

## Fashion and Comfort in Sub-Zero Climes

By Margo Talbot



Have you ever looked at a photo of a woman climbing high on a mountain and thought: “She looks so comfortable in that environment!”

Well, the good news is you were right in your assessment of her comfort. The secret to being comfortable in the world’s harshest environments is in your personal preparation and your gear. Firstly, you need to be realistic about your foray into the great outdoors and understand that there is a huge difference between sitting in your kitchen drinking coffee and walking along a remote ridge at 14,000 feet. Secondly, you need to know what gear to bring.

You want a layering system that will allow you to regulate your temperature to within a couple of degrees. This means not only what goes on top of what, but how well you can ventilate each piece in terms of unzipping at the neck, up the sides, or under the arms. You want to minimize the amount of perspiring that you do, as it is one thing to be dry and cold, and quite another to be wet and cold.

Your layering system should be thought of as an onion from the inside out. You want to have a nice soft thin insulating layer next to your skin, both on the top and on the bottom. One of my favourites is the Icebreaker Skin 260 line. There is also an assortment of synthetic underwear on the market.

Next you will want a thicker piece made of either wool or synthetic. I find that once I have a natural base layer I am happy with synthetic outer layers. I prefer a fleece with a deep zipper at the neck so that I can ventilate more without taking off another layer. It is not always practical to stop every time our bodies change temperature. It is far easier to use pit zips in jackets and neck zips in shirts.

Depending on how cold it is I may want another layer on my legs. For this I use a pair of mid weight fleece as I find that I do not need the same amount of insulation on my bottom as on the top. But usually I wear the thin wool underwear and a pair of insulated soft shell pants over these. My favourite is the Women's Solitude Pants from Outdoor Research. Depending on your level of time commitment to these endeavours you may want to get a crotch zip sewn into these so that you don't have to take off your harness or fiddle with inserting the Freshette\* through several layers of clothing every time nature calls.

Finally you will want a good soft shell or Gore-tex jacket for your upper body. If you expect to be in quite wet conditions you will want to bring a gore-tex layer for both the upper and lower body. And to cap it all off you will need a parka. These come in synthetic and down versions. My preference is a down jacket as it hugs the body better and provides greater warmth. The beauty of the synthetic jacket is that it will insulate even when wet and will dry out faster than sodden down. In places like Antarctica, Alaska and the North American Rockies, where the climate is cold and dry, down is my preferred choice. However, if I am doing a trip in a coastal region, I opt for the synthetic choice.

We have come to the end of our clothing list except for two of the most important parts of our bodies: the hands and feet. You will want to spare no expense in making sure you have a great pair of gloves. They should have a grippy palm, a removable liner, and be dexterous while affording you the desired amount of insulation. Your boots should be snug, but not tight, and you should be able to wear a mid to heavy sock, depending on how good the circulation is in your feet. You will also need a tuque that will fit comfortably under your helmet. This need not be thick as you will have the hood of either your gore-tex jacket or your down parka to use whenever you are not in the midst of moving.

I can guarantee that the proper gear can turn your cold-weather foray into a surprisingly comfortable experience.

*\*The Freshette is a plastic oblong bowl-shaped device that is inserted between the legs to catch the fluid your body excretes. Attached is a tube that diverts the liquid away from your body.*

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