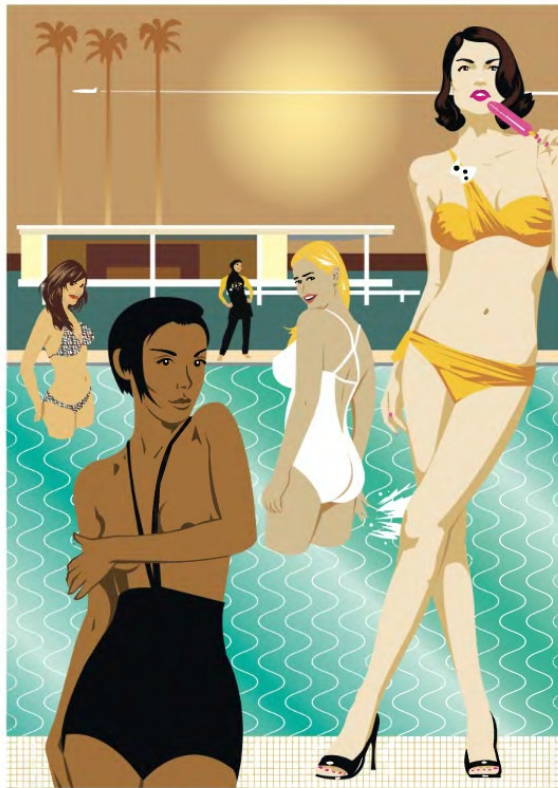


ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

ITSY-BITSY TEENY-WEENY

On the trauma of swimsuit shopping.

BY PATRICIA MARX



Bathing suits—let's not kid ourselves—are underwear, but worse. For, unlike underwear, they do not work behind the scenes. Bathing suits are the whole show. They cannot depend on the charity of clothes to prettify the picture. This makes shopping for them a high-stakes endeavor. It takes a certain amount of derring-do and self-delusion to view one's mostly naked body reflected fluorescently in a three-panel mirror. "Everything I hate about life is in that particular item of clothing," Lynne Pepall, the dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University, told me. Pepall contends that her black Gottex tank suit

makes her look Goth among the Martha's Vineyard-Lilly Pulitzer crowd (Gottex square-neck maillot with mesh cut-outs, at Bloomingdale's; \$148; Paltrow patch bikini, designed by Gwyneth, at Lilly Pulitzer, 1020 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street; \$105 on sale). "In almost every other type of garment," Pepall said, "I can find my personality, but with a bathing suit there is nothing for the intellectual-bohemian. It's either sparkly fun or nun." We're well into summer, though, and that one-piece suit is so threadbare it's practically a two-piece. Surely you can find something fresh in the stores that you'd be pleased to splash around in.

A true bikini, said the man who invented it, can be pulled through a wedding ring.

The first consumers of bathing costumes may have been the Greeks, according to bikini scholars, who base their suppositions on illustrations, found on Minoan cave walls from 1600 B.C., of female gymnasts in two-piecers. Two thousand or so years later, mosaics in Sicily depicted women capering in scanty bandeaux and briefs that look remarkably like the modish nude-colored suits offered by Tomas Maier, the German swimwear maestro, who is also the designer for Bottega Veneta (Vedette bikini, at tomasmaier.com; \$420).

With the fall of the Roman Empire came the rise of prudery: during the Middle Ages, swimming was regarded as unhealthy. In the eighteenth century, the popularity of therapeutic spas necessitated the revival of the bathing suit, but not in any form you'd covet: for gentlemen, woollen jerseys over knee-length knickers (a modesty panel over the crotch was a later invention); for ladies, long-sleeved woollen smocks with hems into which weights had been sewn so that the gown would not float up when the wearer hit the water.

