

Kite Fashions: Above, Below, Sideways

Editor's note: Author of perhaps the best single English language book on kites. The Art of the Japanese Kite, Tal Streeter responded to a questionnaire on kiteflying clothing posed by the daughter of a kiteflying friend, Alistair Hunt. His offbeat answers to his personal fashion needs may surprise some.

Laura Hunt: Your age?

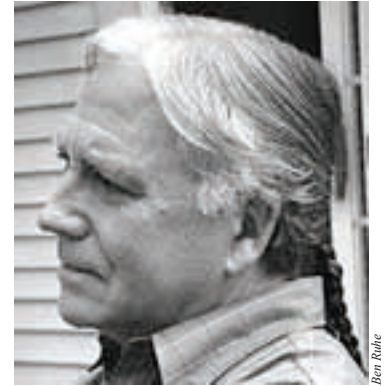
Tal Streeter: 70 going on 13.

Q: How many kiteflying garments do you own?

A: Only one specifically oriented to kite festivals. I wear it sporadically in a kind of personal, in-your-face mood: an ankle-length bright red nylon cowboy-style flared horseback slicker. I'd wear it on the field, but it is also great for passing quickly through that moment when your host is trying to identify you as "the kiteflier" arriving at the airport, ensuring immediate recognition. I put it on just before deplaning, not wanting to cause undue concern for the crew or stewardesses as a too-strange passenger.

Q: Where did you acquire this garment?

A: It was off the rack, on sale, in the women's large sizes department at Macy's, New York City.



Tal Streeter

Q: What type of shoe do you wear?

A: Tennis shoes in general are wonderfully constructed for active sports, kiteflying included, but, for me, drawing attention to my feet with wild patterns and colors? That's a disaster, a horrible blot on the weak, if not very nearly non-existent, American fashion scene. If I could find them, I'd wear low cut, white deck tennis shoes on the flying field. Due to foot problems, I actually wear brown or black leather Teva-style sandals year around, stylish and designed for extreme physical activities. (When wearing a tux, I wear them with black socks----generally unnoticed.) If we're in for rain, I wear New Balance DDD-width tennis shoes (carrying several pairs of socks), but generally I stick to sandals.

Q: What about jackets, trousers, tops?

A: On the field, I tend to appear against character: Americans customarily dress in tennis shoes and winter ski garb, whatever the season or occasion, without any taste whatsoever, both at home and abroad, instantly recognizable as Americans----doubly true for American kitefliers. I tend to dress down, but following what passes for an underplayed Southwest U.S. style: Levi jeans and shirt, sometimes with a Warhol-inspired tux jacket, or a nice summer-weight, natural-drape tan linen jacket; generally with a white, sometimes black, mandarin-collar Perry Ellis or Geoffrey Beane broadcloth or linen long-sleeved shirt. It would be nice to wear a brown felt dress hat, but winds on the festival fields make this impractical. A baseball cap seems appropriate, but solid black or brown with the bill folded tightly. Sometimes I'll revert to an in-your-face, boldly printed Hawaiian short-sleeved shirt off the airplane and on the flying field. Not of course in Hawaii.

Q: What do you look for in a garment? Durability, trendiness, practicability, colorfulness, comfort?

A: While traveling, as well as for generally day to day wear, I look for comfort. Garments should be washable. Trendy brandnames? Heaven forbid. I won't wear any clothing with a designer's label prominently displayed. Free advertising that I pay for? You're kidding!

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Q: What about accessories.

A: I raise a red pole bannner near my kite gear spread out on a blue ground cloth. If the pole doesn't fit in my flight luggage, I leave it at home.

Q: What clothing features interest you?

A: I have a probably unhealthy psychological fascination with sunglasses with German or French frames whose prescription lens are a shade of orange or very dark black. Glasses are very appropriate for a kite flier who spends much of his time with head turned to the sky (orange lenses in particular make the sky and clouds more beautiful). Long hair and dark glasses always turn heads in the supermarket---I enjoy screwing around with people's fascination with rock and movie stars, coming up with a stub of a pencil and a piece of paper looking for an autograph: "Sorry, I'm just a kiteflier."

Q: Out on the flying field, do you wear layers of clothing?

A: Layers seems the best bet for traveling reasonably lightly. Travel packing is a serious concern. In India, for example, the kite season can be both extremely hot and uncomfortably cold. In England in the flying season, on the other hand, there is always the need to keep a raincoat at hand, or when taking the field to spot a handy nearby tent to run into for shelter and rain-inspired shooting the bull with the always interesting kitefliers one finds on the flying field---whatsoever their fashion consciousness. Is talking about kites as much fun as flying them? You bet!

Q: What about emphasis on the flying field?

A: Maybe gear and flags should be more neutral in colors, not funereal, but played down a bit---thereby drawing attention to the stars of kite festivals worldwide---the kites themselves.

Q: What are your thoughts on uniforms?

A: I'm not inclined to the need for uniforms of any kind, but the simple, understated white short-sleeved tee shirt and jeans were business and party dress for the designer Versace---someone with the entire range of clothes and fashion accessories at his fingertips. That ensemble is my idea of a decent uniform for the well-dressed American festival flier. I love circus clowns, particularly the tramp clowns wearing beat-up bowler hats as opposed to the traditionally---scary---crazy quilt costumed whiteface clowns. But kiteflier dress modeled on these latter clown costumes, Dr. Seuss hats, etc., is for me a great distraction from the kites.

Laura Hunter: Thanks!

Tal Streeter: I hope these remarks have given you, as an emerging designer, some pause for thought. My comments on clothing may offend some festival kite fliers, but what I've written here is not a little tongue-in-cheek, and not meant to offend.

What They Had to Say

"Imagination is the highest kite one can fly." Actress Lauren Bacall

"Kite watching is good for exercising the cervical vertebra, improving eyesight, and relieving eye strain." Liu Chungen, Chinese Kites

"Those man-lifting experiments with kites Nick Morse and I did were scary, yes. We got up to 300 feet, high enough to die. The first 50 feet were the worse because if you fell you might live!" Martin Lester, England

"Kiteflying is a way to quiet anxieties, to eternalize the present moment. When I lived in Japan, I sometimes tied a kite to a tree where it would fly several days. The pleasure of stopping time with a kite has been expressed by the Japanese poet Buson: A kite---/in the same place/in yesterday's sky!" Tal Streeter, U.S.A.