully stored, preferably in a *kiridansu* (also known as a paulownia – a type of hardwood – wardrobe). "So I do it all: storing, maintaining and cleaning kimonos, and teaching people how to wear them," says Ota. At Mizhana, the users leave their

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kimonos – and all the associated fuss – to Ota and share the pool of robes with other members.

Kyoto is full of rental kimono shops catering to tourists but Ota's idea of sharing appeals to locals, providing them with a range of designs to choose from and making the kimono-wearing process more accessible. "I wanted to make the most out of the unused kimonos that people already own. Many young people actually have kimonos from their grandmothers but don't know how to put them on."

The Kyoto government is well aware of the industry's tumultuous recent history and is doing its best to pique people's interest once again. "Kyoto has a kimono-weaving industry but it's been in decline," says Takahiro Yukawa from the prefectural government. Last year,

Yukawa's team held a competition for easy-to-wear modern kimonos and it is now helping the winners bring their designs to market. "This is our first step in attracting people to kimonos. In the long run, we want them to get into authentic kimonos," he says.

Reviving interest in this centuries-old attire will take time. Yet just one month after opening, Ota's business (in a 100-year-old traditional Japanese wooden house) is already attracting young male and female customers. "Lifestyles have changed and it is unrealistic to expect people to wear kimonos on a daily basis. My goal is to elevate the kimono so that it is one of the stylish options people consider when they want to dress up," she says. "It would be great if other people also started doing this across Japan."

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