Anyone yearning for that full-cover era should visit wholesomewear.com, an Oregon-based company that sells "swimwear that highlights the face, rather than the body." Here you'll find swimsuits consisting of a knee-length spandex bodysuit covered by a loose-fitting dark polyester tunic that "limits cling and adds modesty and style" (\$80-\$98). Meanwhile, in Australia, Aheda Zanetti, a Lebanese Muslim woman who was frustrated by the immodesty of secular bathing garb, came up with the "burqini" and the "hijood"—an ensemble of leggings, a draped overdress, and an attached elastic head covering. The burqini is chlorine-resistant, water-repellent, and let's just say that sunburn won't be a problem—although being mistaken for a member of the Blue Man Group might be (ahiida.com; about \$128-\$160).

"This you cannot wear," said Shahlla Azizian, the Iranian co-owner of Pesca Boutique (244 East 60th Street) and the nearby Pesca Trend (1151A Second Avenue, at 61st Street). She meant me, not you, and she was referring to a come-hither one-shoulder number, in fuchsia with rhinestone studs, called Can't Buy Me Love (\$319). After Azizian's brother died, in 1989, she wanted to do some-

QUICKHONEY

thing that made people happy. Bathing suits, she figured, were associated with vacations and fun. I brought Grey Hirschfeld, a non-practicing lawyer, and her eighteen-year-old daughter, Natasha, along for the ride. "These are not for me," Natasha said as she surveyed Pesca's kaleidoscopically colorful itsy-bitsies, which were dotted with sequins and spangles, and all on sale for \$89. "There are a lot of embellishments on suits today, and they're impractical," she said. "The metal O-rings get hot in the sun, and all that flashy stuff falls off in the water." "You like polka dots," her mother said, pointing at a cute brown-and-yellow specimen. "Have you noticed I don't wear polka dots?" Natasha said, kindly. Around the corner at Bloomingdale's, Natasha emerged from the dressing room triumphant in a retro-style bikini from her favorite designer, Marc Jacobs ("Pretty, but not overly girly"), a cream-colored affair with tiered blue and orange ribbon ruffles on the bandeau top and bottom (\$201). At an amiable shop called Canyon Beachwear (1136 Third Avenue, at 66th Street) Natasha deemed the merchandise too mature for her taste, but her mother took home a navy one-piece with tiny white polka dots, also available as a tankini (tankini; \$66). "It's a little baggy, but that means I can keep eating," Grey said. "You look adorable in polka dots, Mom," Natasha said.

My spell-checker has never heard of "tankini," so perhaps you haven't, either. Bottom half bikini, top half tank top, the tankini was concocted in 1997 by the swimwear designer Anne Cole. Have you met the other sisters in the kini clan? The camkini is a tankini but with the spaghetti straps of a camisole. The bandeaukini, a.k.a. the bandini, has a tube top upstairs. You don't need me to tell you what a skirtini is, or a halterkini. The monokini is a topless bathing suit, and was invented,

if that is the right word, by the Austrian fashion designer Rudi Gernreich, in 1964. The original version came with impudently positioned straps (and is on view until August 9th at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as part of the "Model as Muse" exhibit). The Pope denounced the monokini as immoral. Today, the term "monokini" denotes a one-piece suit with cutouts so liberal that the suit often looks like a slingshot or an unfinished two-piece with, say, a chain or a slender isthmus of fabric connecting the upper and nether sections. Shortly before Gernreich died, in 1985, he came up with the pubikini, which hugs the hips and keister but is otherwise about as close to, well, a no-kini as one can get.

