

## Style

## A guide to dressing festively



Anna Berkeley

## Ask a stylist

**Please can you tell me where to find festive outfits that feel elegant and not like a Christmas decoration? Also, I have an actual office party, so a pointer or two on that would be gratefully received!**

The festive season is upon us and there are many bonkers sleeves, cut-outs, fringes, bows and diamanté details to contend with right now. If you don't want to look like an overgrown toddler, read on.

I love a bit of drama at Christmas (well, in my outfit, at least). As I have suggested in previous columns, before you consider what to wear you should be super-clear on the venue, how you're getting there, whether you're seated or mostly standing, and what the temperature expectations are. You want to be in the right gear for your environment.

First, you really must have a beautiful coat to go over your party outfit. If you are tall (over 5ft 6in), go for full length, as this will work with any hem — and you will be in no danger of looking like you're putting the bins out in the rain. Raey's leopard coat (£895, matchesfashion.com), Tove's Mio (£995, tove-studio.com) and Rebecca coats (£995, tove-studio.com) or Anine Bing's Hunter coat (£855, eu.aninebing.com) are all winners. Teddy coats are everywhere and surprisingly versatile too. Go plain and neat (even John Lewis has a good one!) and relish the cosy hug they give you.

If you're petite, I would suggest a knee-length coat, which works with any hem that sits above it, or pair it with a slim trouser à la Audrey Hepburn. That is always chic.

Try Harris Wharf, Hugo Boss, or Zadig and Voltaire.

When it comes to the outfit itself, I like to start by focusing on a key fabric. Perhaps home in on velvet or satin, silk faille or cashmere. Sequins are also a Christmas stalwart. And with good reason — they do everything in one fell swoop. Sparkle and silver-screen glamour? Done. They are, however, awful for the environment, so please consider renting or buy vintage.

There are a few sequin options at rental site Hurr — I like the gold Stella McCartney dress (rent from £184, hurrcollective.com). Wear it with a blazer and ankle boots or matching sandals. Mulberry's loose-fitting Kelsey sequin maxi (pictured) could be worn with a blazer, or you could dress it down with a fine jersey top underneath (rent from £70, hurrcollective.com). Keep accessories plain and let the dress do the talking. Depending on where you're going, you could wear a long leather boot with either of these — as tight on the leg as possible. Manolo has a suede shape that is very sexy (£1,075, net-a-porter.com) and has the added benefit of keeping your legs warm. If you want a cheaper alternative, LK Bennett does a great sock boot (£367 on sale, lkbennett.com). Finish the look with the iconic lip bag from Lulu Guinness: this fun Perspex style has been in her range since 2008 (£206 on sale, luluguinness.com).

If you want something special, you can always opt for a simple but interesting skirt. I love Raey's pink recycled tulle confection, which comes in mint and yellow too (£525, matchesfashion.com). I would always use a knit with this type of skirt, so that you can squash it gently into the

waistband. Ensure that it has a ribbed hem — a charcoal one from NavyGrey (£180, navygrey.co) would work well. Lisa Yang, Loulou Studio, Allude, Alabaste Cashmere and Joseph also offer great knit options. Add a necklace such as this sparkly choker from Dries Van Noten (£295, harveynichols.com) or its equally fantastic earrings (£295, harveynichols.com).

If you have a shorter neck, choose an open-neck or V-neck style, and wear your hair up. Don't fancy a tulle skirt? Rixo's easy Kelly skirt (£235, rixo.co.uk) comes in various prints and iterations, the latest of which has a feather trim. It suits curvy shapes well, as it's cut on the bias.

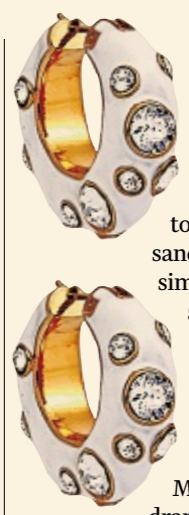
A feather adds a whimsical feel to any party outfit and always conjures up the Roaring '20s for me. If you have a small bust and narrow shoulders, dress the skirt up with a puff-sleeve top such as Isabel Marant's Giamili bouclé peplum sweater (£525, net-a-porter.com). Or dress it down with a tee or simple knit.

How about a jumpsuit for that office party? It's always a solid alternative to a suit. The Seashell jumpsuit from Bevza (pictured) is best for taller women with smaller busts and broader shoulders (£711 on sale, bevza.com) — spaghetti straps and soft cups can't really deal with full busts.

For a more formal option, look to



**Clockwise from top:** Dries Van Noten crystal-embellished gold-tone hoop earrings and silver-tone choker; Mulberry Kelsey dress, from a selection to rent at Hurr Collective; Bevza Seashell jumpsuit



Galvan. Its signature stretch corset jumpsuit is pure class (£1,095, galvanlondon.com). Slip a loose blazer on top and add a strappy sandal, ankle boot or simple court shoe. For alternatives, see Melissa Obadash, Norma Kamali and Saloni.

If you still hanker after a dress, Roland Mouret's fit-and-flare draped stretch style flatters both straight and curvy figures, plus it semi-covers the dreaded armpit area (£650, rolandmouret.com). Another option is a lemon-yellow form-fitting stretch jersey dress from Richard Quinn (£700, matchesfashion.com). Team it with Swarovski's incredible Lucent necklace (£840 on sale, swarovski.com) and a silver, gold or purple shoe. If you can't let go of the comfort factor completely, then opt for a co-ord: knitted two-pieces, silky pyjama suits, loose velvet suits. Try Dea Kudihal's Falula velvet blazer (£289, featherandstitch.com) with the accompanying trousers (£239, featherandstitch.com). These can be made party-ready with strong accessories. I promise.

