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# PRIDE

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CLOCKWISE Italy's Montecatini; Bells Beach, Victoria; the old town hall in Herzogenaurach; Herd Groyne Lighthouse, South Shields.

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OF

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# PLACE



Some cities are known for their architecture, others for their history or natural beauty. Then there are towns such as Montecatini, Torquay and Herzogenaurach, which are synonymous with the brands created there.

Words NATASHA PHILLIMORE  
Illustrations PAULA SANZ CABALLERO/  
THE ILLUSTRATION ROOM



**“Move very, very carefully, and never so far from the heritage that people don’t recognise the brand.”**

**A**

**little plaza buzzes** in the morning sun. Bleached canvas awnings shade gesticulating men and their double espressos. An Italian woman crosses the cobblestones, making

a beeline for a small homewares store, Le Sorelle — The Sisters. Here, she picks up a stack of paper fabric cut to pattern and returns home to sew it into the bread bags and aprons that pepper the area’s cafes and restaurants.

Welcome to 21st-century entrepreneurship, Tuscan style. Here, Silicon Valley is a sleepy village, the coders are stay-at-home mums, the hardware is a Singer sewing machine and the product a scrunchy little bag whose fame ripples across the Indian Ocean to the home of Sydney’s style set, Bondi Beach.

Casey Languillon can be credited for extricating the covetable bags from Montecatini, about 50 kilometres west of Florence. She discovered them, and Le Sorelle’s unique way of treating paper, while on holiday with her husband, Nico.

They’d always talked about importing an overseas product — maybe from France (Nico is French) — but Languillon figured it was all “a bit of a pipedream”. Then, inspiration hit.

“Travelling through Tuscany, eating at a B&B, we were served muesli in this gorgeous paper bag. I thought, ‘Oh,

that’s cute’. Then at lunch, the bread came in a similar paper bag, as did the crostini at a wine bar. Finally, I checked the tag: ‘Made in Lucca, Le Sorelle!’” And there, just across the piazza, was that very homewares store.

“It didn’t hit me until a few days later that this could be something,” says Languillon. Back in Australia, she emailed the store, spoke to one of the sisters, Giulia, who told her that the bag’s were actually her father Marco’s brainchild.

“I was a producer on a cooking show for years and had a lot of contacts through the chefs I met and thought this would be something Australian restaurants would love,” says Languillon. “We bought two boxes and it wasn’t an immediate [success]. But it was pretty close to it.”

That initial interest wasn’t from restaurants, however. “That’s where my business model completely failed,” laughs Languillon. The bags sold out in two hours at a single stand at Bondi markets.

Now, they’re branded as Uashmama, and stocked in their own store at Bondi. “The locals are so proud to have their bags here,” she says. “We recently hired an Italian girl from Montecatini to work in the store — she almost cried when she saw this little brand all the way over here.”

**P**art of Uashmama’s charm is that the product is inextricably tied to a place, and even to a time — the era when, if a society lady needed to frock up, she visited the local seamstress. A true fashion brand is nothing without its heritage. This is why Louis Vuitton has taken great pains to claw back its age-old status — one linked to sophistication, but also to a distinctly French craftsmanship.

“Creativity, innovation, technology, cultural identification and economic ➤

benefits are all elements resulting from textiles and fashion, and that subsequently help shape and showcase a place,” says Kiri Delly, CEO of the Council of Textile & Fashion Industries of Australia (TFIA).

One great British brand that never lost sight of its roots is Barbour, maker of the waterproof waxed coat made famous by the Queen herself. (In fact, when Barbour offered a new one in celebration of HRM’s silver jubilee, she asked to have her old one reproofed instead.)

A fifth-generation style stalwart, Barbour began life on the piers of South Shields, a town at the mouth of the River Tyne. Inspired by north-east England’s working communities, Scotsman John Barbour saw a need for hard-wearing, waterproof coats to replace the tar- and fish-oil ones the fishermen had worn for decades. Today, the Barbour factory is still in South Shields, albeit in bigger premises than the original location at 5 Market Place.

Quaint piazzas, British coastal towns — grown-ups might appreciate fashion with history, but the irrepressible trendsetters are the young. The question Barbour asked was this: who’s to say you can’t appeal to both? Enter associations with It girls Alexa Chung and Olivia Palermo and UK rock royalty, Arctic Monkeys; collaborations with fashion designer Alice Temperley; a collection inspired by late actor and motorcyclist Steve McQueen; Daniel Craig sporting a Barbour coat in the Bond film *Skyfall*.

The driving force behind Barbour’s resurrection is Dame Margaret Barbour, named one of *Vogue UK*’s ‘Wonder Women’ in 2011. The great matriarch manages to pull off corporate chic with an ‘at home on the marshes’ savoir faire in her midnight-blue Barbour. Past Barbour collaborator Anya Hindmarch describes her as a national treasure. The entire United Kingdom would probably agree.