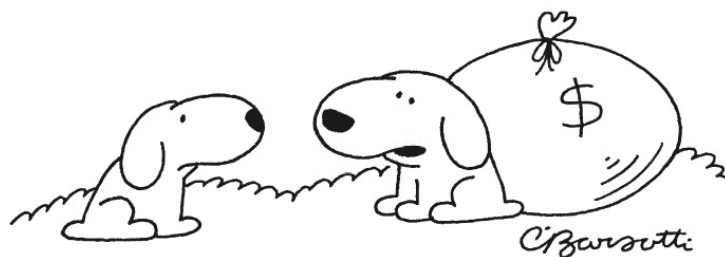
These aqua-chimeras were, of course, begat by the bikini. In the summer of 1946, Jacques Heim, a swimwear designer who had a shop in Cannes, created a tiny two-piece he called the Atome. Heim hired skywriters to fly over the Riviera, proclaiming that his design was "the smallest bathing suit in the world." Louis Réard, an automotive engineer, announced that he'd split the Atome and made it nanoscale, thus introducing *le bikini*. (The bikini appeared four days after the United States began nuclear tests in the Bikini Atoll—hence the name.) Réard hired skywriters to declare that his bikini was "smaller than the smallest bathing suit in the world." A genuine bikini, Réard said, could be pulled through a wedding ring. Diana Vreeland remarked that these three famous triangles of fabric "revealed everything about a girl except her mother's maiden name." The suit was banned from beaches in Australia, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Hollywood, having a thing against belly buttons, scorned it as well. "Please bear in mind that we cannot approve the Bikini type bathing suit," Joseph I. Breen, the head of the Motion Picture's Production Code Administra-

tion, wrote in response to moviemakers who'd petitioned on the garment's behalf.

The French demi-fashion did not catch on in America for many years, but by 1967 *Time* reported that "65% of the young set has already gone over, and this seems the season when the more mature will follow suit." Take your pick of an explanation: Brigitte Bardot, sexual liberation, the growing number of back-yard pools, Brian Hyland's hit single "Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini" (1960), the first *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue (it featured a white bikini, in 1964), or global warming.

You're not actually going to get your new suit wet, are you? The showstopping swimwear for sale at Rosa Chá, a Brazilian boutique in SoHo (460 West Broadway), is far too ornate and expensive for anything but lounging. A cappuccino-colored lace bikini comes with wide Swarovski-crystal straps (\$750); the one-piece version has a crystal-inset waistband (\$3,200). Or maybe you're thinking that a woven leather suit in grayish beige would be more becoming (\$1,200). "Bathing suits are one item I enjoy buying cheap, since they're so casual and get roughed up anyway," said Anna del Gaizo, age twenty-four, who, earlier in the summer, bought a gray-and-white tie-dyed bikini from Zara (various locations) for \$40. Nonetheless, she tried on a fetching mermaid-green spectacle with a bra fashioned from padded layers of beaded triangles (\$391). Meanwhile, her mother, Kim del Gaizo, posed in a swanky one-piece with a vintagey wooden buckle (\$350). "You know what we need at the beach?" she said. "A dimmer switch for the sun."

Observation: The most intriguing bathing attire is that which refers to an earlier era, a movie, or another article of clothing. For instance, take the Coco, a one-piece suit by Tigerlily, at the cute-as-pie shop Azaleas (223 East 10th Street; \$190). Made from a charcoal-and-white viscose/polyester/spandex that looks like bouclé, it is trimmed with black buttons and pocket details and is the swimmable version of a Chanel suit. If you told me that the bathing costumes designed by the Dutch designer Ruth Kenter had been worn by nineteen-fifties movie bombshells, I'd believe you, although surely the swim cloche covered with clusters of latex flowers belonged to your



"She was a sweet old lady whose kids never called."

Aunt Sadie (mamamaria.nl; cherry-printed high-waist halter bikini, about \$182; cap, about \$40). But everyone, even Aunt Sadie, can turn into a nineteen-forties knockout when suited up in the Betty, a one-piece made of wonderfully thick matte fabric by Bondi Bathers (bondibathers.com; \$102). Armani's perky bikini with oversized grommets and lacing suggests a Hawaiian safari (armanixchange.com; bandeau, \$29 on sale; bottom, also \$29). Agent Provocateur (133 Mercer Street) has bathing suits loaded with associations. Take the adorable red gingham and mock-denim Kerry—a halter top and matching boy shorts that evoke the TV show “Petticoat Junction” (top, \$180; bottom, \$110).

