

FASHION

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SWIMWEAR/GLOBAL

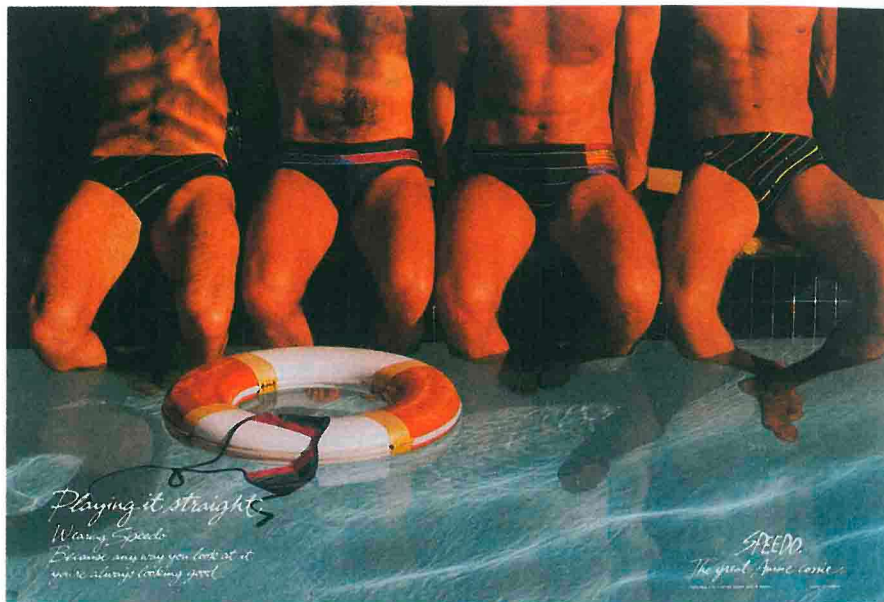
Battle of the bulge

No menswear item is more divisive than a pair of speedos.

And opinions on 'banana hammocks' are informed by national psyche. We reveal all.

By Jamie Waters

Illustrations Josh McKenna



Speedos are a bit like Vegemite. They are Australian, pint-sized and you either love them or you hate them. Few clothing items come with as many associations as these skimpy swimmers. They are variously a symbol of liberalism and hedonism, of gay men, sporty men, fashionable men, exhibitionists and dads; of both not giving a damn about how you look and giving lots of damns. They look best on men who look good naked, they give you nice tan lines, and they're beloved in sexy Mediterranean countries but loathed in places where bodies skew towards pale and lumpy (they were recently voted the "most hated clothing item in the UK"). Their nicknames include "budgie smugglers" (or "parrot smugglers" for wearers who are pleased with themselves), "banana hammocks", "dick stickers", "slugos", "sungas" (in Brazil) and "lolly bags". They are inextricably linked with Bondi surf lifesavers and Ipanema beach. They were rejected by Generation X in favour of boardshorts but have stuck around. They are and will forever be the ultimate summer item. And, on top of everything else, they are featured in an upcoming exhibition at the new v&a museum in Dundee, Scotland.

Speedos have always been wildly successful and wildly controversial. The first model by Speedo, the swimwear company that was founded by Sydney-based Scotsman Alexander MacRae, looks positively demure by today's standards. Designed in the late

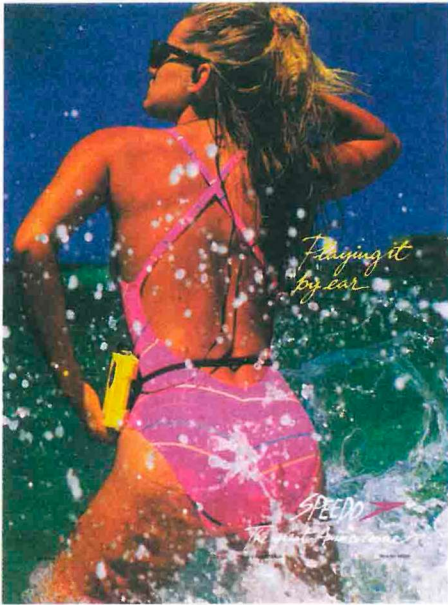
1920s, it's a racerback-style suit that extends halfway down the thigh.

"At the time it was shocking; the fact it revealed the wearer's back and shoulders was radical," says Meredith More, curator of the v&a exhibition that will feature this design. "But it was released at a good time, just as mixed-gender bathing became legal in Australia and beach culture was blossoming." Speedos as we know them today – the Y-front or brief style – were only unveiled in 1961. The first man to be spotted in a pair, on Bondi Beach, was arrested for public indecency. (Mercifully, he was released after it was ruled that no pubic hair could be seen.)

