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Beyond the pale?



David Hayes APRIL 22 2011

The buzz around Baz Luhrmann’s remake of *The Great Gatsby*, due to star Leonardo Di Caprio and Carey Mulligan, has clearly reached the fashion world. Or at least it’s reached the men’s wear world. From Dolce & Gabbana and Bottega Veneta to Louis Vuitton, Junya Watanabe, Hermès and Ermenegildo Zegna, designers have been embracing the cool, cream linen suit worn to such great effect by Robert Redford’s Jay Gatsby in the 1974 version (in which he starred alongside Mia Farrow).

This is great news for anyone planning a summer wedding or a meeting in the tropics. But for those of us stuck in the city, the question of whether to embrace the look is a little more complicated.

“British men *can* wear cream – it doesn’t necessarily have to be a ‘European’ look,” says Gildo Zegna, chief executive of Ermenegildo Zegna. “It’s all about attitude; men can wear paler suits, both with a plain white shirt or ‘dressed-up’ with a tie. You can also split up suiting and pair different colours together, something which is a key men’s trend at the moment.”

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Patrick Grant of London tailor E Tautz warns, however, that “pale suiting is hard to pull off in a professional environment”. In the past, he says, E Tautz has done head-to-toe pale suits, but is advocating separates this summer. “The best advice is to choose cloths with a bit of texture or pattern to them; a herringbone or something with a bit of a slub through it to break things up,” he says. “Pick the most natural shade you can find and avoid anything with a yellow hue. Separates are much easier to wear; mix a dark jacket with pale trousers or vice-versa and save the full suits for days when the sun is high in the sky.”

There is, of course, a perception that dark colours are more “serious” than light ones; they are seen as more sober and workplace-appropriate, even in summer.

“Incorporating pale summer tailoring into the average working man’s wardrobe can initially seem a daunting task,” says Sam Kershaw, men’s international designer buyer at high-end department store Harvey Nichols. To counteract that perception, Kershaw suggests choosing something lightweight but with structure, such as Armani’s beige herringbone linen jacket (£570) and DSquared’s slim, light grey peak lapel suit (£1,045).

Likewise, Ben Leaver, formal wear buyer at Selfridges, suggests “a pale suit in a wool mix with some mohair content” – such as Spencer Hart’s grey suit (£760) or the pale beige slim-fitting suit by The Kooples (£370). Balance the colour with a darker tie and opt for something sharp and modern instead of a costume-drama linen look, he advises. “Always steer clear of linen in the City. This should be a look strictly reserved for summer holidays.”

Similar advice comes from London tailor Oscar Udeshi. “I have about half-a-dozen pale suits,” he says: “white, beige, caramel, seersucker and pale grey – because I was bitten by the James Bond bug at a very early age and one of the most powerful images on the big screen was the pale grey three-piece suit Sean Connery wore in *Goldfinger*.”

He adds: “I wear my pale suits to summer functions, dinners, Sunday lunches in the south of France – but never for work. Would you really want your legal adviser dressed like *Our Man in Havana*?”

Interestingly, it is the high street stores that are most confident about the pale summer suit. “Our best-selling suit is a slim-fit, silver grey one worn by [footballer] Jamie Redknapp in our adverts,” says Jonathan Swartland, menswear suit buyer at Marks & Spencer. “And more men are wearing pale suits to work. Our ‘Superlight’ range is constructed using lighter-than-normal internal components that make for a more comfortable, crease-resistant suit for the office. We also offer lighter greys in our machine-washable tumble dry range (from £99).”

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Ah yes, the thorny issue of cleaning. Committed pale suit wearers suggest avoiding the dry cleaners as long as possible: instead, find a tailor you trust to press your suit and thus reduce fabric damage, giving the suit a far longer shelf life. Still, they admit that a pale suit will always have a tough time staying pristine in the city. And when some of the best come with a four-figure price tag, such as the unlined white cotton suit from Hermès at £2,240, it is sensible to factor in dry-cleaning costs.

“Unless you travel by private jet, someone else carries your luggage and you have a sedan chair on hand, your dry-cleaning bills will, I’m afraid, be high,” says Jeremy Langmead, editor-in-chief at Mr Porter. “Having said that, pale suits can look great – especially in taupe or stone, but even in white. Look at French actor Jean-Paul Belmondo; he wore a tan suit especially well. And think of Bryan Ferry in his white suit. The trick is to team white with a suntan and mix in some colour, perhaps a pale blue shirt. If you keep the look too white, you will look like Casper the Friendly Ghost.”

Still, Langmead doesn’t own a cream suit himself: “In summer I wear lots of khaki, pale grey and white trousers, but tend to keep the jackets darker. Mainly because there isn’t much tanning opportunity in west London, and – well, I’m rather fond of tomato soup.”

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Lighten up: David Tang on wearing pale suits

Unless you are Rick from Casablanca, it’s hard to get away with a pure white suit. I don’t wear white white suits – I prefer beige linen. My suits are the colour of the stuccoed buildings in Belgrave Square – I don’t want to look as if I’m going to a wedding in California under a rose bush.

I started wearing beige linen suits after I saw *Goodbye, Mr Chips*. Then I noticed other smart people wearing them: Edward G Robinson, Orson Welles, Noel Coward, Mountbatten, so I wore them more. They gave you a slightly exotic sense of the wondrous tropics: humid, languid, balmy and romantic. But of course in England, they need to hibernate between October to May.

Over the years, I have had several beige linen suits made by my tailor Welsh and Jefferies. They are Etonian tailors and my mother always said that if I wore their suits people who don’t know me would think I went to Eton. It’s important to have them lined properly so they don’t crease up like an accordion. Even in hot weather, I would rather be a bit warmer than look like an Italian gigolo.

I do own one white suit. When I was younger I thought I was smooth and bought white jeans from Fiorucci and a white jacket to go with them, then I thought I’d have a suit made as well. I only wore it in Italy, though, out of sight of my friends, as it was slightly vulgar. I also deliberately wore it for a long time without getting it laundered, because the secret of a pale suit is that it cannot look too virginal: the older the better. Think of Oxford dons or the Bloomsbury set, that shabby chic look of the real English gent. You must also have a thread behind the buttonhole to keep a flower there securely and two loose buttons on the cuffs so that you can wash your hands with ease in hot weather.

In terms of the appropriate shoes I wear my pale suits with bespoke brogues from John Lobb; they appear to be lace-ups but are in fact ready laced slip-ons. They save so much time. A nice turn-up to show off shoes gives the Hercule Poirot look, but I would draw the line at spats.

www.welshandjefferies.com

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David Tang writes the *Agony Uncle column* in *House & Home*

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