What do little girls like? “Think the opposite of everything *you* like,” Julie Klam, the mother of a five-year-old named Violet, said. Little girls go for glitter and gewgaws, and, of course, anything in princess pink and lavender and silver. They do not like shopping except for toys, but are agreeable to a little swimwear-browsing, if it is followed by grilled cheese and chocolate milk. At the pre-teen emporium Infinity (1116 Madison Avenue, at 83rd Street), Violet dismissed the chic bikini by Les Tout Petits in an autumnal print that looked like one of Bill Cosby's sweaters (\$30 on sale). At Marimekko (1262 Third Avenue, at 73rd Street), the Finnish company that has been making bold printed textiles since 1951, Violet was so-so about an orange-and-white polka-dot maillot (\$38). (A maillot, derived from the French word for swaddling clothes, is any fitted one-piece.) At Flowers by Zoe (1070 Madison Avenue, at 81st Street), where Julie said that she once heard a gentleman ask for a gold lamé bathing suit for his daughter (“and then I threw up”), Violet said no to a cute cerulean terry-cloth bikini, and yes to a pink one with “LOVE” written on the tush and a pair of peace signs on the top (both \$46). What does Violet actually wear poolside? Wishing to shield her daughter from the sun, Julie generally covers her bathing suits with rash guards—tight-fitting Lycra T-shirts, prevalent among surfer dudes, which offer varying degrees of ultraviolet protection (Illbean.com, \$28.50; landsend.com, \$19.50-\$25.50). (Remember when the sun was our friend? And the sunlamp and that homemade

concoction of baby oil and iodine were our friend's helpers?)

When did the Bronze Age begin, anyway? Nobody knows, but the ancient Greeks and Romans worshipped pallor, which was considered a sign of the non-working elite. So they applied lead paint to their faces to whiten their skin, failing to notice that one of the side effects of this affectation was death. According to popular lore, it wasn't until 1923, when Coco Chanel accidentally got a suntan on the Duke of Wellington's yacht, that the brown complexion of a sailor moved from the “out” list to “in.”

Nina Franzen, age eighteen, needed a suit for camp. No, not Bikini Bootcamp, the Mexican beach getaway for men and women who pray that they'll get in swimsuit shape by spending a week eating spa food and taking power walks, yoga classes, and Mayan clay skin treatments in a setting that in no way resembles Fort Benning (amansala.com; \$2,135 for a six-night stay). No, the Vermont summer camp where Nina is working as a counselor is the kind that does not have four-hundred-thread-count linens on the bunks. What type of bathing suit did she need? “Let's put it this way,” she told her mother, the cartoonist Roz Chast, during a trip to the Danbury Fair Mall. “It used to be kind of a clothing-optional camp, i.e., it has a liberal dress code.” Surveying the racks at H&M, Nina declared, “No doodads. I want something that says, ‘Don't even look at me.’” Roz picked up a Matthew Williamson Spirographish-print bikini (top and bottom, \$16.90 each). “These are so tiny!” she said. “I could wear them on my ears.”

“Would you even let me wear this?” Nina asked, brandishing a faux-snakeskin bikini with metal aglets (top, \$14; bottom, \$12). At Macy's, where a black tank suit with turquoise piping caught my eye (Nautica; \$60), Nina pronounced, “All bathing suits fall into one of these categories: floral, animal print, poor color choice, middle-aged, or Grandma's curtains if you're on mushrooms. But, anyway, they are all a ploy. Either you go naked or you wear your clothes.”

At J. Crew, regarding a turquoise bikini with a bandeau top, Nina said, “I refuse to wear a bathing suit that doesn't acknowledge that there are two boobs and not one loaf o' boob” (top, \$17.99; bottom, \$34.50). Her mother

nodded and said, “I don't look at a suit unless it has a contraption in it, preferably pulleys.”

