

23 Comments

 adventure-journal.com/2021/05/need-know-buying-a-wetsuit

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If you're not well-versed in the wetsuit game, buying a new one can be incredibly intimidating. Daunting even. Each of the big three wetsuit brands (Rip Curl, Quiksilver, O'Neill) make about a dozen different suits, based on warmth, stretch, and fancy rubber-lining gizmos and gimmicks that mostly just drive up the price. Then there are the next tier of brands like Xcel, Patagonia, Vissla, which make good suits with slightly smaller market share but command fierce brand loyalty. Then, next level down in terms of availability, but often a grade or two higher in terms of quality, there are brands like Isurus, FERAL, Matuse and a whole host of boutique wetsuit companies popping up to fill in the cracks left vacant by the big boys.

But before we go any further, a little secret: The vast majority of wetsuits are all made by the same Thailand-based company called Sheico. Each wetsuit maker will have their own peculiar design features, but for the most part, the same factory has likely pumped out any wetsuit you've ever worn. Maybe that matters to you and maybe it doesn't.

Lots of the biggest, most widely available brands, therefore, aren't offering anything you can't get from their competitors, they just put their own spin on it with slightly different designs. The smaller companies, like Feral, which uses high-quality Yamamoto neoprene that Sheico doesn't provide, actually can offer something different.

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And then, how about thickness? This is actually the easiest part. Do you surf, or plan to surf in California? A 4/3 mm suit (this typically means the body is 4mm thick while the arms and legs are 3mm) will work just fine for the cold months for everywhere south of Humboldt all the way down to Baja. I prefer suits with hoods attached for the really cold days. If you're on the East Coast and surfing north of the Carolinas, a 5/4 mm or even maybe a 6/5 mm will be necessary for the brutal days of winter. Great Lakes? 6/5, no question.

Trying a wetsuit on is kind of a pain in the butt, but any experienced surfer working at a surf shop can tell you instantly what size you should be from taking one glance your way. Backzip wetsuits are much easier to put on and take off, chestzip suits offer more flexibility across the back and shoulders. Either will keep you just as warm, for the most part. A suit should not have any baggy sections at all when you're wearing it, but it should be comfortable too. If it fits close to the body and you can comfortably bend forward to touch your toes, or reach both hands above your head without resistance, it fits.

Like many expensive outdoor products, there's also a robust direct-to-consumer wetsuit industry clawing at its share of the market. Like with bikes, etc., this can mean a much better suit for the same price as the big boys. DTC companies typically sell their suits at about the same price point as big manufacturers, but without the middlemen of retail markups, the rubber quality is typically much higher.

So how to choose? Here are three hypothetical customers of different experience levels and willingness to throw cash around, with a wetsuit suggestion for each.

The Newbie

Are you new to surfing and aren't totally sure how often you'll be getting in the water? This is an easy one: go cheap. If you wear a suit only occasionally, you're more likely to let it dry improperly, trapping water and salt in the seams and leaving it there for weeks on end where it will erode the neoprene. Plus, every surfer is different. Some surfers require extra-thick suits to remain as warm and cozy as possible to perform at a decently high level; others prefer a thinner, more flexible suit and don't mind a slight chill. You won't know which type you are until you spend a lot of time in the water. Even the finest wetsuits don't last more than a couple years at best, so there's no reason to buy a fancy, expensive suit until you know what you actually need. You'll be buying a new one in a couple winters anyway. Plenty of decent suits can be had for around \$200-300.

Suggestion: Men: Vissla 7 Seas Back Zip 3/2mm \$220; Women: Roxy 4/3mm Syncro Plus \$220

A basic, backzip or chest zip wetsuit (higher-end suits will almost always have the zipper across the chest for added back flexibility) with glued and sealed seams, both of these budget offerings are perfectly fine for a season or two of getting your feet wet. And at about \$200, they're a huge bargain.



Photo: Jeremy Bishop

The Every Day Surfer

If you've been surfing for a few years, you know what you like, and are ready to splurge a little bit, there are plenty of options for you to get a little spend-crazy. Or a lot crazy. Once you bump up to the \$400-500 range of wetsuit, you're awash in features. This can include a variety of liners attached to the inside of the neoprene meant to either generate excess body heat or more effectively trap it. Fancy seam-taping that promises to keep water out and heat in, while allowing for supreme stretch. Quick-drying fibers that mean second sessions don't have to take place in a sopping wet suit. For the most part, most wetsuits in this price range, especially the ones made by reputable companies, will work very well. The Xcel Drylock series is

probably the top of the heap. I've worn wetsuits from every possible manufacturer in 25 years of surfing, and Xcels have always been the warmest, most performance-oriented, and the longest-lasting of the mainstream brands.

There are other interesting options in this segment however. Patagonia, for example, is now making its suits neoprene-free, from a rubber source derived from sustainably harvested plants. The suits typically aren't as flexible as competitors and can be a little more fragile, but the materials as you'd expect from Patagonia feel terrific against the skin, and if eco-friendliness is a significant concern, they're basically the only game in town.

Suggestion: Men: Xcel Drylock, 4/3 mm, \$500ish

Take it from me, a guy who's spent upwards of ... [checks old receipts] ... wow, probably \$5,000 on wetsuits over the years, the Drylock is the granddaddy of high-end, surfing through the coldpocalypse while still shredding, performance.

Women: O'Neill Psycho One 4/3mm \$400

It's hard to find women's Xcel Drylocks these days, but the O'Neill Psycho series works just as well. O'Neill is one of the two oldest wetsuit makers in the biz, for a very good reason. This is a top of the line suit for year-round use.



Photo: Bishop

The Every Day Surfer Who Wants the Best

Finally, for the long-time hardcore surfer who's grown bored of the same old same old from wetsuit makers—it's time to try out the little guys. After two decades-plus of Xcel, O'Neill, and Rip Curl, I finally took the plunge on a smaller company a year or two ago and have been wearing FERAL wetsuits ever since. I learned pretty quickly that I didn't actually need all the complicated additions to the modern high-end wetsuit. Good rubber in a good fit at a good price is about all I care about. Lots of these little companies are still surfer owned and operated, often by surfers every bit as hardcore as their customers. Something that's always been attractive to me.

Suggestion: Men and women: FERAL, 4/3 mm, \$395

Made with very high-quality Yamamoto neoprene, the difference between a suit like a FERAL and the above Xcel is night and day. The FERAL is lighter, simpler, fits better, and is far more durable. The superior neoprene quality leaps out at you instantly. Because of the great rubber, the suits don't need the heat-retaining liners of their more expensive brethren. They aren't the only brand out there using Yamamoto but their prices are often the best and the quality is great.

Photo: Jeremy Koreski

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