Wishing you a merry time whatever you end up wearing!

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**O**n Net-a-Porter, a cashmere Achillea turtleneck sweater from Loro Piana knit in a graphic jacquard pattern will set you back £3,440. At Uniqlo, a 3D Knit crewneck jumper, available in 15 hues ranging from a soft ivory to candy-corn orange, is priced at £110. Both are billed as 100 per cent cashmere. What makes the price of one sweater more than 30 times higher than the other? Are they worth it?

"The products are not the same," says Simon Cotton, chief executive of Scottish textile company Macnaughton Group Limited and former chief executive of storied knitwear purveyor Johnstons of Elgin. "But they are not as different [as the prices suggest]."

A jumper sourced from cashmere goats in inner China or Mongolia, and spun and manufactured in Europe, is going to cost more to make than a jumper whose fibre came from Pakistan or Iran and is spun and manufactured in China, knitwear specialists say. But there is also a mark-up — sometimes as much as four to five times the cost of making it — that some luxury knitwear brands put on their products. And some of those brands cut corners — particularly in the way a piece is "finished", or designed — that makes them not much better than those on the high street.

In other words, paying a high price for a knit is no guarantee that you're getting a good one. My own experience buying cashmere and wool bears this out: the best sweaters in my wardrobe — by which I mean the warmest, hardest-wearing ones that have best retained their shape — are not the ones I paid the most for.

So how do you find a good, long-lasting knit, and know you're paying a fair price? First, don't expect to find a have-it-forever jumper on the high street. While you can absolutely find good value there — big brands have economies of scale that smaller brands lack — you won't find the best quality. Cheaper cashmere tends to have shorter fibre lengths, of 30mm or less, so it is more likely to pill continuously.

"It's the difference between being able to wear it twice, and it looking terrible, versus being able to wear it for a lifetime," says Buffy Reid, founder of British knitwear label &Daughter, which sources all its yarn in the UK and Ireland



## How much is too much for cashmere?

## Textiles | Cashmere jumpers

can range in price from sub-

£100 to the high four figures.

Are you getting what you're

paying for? By *Lauren Indvik*

with cashmere fibre lengths of 38mm or more. Its cashmere jumpers are priced from £375-£385.

With cheap cashmere, shortcuts are also often taken during the carding, washing and milling processes — meaning darker, lower-quality fibres might be mixed in, and then bleached, damaging the hair. Or the yarn will be spun at a lower tension and rapidly lose its shape. "It's like a rope, which is made strong through its twists," says Reid. "If it's twisted loosely and there are not many twists in it, it will create a loftier, more luxurious-seeming garment, but it

**Clockwise from main:** &Daughter crewneck, £425, and-daughter.com; Uniqlo jumper, £110, uniqlo.com; Loro Piana sweater, £3,440, net-a-porter.com

Millie Grace Horton

won't be very strong. When you touch it in store, it will feel incredibly soft, but it also means in two weeks time, it will look like rubbish."

Professionals say they can "feel" good wool and cashmere, and Scottish label Barrie, which knitwear designers at rival brands repeatedly claim is "the best", would be a good place to train your hand. The Row is another name that repeatedly crops up, though designers and makers marvel at what they see as an enormous mark-up for such simple designs.

A kilo of high-quality Scottish or Italian-milled cashmere yarn — enough to make two to three basic crewneck jumpers, depending on the ply count — costs about £170. As a rough guideline, any amount over £600 for a jumper is simply mark-up, says Catherine Morrissey, president of New York-based knitwear specialist White + Warren. But designers say additional allowances should be made for design elements such as embellishment, intarsia, panelling and hand-knitting, which can require considerable design and production work and can justify four-figure price tags.

When shopping for knitwear, start by weighing it in your hands. Unless it's designed as an ultrafine layering piece, a jumper should have a nice heft to it — the heavier the jumper, the more yarn used — and should be well-finished around the collars, cuffs and armholes (check the inside for loose threads and unfinished seams too).

Avoid knits that feel "soapy" or too soft — tell-tale signs that the fibres have been mixed with acrylic or have been bleached or spun too loosely. A hard-wearing sweater with good tension will immediately snap back into place if you stretch it. Be wary of knits that feel too "lofty" or airy — while they can be beautiful and wonderful to wear, they can

quickly lose their shape and require more maintenance.

As a general rule, brands that are "vertically integrated" — meaning they sell in their own stores and not through a department store or boutique — tend to offer better value because they don't have the same retail mark-up.

Looking for the most sustainable option? Check the product tags for certifications such as the Good Cashmere Standard (for cashmere) and Responsible Wool Standard (for wool). Or opt for jumpers containing partly recycled content (100 per cent recycled is likely to wear out quickly, but if it is mixed with a stronger wool, it should hold up pretty well).

If you're really concerned about sustainability — and want a jumper that will last — you're better off avoiding cashmere and choosing a harder material such as organic cotton or lambswool. Cashmere is pricey because it is scarce: made from the longest, softest hairs under the belly of a cashmere goat, it takes seven to eight goats a year to produce enough material to make one jumper, whereas one merino sheep can produce enough fibre to produce five to six.

On Kering's Environmental Profit & Loss statement, animal fibres — of which wool and cashmere make up the lion's share — have the highest environmental footprint of all the group's materials after leather. That's not only because it takes so many cashmere goats to produce one sweater; it's also because the dramatic overcrowding of goats in China and Mongolia has led to large swaths of desertification on former grazing lands.

Another idea, then, might be to learn what "good" cashmere and wool feels like — and then buy it second-hand.

## Modern Menswear



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