Good news, Roz: Shoshanna Gruss, who became a designer in 1998, the year after she broke up with Jerry Seinfeld, insists that, no matter what a woman's size, her Shoshanna strapless bathing-suit tops will stay fixed on the chest—maybe permanently—because the underwire bra is built with twenty-six components, including side boning, silicone gripper tape, and a hidden hook-and-eye closure (Saks Fifth Avenue; plum bikini with twisted bandeau top, \$45.90 on sale).

You know who looks fabulous in a bathing suit? A mannequin. Also, a hanger. How that wisp of nylon will look on you, however, is a mystery, and will remain so until you try the damn thing on. Because the bathing suit provides so little—literally—it is impossible to imagine it on your body. Face it: it pretty much *is* your body. Also, the sizing in swimwear is more variable than that of, say, dresses or shoes. Fortunately, there are many online swimwear outlets with lenient return policies (swell.com, bluefly.com, oldnavy.com, urbanoutfitters.com, landsend.com).

This season, we have located the Anti-Anxiety Zone. Or so declares Lands' End, which claims to be the home of this province, as well as of the Slenderizing Zone, which is presumably nearby. On the Lands' End Web site, suits have been sorted into categories based on problem body parts—for instance, “minimize tummy-waist,” “lengthen legs,” and “enhance bust” (All-Over Control Halter Slender Swimsuit of UPF 50 fabric, at landsend.com; \$84.50). Shoppers who can't get the hang of it may call a hot line where “Professional Swim Fit” operators—they are “tenured experts” who have “specialized fit training”—furnish counsel.

“The Sarasohn-Beilin team is very efficient, and we like to shop together,” Wendy Sarasohn said about her and her twenty-eight-year-old daughter, Jamie Sarasohn Beilin, who work together as real-estate agents. We moseyed down Madison Avenue in search of bathing suits. At Missoni (1009 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street), there were delicate knit triangles for delicate women who require neither interference nor assistance up top (originally \$470-\$715, re-

duced to \$258-\$358). A mannequin had on a bikini of purples and pinks from the pre-fall collection (refers to the season, not the state of the buyer's bustline). Silky black fringe swished from the bra down the bodice, a look that would turn any woman into a dead ringer for a Victorian lampshade (\$650). At La Perla (803 Madison Avenue, at 67th Street), Jamie looked around and said, "My mom likes anything with jewels." Her mother did not, however, go for the black bikini with rows of rhinestones across the chest (\$468), or the one decorated with what looked like trellises made of licorice whips (\$325). "Very Boca, very sugar daddy," Wendy said. Why are the suits at Polo Sport Ralph Lauren (1055 Madison Avenue, at 80th Street) kept behind the counter in shopping bags? "No reason," a salesman said, holding up a bikini with gold straps. A low-cut black maillot with a halter top was declared "Audrey Hepburn-y" by Wendy, who snatched it before she and Jamie left to sell an apartment (\$250, reduced to \$175—for the suit, not the apartment).

I continued on to Pucci (701 Fifth Avenue, at 55th Street), into a serene studio carpeted in swimming-pool blue, where there were drawers of bathing suits in saturated colors. I especially liked the ones with pom-pom detail (bikinis, \$320-\$690). Norma Kamali (11 West 56th Street), the originator of the sleeping-bag coat as well as of clothes made from actual parachutes, is also the designer of extremely elegant swimwear. Her swimsuits—and they are countless—are simple and unadorned (except for the tastefully studded styles and the low-rise bikini bottom with fringe—and, oh yes, those one-pieces bedecked with rows of safety pins). They come in a variety of solids, patterns, and fabrics, ranging from metallic foil to something called "swim panic," which is a yellow-and-black leopard print (\$75-\$450). Kamali designed a budget line for Wal-Mart this year, and among the must-haves is a ritzy off-the-shoulder black maillot for twenty bucks (walmart.com). How to transport your purchases to the beach? You could fit the entire Malia Mills shop (199 Mulberry Street, and other locations), bikinis and all, into the huge acid-yellow canvas bag (\$395) displayed next to the equally terrific neon-

green-colored coverup that looks like it's made of mosquito netting (\$165).

