

fashion

The new casual — why it's time to wear a boilersuit

Forget all those mechanic connotations. It's really just a simple jumpsuit, says **Harriet Walker**. I'm a convert

Fashion editors aren't known for getting their hands dirty, but they have started dressing to make you think otherwise — the arrival of the boilersuit among the decorative-collar workforce is the closest most of those along the front row have been to manual labour. *Vogue* recently contained a paean to them by its shopping editor — and long-term fan — Naomi Smart.

Appropriately enough, this latest front-row must-have was one of the hardest-working wardrobe items of fashion week. The street-style set wore theirs with hiking boots or heels, accessorised with It bags, clutches and statement belts, and layered them over polo necks on cooler days, or with a bare décolletage for evening. That's right: an evening boilersuit.

The advent of the haute boilersuit is another marker in our collective post-industrial identity crisis. The more sedentary we become, the more likely we are to be dressed in — and to have paid through the nose for — clothes designed originally either for toil or the gym. See also: jeans, leggings and chinos. (At the time of writing, nobody has yet accused the fashion crowd of insensitive cultural appropriation, but there's almost certainly someone on Twitter who is prepared to become angry about it, given the chance.)

I'll allow you one eye-roll at the notion of some of the world's most affluent women wearing a £1,200 pink satin take on something more usually worn to unblock drains, but that's your lot — because actually boilersuits are not a bad idea.

Forget the papery *Silent Witness* kind, and the *Orange is the New Black* felon look, a boilersuit is, simply, a jumpsuit without the frills. A jumpsuit with fewer bells and whistles: more utilitarian-looking, more streamlined and, yes, OK, more literally what someone who works in a car body shop might wear. Don't let that put you off, though.

You might have detected that I am speaking with all the zeal of a convert — I bought

Spry Workwear's navy boilersuit about six weeks ago and haven't looked back (£160, spryworkwear.com). It's light, comfortable and made of sturdy cotton twill, so it doesn't cling or highlight lumps and bumps. Crucially, it has buttons at the waist, so can be cinched in to avoid that undesirable baggy-bum effect associated with the standard-issue hazmat suit. This, I would argue, makes a boilersuit every bit as flattering as a waisted dress or skirt — more so, perhaps, given there's no need to worry about waistband overhang.

The stylist Anna Berkeley agrees. "The waist makes or breaks the look, so make sure it's in the right place for you — if it's loose, use a belt, and add an elegant shoe to offset the potential mechanic vibe."

Spry's version might well be a little too



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Above, from left: £59.99, mango.com; Vogue's Sarah Harris; £550, bellafreud.com. Right: £228, freepeople.com; Left, from top: a street-styler; YouTuber Victoria Magrath; stylist Chiara Totire

authentic for some tastes, so let me direct you to a few on the high street that have been subtly “razzed” (a scientific term) to make them feel more dressy and less Dyno-Rod.

Arket's black-crepe style is stripped back and elegant with a belted waist that will smooth your silhouette (£135, arket.com). That other Scandi brand & Other Stories is full of great boilersuits, but it's the belted, button-down satin version that I like, in olive green with shirt collar and tie waist (£79, stories.com). Mango's denim take is more casual and hard-wearing (£59.99, mango.com), as is Isabel Marant's — although rather pricier (£470, matchesfashion.com).

I also love LF Markey — this east London designer is the queen of boilersuits. Hers come in zingy shades of red, green, rust and plum, in cotton

and in corduroy, with adjustable belts and flattering elasticated waists (from £165, lfmarkey.com).

Kin's collarless style is one of the best around — proof comes in the fact it has sold out, but it will be back in stock at the end of this week, so set a reminder on your phone (£119, johnlewis.com). Another hot cake to put your name down for is Kitri's Jule boilersuit, with its contrast neon-blue D-ring belt (£125, kitri.com), which was a favourite among editors at the shows.

Speaking of which, I have worn my boilersuit to fashion week, a book launch and a children's birthday party, which I think ticks off a healthy number of demographics, and I felt just the right side of Rosie the Riveter at each. I would wear it to work too, but I'm aware that my office dress code is different to most people's. In real life, boilersuits are excellent weekend wear — an easy one-piece outfit that you can glam up or dress down with jewellery and shoes: simple white trainers or felt Allbirds sneakers (£95, allbirds.co.uk) for day, or



pointed leather flats, jewelled sandals and baroque pearls for evening.

“They can definitely look grown-up,” says Berkeley. “Choose crepe, silk or suede and keep it simple. Boilersuits are set to become a ‘basic’, so invest in one that fits incredibly well.”

Some style notes: the best boilersuits are plain and unfeminine. Try plenty of sizes — if you are petite, you might need to go smaller than usual, because many tend to come up roomy. You don't have to be tall, either; if you're short, try lighter fabrics so you don't feel swamped in rigid cloth. Most boilersuits need a turn-up and a rolled sleeve, otherwise they look a bit clinical.

The best thing about wearing one is that you will feel neither under nor overdressed for pretty much any occasion — and you'll have a ready-made conversation piece, because people seem to be fascinated by them. It goes without saying that loo trips are a little more involved than usual, but in the words of the boilersuit's most famous champion: “We can do it!”

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The best basket bags

By Hannah Skelley



Bucket net bag, £49.99, mango.com



Rattan and leather, £295, Wicker Wings at net-a-porter.com



Multiweave bucket, £18, warehouse.co.uk



Macrame and leather bucket, £266, [Staud at matchesfashion.com](http://staud.com)



Brandy bucket, £25, topshop.com



Natural handbag, £29.99, zara.com