Like Hoover and Sellotape, "Speedo" has become a noun, or generic trademark, for every Y-front model of men's swimwear, irrespective of brand. Which is, of course, the ultimate sign of ubiquity. For much of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, every man, whether European, Australian or American, wore this style of swimmers. It was only after shifts in the late 1980s and 1990s in the way sportsmen and musicians dressed that speedos were jilted in favour of boardshorts. Fashion historian Daniel Delis Hill, author of *History of Men's Underwear and Swimwear*, notes that, in the US, boardshorts became the norm in the late 1980s after Michael Jordan started wearing baggy basketball shorts and rappers began favouring oversized clothes; this looser style filtered into all aspects of men's fashion, including swimwear.

Nonetheless, today speedos remain a favourite among certain fashionable men. In Italy, silvery-haired *signori* stroll along the sand of Lake Como or Positano in speedos and pool slides, with small leather bags slung over their shoulders (Giorgio Armani, for one, wouldn't be caught dead on the beach without his jet-black briefs). Earlier this year the excellent menswear publication *Fantastic Man* featured speedos in its Top 40 summer items. Opt for navy, it instructed, "which is less austere than black and goes well with a tan. No bright colours. Nice with a jumper."





Patrick Grant, the inestimably chic British tailor and creative director of E Tautz, swears by speedos and recently bought a royal-blue pair by Cornwall brand Fourth Element for his spring jaunt to Italy. “I wear swimming briefs for practical reasons,” he says. “Men wear swimmers for two reasons: to swim and to lie in the sun. Boardshorts are not good for either of those things. They give you bad tan lines and puff up when you swim. It makes no sense to me why you would choose them over speedos.”

So why do these practical swimmers draw such ire from men? An ad hoc poll in anticipation of this article yielded colourful responses from members of the fashion community. Some were positive: “Great topic!” said one guy. “I’ve wanted to talk about this for a while,” added another. Others were less so. “Not a fan,” and “Only brave tacky guys wear speedos,” were two replies fired back. One designer almost seemed offended that I had posed the question to him. “I absolutely do not wear speedos! When I see men in speedos I think ‘poor boy!’”

The reason so many men eschew speedos for boardshorts is partly a matter of aesthetics. Swimshorts are more conservative and less show-pony, and are slightly more forgiving to men who’ve been caught out by the arrival of summer (but only slightly).

More significant are the associations that speedos have with masculinity – or a lack thereof. Among younger generations especially they

have connotations with campness, which makes them incredibly divisive. “I posted a tweet about my new swimmers and I received so many weird comments from people saying things like, ‘Oh Patrick what are you thinking!?’” says Grant. Speedos are an easy jibe. If a guy says to his mates or girlfriend (or, indeed, to a stranger), “Oh, haha I would *never* wear that,” he is in safe territory. He has staked his position. He is part of the pack. He is not going to be mocked by anyone.

Yet the thing that has enabled speedos to maintain a foothold in mainstream culture is their sports DNA. The Speedo company (which today is owned by UK sportswear giant Pentland Group) has always branded itself first and foremost as a high-performance player. It was the official sponsor of the Australian swimming team for decades (until 2017) and the major selling point of its swimsuits has always been that they enable you to go faster (the name Speedo is derived from the slogan “Speed on in your

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Speedos”). A visit to the global flagship in Covent Garden, London confirms this attitude. The place smells of chlorine and rubber, the posters on the walls feature Olympic athletes, and the mannequins wear speedos, swimming caps and goggles. “Many of our customers come in because they are competitive swimmers, although some do just want speedos for fun,” says Dane, the smiley shop assistant.

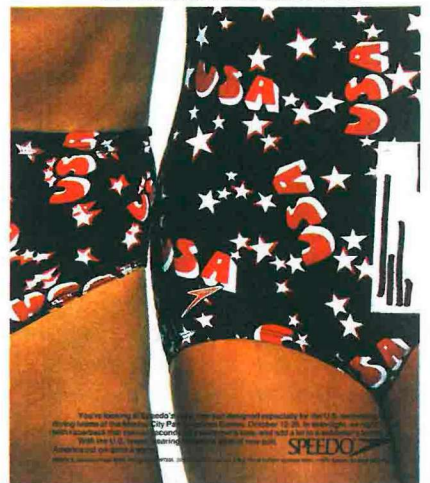
Historian Delis Hill says that “because of [its] association with gay men, the men’s bikini did not become a mainstream style for Middle America until 1972. It became associated with straight men’s athleticism when

Olympic swimmer Mark Spitz won seven gold medals wearing a stars-and-stripes nylon-knit bikini.” More recently in the UK there was a notable spike in speedos sales in the years following *Casino Royale* (2006), in which Daniel Craig, a paragon of athletic masculinity, emerged from the water in tight trunks.