In an airy atelier on the mezzanine of a Chelsea brownstone at 128 West 23rd Street, a Tokyo-born designer named Keiko makes bathing suits for men and women. She'll sew one just for you if the samples on the rack don't fit perfectly. The guy briefs at Keiko are a touch X-rated, more for a gigolo or Sean Connery than for your husband, but the gal pieces are creative without being too creative, especially the styles that look as if Mondrian had tailored them from inspired combinations of meshes and solids (\$70-\$380 for men's; \$168-\$300 for women's; custom, \$350 and up).

Rita Konig felt that a bathing-suit intervention was in order. She had recently spent a week on a beach with Cynthia Kling, who'd worn a frayed nylon tank suit deemed a fashion underachievement by her travel chums. "If you can afford a suit from Eres, you can't go wrong," Konig said. "What Eres does well is pull your figure up. Enough of your body will look good so that you won't care too much about the acres that don't." Eres, a French line with a boutique at 621 Madison Avenue (59th Street), is known for swimwear and lingerie that are sleek, superbly made, and devoid of frills and bulky elastic. There are few styles and fewer colors, many of them powdery, muted hues. And Konig is correct: the suits seem to have the muscle of a girdle. Kling modelled a gray one-piece with a plunging V-neck, belted under the bust (\$445), and a winsome black strapless suit with drawstrings down the sides that can be tightened at the thigh for a shirred effect (\$410). "It's essential to bring a friend when bathing-suit shopping," Kling said. "One, women are too crazy to judge how they look. Two, if you go with your mother, she'll project her neurotic body image onto you. And, three, salespeople lie." A skinny woman stepped out of the dressing room in a bikini that made her rib cage look like scaffolding. "My mother is going to say 'Cover your derrière,'" the woman said, to which the saleswoman replied, "Trust me. That's the way it's supposed to look."

How to make spandex: Combine a macroglycol with a diisocyanate monomer until it turns into a prepolymer. Add diamine, and then dilute with solvent until . . . you're not listen-

ing, are you? Spandex, an anagram of "expands," was invented in 1959 by scientists at DuPont as a rubber substitute. (The company trademarked it as Lycra.) This fibre, which can stretch more than five hundred per cent and then retract to its original size, has transformed the wardrobes of swimmers, superheroes, and Bon Jovi. The Magicsuit, which, depending on the style, contains forty to sixty per cent spandex (three times that of a typical suit), promises to make you "look seven pounds slimmer in seconds" (victoriasscret.com; \$99-\$118). If you don't believe in magic, how about divine intervention? The Miraclesuit has roughly the same amount of spandex as the Magicsuit and guarantees to "take ten pounds off in ten seconds" (nordstrom.com; \$128-\$146). Both labels, it turns out, are manufactured by Miraclesuit. Sandra Davidoff, the director of public relations for the company, says that the Magicsuit is "contemporary, sexy, and fashion forward."

Before attempting to squeeze into an above-the-ankle-length Speedo LZR Racer bodysuit, a feat equivalent to fitting a rhinoceros into a party balloon, I advise you to watch the company's five-minute instructional video (youtube.com/watch?v=l1T-tvfNSIc). This solemn tutorial recommends that you first slip a plastic bag onto each foot to help ease the sheath on, make certain that the Core Stabilizer is in place above the hip bones, and enlist two assistants to zip you in (speedo.com; \$425-\$550). The sealskin-like water-repellent fabric, whose surface drag has been tested in NASA wind tunnels, is so taut that I suggest you have on hand a third assistant who knows C.P.R. Speedo, a British company, is one of the world's largest swimwear-makers, and its 2008 LZR Racer is the fastest suit ever, worn in the Beijing Olympics by more than ninety per cent of the gold medalists.

Speaking of winners, the first known bathing-beauty competition (not counting the ones on Minoan cave walls) took place in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, in 1880. One of the judges was Thomas Edison. First prize, which went to a young woman named Myrtle Meriwether: a trousseau. ♦