When her husband John, then head of Barbour, suddenly died at the age of 29, Dame Margaret took over what was then a fourth-generation company (daughter Helen has since joined the ranks as vice-president) and steered it into record profits.

“I was 28, with a little girl of two, when John died, and I was left with a majority shareholding. I set about learning everything, including how to make a jacket,” she told *Fast Company*, which ranked her 85 in its 100 Most Creative People in Business 2014. She cited her biggest challenge as fashion, and how to reconcile the fast-paced, ever-changing industry with the Barbour tradition. The secret is to “move very, very carefully, and never so far from the heritage that people don’t recognise the brand,” she declared.

**F**rom the windswept beaches of England to the sunnier ones of Australia comes a fashion collective stamped in the minds of every teen of the 1990s. A surf-wear aesthetic was born in the whitewash of Torquay, one that owed everything to where it came from and who wore it.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the golden age of surfing in Australia. It spawned Nat Young, Bernard ‘Midget’ Farrelly and Mark Richards, and inspired the new vanguard, Layne Beachley and Mark Occhilupo. This was also the time that Torquay began hosting the Bells Beach Surf



## A surf-wear aesthetic was born in the whitewash of Torquay...

Classic, now called the Rip Curl Pro and the world’s longest-running surfing competition. The beach is a natural amphitheatre for the boardie-clad crowds that descend every Easter.

Alan Green grew up in Pascoe Vale on the outskirts of Melbourne, but would often wag school and hitchhike to Torquay to surf. He eventually moved there in 1969, to a dilapidated house where he started stitching his own surf wear with mate John Law, drawing on his love and experience of surfing to create the best possible board shorts, using snaps and velcro instead of zips.

It didn’t take long for Quiksilver’s reputation to take off — soon the top surfers around Australia were wearing Green’s handiwork. In 1976, Jeff Hakman left Torquay with a Bells trophy and a licence to sell Quiksilver in the US. ➤➤

As the brand grew, so did the town around it. Today, you can find stores for Quiksilver, Roxy and Rip Curl — all born in Torquay — at Surf City Plaza, the surf wear aficionado's fashion mecca.

Roxanne Green, daughter of Alan Green, remembers a time when the surf was high, the water clear and the clothes functional — and often barely there. She's now based in Melbourne and runs her own women's swimwear label Finnigan, which, if Roxy and Quiksilver are the young adults, is the sophisticated older sister. "Quiksilver is our family company and even though we're not owners anymore, I didn't want to be a direct competitor. So I concentrated on a more classic, sports luxe style."

Green, who heads back to Torquay whenever she can, has noticed the bygone staples of boardies and T-shirts, tracksuits and jumpers have given way

to casual gear with an edge. "It's still streetwear — every guy you see on the street will be in streetwear — but the girls are now a bit more grungy and cool. They're certainly not rocking cashmere sweaters. It's a lot more relaxed, you can get away with a lot more — it is like a uniform, though."

And, of course, the surfing roots remain. "Torquay is attractive to those in the industry and is still the hub as far as Australian surfing fashion goes," says Green. Delly, of the TFIA, thinks this is hugely positive. "Ultimately the fashion sector has always added to the very fabric of a place, pun intended," she says. "These industries foster the development of quality growers, skilled designers and artisans; clever entrepreneurs who all work together to create the special product."

In the case of Rudi and Adi Dassler, working together didn't pan out quite so well. The young Bavarian brothers grew up in the 1920s in the small town of Herzogenaurach, Germany. They became partners in the Dassler Brothers Shoe Company, conducted out of their mother's laundry: Rudi the itinerant salesman; Adi the thoughtful craftsman.

But as often happens in family businesses, tensions broke out. Some say Rudi played up with Adi's wife; others that Adi insulted his brother in a WWII bunker. Regardless, the brothers' shoe company was no more. Instead, Adi started the Adidas factory on one side of the Aurach river, while Rudi did the same on the opposite, with Puma.

In their effort to own the sportswear market, they employed thousands of people in the town between them. For many years, Herzogenaurach was nicknamed "the town of bent necks" as everyone's first reaction to meeting someone new was to check out their shoes. The war was long-running and very real. Puma supporters didn't marry Adidas ones, businesses wouldn't serve one or the other. It took 60 years, the death of both brothers (they died within four years of one another, and were buried on opposite sides of the local cemetery) and a 2009 football game for the two companies to call a truce.

It's an interesting juxtaposition, the sleepy hamlet giving birth to not one, but two of the world's biggest sporting goods companies — companies that may have buried the emotional hatchet, but are permanently at war in the boardroom.

By all accounts, the town has borne the fight well. Herzogenaurach remains an under-the-radar European city that fuses quaint charm with cutting-edge technology — think cobblestone streets lined with obligatory half-timbered houses and chiming clock towers, not to mention outlet stores that will get the average sneaker-lover salivating.

For the Dassler brothers, operating out of mum's laundry and selling to the neighbourhood they grew up in was just a way to make some cash. To the sports industry, indeed to the world, Herzogenaurach will always be the birthplace of something great. 📌



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