There’s a wave of new brands that are wooing younger customers by playing on speedos’ athletic inflections. In Australia, Funky Trunks, which has a campaign featuring images of men swimming laps, is popular among twentysomethings. Meanwhile, Parisian label Ron Dorff makes natty blue-and-white pin-striped versions based on the design sported by Brazil’s 1980s water-polo team. Making fashionable speedos is a smart move in France, where there is a big swimming culture but swimshorts are banned in public pools.

“The brief style is one of our best-sellers. We sell to all ages in France. And overseas the trunks are generally more popular in Latin countries,” says Ron Dorff co-founder and CEO Claus Lindorff. “We have seen a lot of clients aged 25–30 buying this model over the past two years. I think images of guys in trunks from the 1970s and early ’80s have made the style iconic and a new generation is now ready to take them on in an updated version.”

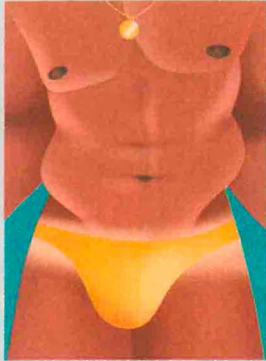
This may be the closest look the competition will get of Speedo’s new suit for the Pan-Am Games.



SPEEDO SELECTION

Tackling trunks

Speedos attract different tribes of men – some of whom pull off the look more successfully than others. Here are four to look out for at the beach this summer.



The bronzed Brazilian

Tones the abs at one of Ipanema Beach's outdoor gyms before hitting the sand for tanning time – all in his yellow *sungas*, of course. We also take our sun hat off to the many 80-year-olds who continue to strut their stuff in their favourite *sungas*.



The chic European

Combines navy or black speedos with Adidas pool slides and a leather bag (possibly Prada). Holidays in Positano, Lake Como or Hydra. Is probably Italian.



The dad bod

Wore speedos in the 1970s as a lithe twentysomething and has remained loyal to the look even as his body has proved disobedient. Could be British or American; could do with a tan.



The Bondi lifesaver

An omnipresent force on Bondi Beach. Spends his days saving tourists from the waves; his only armour is a pair of scarlet swimmers and a red-and-yellow cap.

The world's nations can be divided into those that are speedo-friendly and those that are not. Or, to put it bluntly: the liberals and the prudes. Every year the travel website Expedia conducts the "Flip Flop Report", a "global exposé on beach attitudes". Its findings reveal the countries where people are most comfortable with revealing themselves; where going nude on the beach is fully acceptable and where speedos are passable.

The nations with the lowest "approval" ratings for speedos are usually Norway and Japan (although the UK and US would likely not be far behind). The countries with the highest "approval" ratings are Brazil (which at last count had a 95 per cent rating), Italy, Spain and Germany.

"Men in Brazil are relaxed about their bodies," says Paulo Mariotti, a Bahia native and *Vogue Brasil's* Paris correspondent. "There's a tradition in Brazil that wearing *sungas* is the way to swim. At the height of liberal attitudes in the 1970s, men would wear only *sungas* to the beach and would put their money inside the trunks while they swam," he says. "Today it's not that extreme but they still wear *sungas* to swim and to do things like jogging near the water. There is freedom in the behaviour of Brazilian men."

Looking good is key to this wardrobe choice. "Although heterosexual men will never confess this, there is this aspect of being sexy, being attractive, especially in Rio, where there is this culture of the body," says Mariotti. "Having the speedo tan mark is considered very sexy in Brazil."

Choosing to wear speedos can be a matter of exhibitionism and body pride or merely about being at ease with one's body, irrespective of how lumpy it may be. These sorts of attitudes are ingrained in national psyches, tough to shake off and equally tough to embrace. But, a call to arms: British and American men – and you Norwegians too – this summer let's try to loosen up a bit and embrace the tiny Aussie cosie. Our tan lines will thank us. — (M)



Tight-fitting timeline:

- 1914** Alexander MacRae, a Scot, establishes hosiery company Fortitude in Sydney; it moves into swimwear and changes its name to Speedo.
- 1928** MacRae designs racerback costume.
- 1961** Speedos as we know them today are born when Peter Travis designs the Y-front model.
- 1972** Speedos go mainstream in the US when Mark Spitz wins gold in Munich wearing a pair decorated with the star-spangled banner.
- 2005** Speedo releases popular collaboration with Comme des Garçons.
- 2006** Daniel Craig dons skin-tight trunks in *Casino Royale*. Skimpy swimmers are cool again.
- 2018** The speedo is voted the "most hated clothing item" in the UK yet Selfridges reveals speedo sales are up by 450 per cent year on year. The swimmers are as divisive as ever.