

'I hate uncomfortable clothes. But they can be impeccable, clean, classic (and also comfortable). **You don't have to be sloppy to be comfortable**' – the Chanel designer Karl Lagerfeld



'My style has evolved so much in the past few years. I started more tomboyish, but **now I am more comfortable being girly and wearing colour**. I am comfortable in my own skin and with who I am' – Avril Lavigne



Modish, modern, modest

Contrary to uninformed opinion, the hijab need not be a shapeless, smothering garment. **Priti Salian** hears from bloggers putting the hijab on the fashion map



Clockwise from above, the hijabi bloggers Asma P, Zareen Shah and Jana Kossaibati. Courtesy haute muslimah.com; Samreen Shah; Zahra Kadam



They're passionate. They're modern. They're fashionistas. They're real Muslim women who wear the hijab. Forever challenging themselves creatively to blend their faith with fashion, these hijabistas are out to prove that most style trends can be worked into a modest look. Meet the growing breed of hijabi fashion bloggers who are creating a stir in the fashion blogosphere despite the Herculean challenges. They tell you what it takes to be talk-

Getting creative for the sake of the hijab

"Putting on the hijab is a lifestyle change," says Zareen Shah, a 31-year-old hijabi fashion blogger from Dubai. She began publishing fashion advice on her blog,

ing "covered fashion" in a bare-it-all age and how they've been able to hold their own and create a tiny but growing niche for themselves.

Wearing the hijab doesn't necessarily mean compromising your sense of fashion, style or independence

Zareen Shah blogger

thehijaab.com, in 2011. "It can affect your friendships, career and the way people view you. Through my blog, I try to break the barriers of stereotype usually associated with women who wear the hijab."

Angela O'Brien, who comes from Perth, Australia, and blogs at www.misshijabi.com, had no idea how she could incorporate her style into her new way of dressing when she converted to Islam in 2007. "Blogging became an exercise of sorts, to

find my own way and share my idea of style with other Muslim women," says the 28-year-old, who boasts 12,000 Facebook followers. Miss Hijabi became the first Australian hijab blog and one of the very few dedicated to abayas.

Hijabistas, who?

The biggest challenge for these online style experts seems to be gaining acceptance by the mainstream fashion fraternity as trendy and fashion-forward.

The blogger known only as Asma P, who is in her twenties and based in Texas, posts her style tips at Haute Muslimah (hautemuslimah.com). It is one of the most popular hijab blogs in the US, with almost 150,000 monthly hits. "It's hard to be taken seriously at fashion conferences or events," she says. "People try to figure out where I belong and although most are either kind or respectful, some are outright rude."

The challenges extend all the way to Dubai, where hijabis are not always a welcome part of the fashion scene. "When I attend events, photographers are more likely to click pictures of the fashionista beside me in a skirt or black leggings," says Shah.

Modernity and modesty are not fashion antonyms

Whoever thinks modernity and western styles cannot blend with Muslim dressing ought to read hijab blogs. They offer innumerable combinations of modest wear, proving that hijabi dressing does not translate to shabby dressing. Maxi skirts, harem pants, scarves and jackets are just a few western trends that can become style staples for a modest dresser.

"Maxi skirts can be worn with a fitted top and a loose cardigan on top, spiced up with a colourful belt, ballet pumps and a bright hijab," Shah says. Asma, who takes fashion tips from her American and Pakistani background, teams such skirts with long-sleeved peplum tops.

"Pairing a blazer with a maxi dress or wearing long tunics over trousers are also a popular look," says the 23-year-old London-based Lebanese blogger Jana Kossaibati. She publishes her online style journal at www.hijabstyle.co.uk.

Inspiration comes from the streets and catwalks alike

"I am inspired by the everyday Muslim woman on the street," Kossaibati says.

O'Brien takes inspiration from old photographs, historical fashion from bygone eras and cultural dresses from other ethnicities.

However, Shah has learnt a lot about fashion from her Pakistani heritage and travels. "I love ventur-

ing into street markets like Portobello in London, SoHo in New York City and the market stalls of Greenhills in Manila," says the blogger, who has Filipino and Pakistani heritage. She also takes tips from "Korean and Japanese fashion, where the women layer on their clothes in a way that makes them look effortlessly cool, yet respectable". The American fashion designers Rachel Zoe, Nicole Richie and the Olsen twins are her style inspirations.

Faith and fashion are not mutually exclusive

"Wearing the hijab doesn't necessarily mean compromising your sense of fashion, style or even independence," says Shah. "You can have it all and still maintain the values and principles of your faith."

She's replaced her skinny jeans with maxi skirts and harem pants to get a hip but modest look.

Kossaibati looks for garments with long sleeves, high necklines and opaque fabrics. "I take from fashion what suits me and my beliefs," she says.

For O'Brien, the challenge is "in finding that balance of covering enough for my religion, but also dressing in a way that still allows me to be me". She loves to wear a simple black abaya and create an outfit around it by matching it with bright colours and chic western fun accessories, jewellery and bags.

A passion that has made a difference

Healthy followings and a resulting positive influence on their readers and community has kept these fashion advisers motivated. O'Brien feels she has made abayas more appealing to non-abaya wearers. "Some people tend to see them as giant unattractive black tents of fabric, so it's nice to show them off in a stylish, feminine way."

Asma P's independence has inspired her readers to work for themselves, follow their dreams, run their own blog or website and even start their own company.

Shah and Kossaibati have been able to give the hijab a wider reach. "My blog has helped people gain a better understanding of what it's really like to wear the hijab on a day-to-day basis," Kossaibati says.

"I've had readers who've finally found the resolve and strength to put on the hijab," declares Shah with pride.

Packed with fashion tips and a lot of comfort and inspiration, the hijab blogs have not only become go-to style portals, but also a voice for Muslim women around the world. One has to wonder: is the fashion fraternity listening?

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Some hijab styling tips from the experts:

O'Brien

Experiment with your hijab to get the right shape that will flatter the shape of your face. Miss Hijabi has a tutorial that will help.

Asma

A pretty hijab style doesn't always have to mean 15 pins, voluminous scrunchies and a headache. My favourite style is a simple wrap-around with a statement pin.



Courtesy Zareen Shah

Zareen Shah

Try a jersey hijab. It's easy to put on and more comfortable than pashminas that can feel quite heavy over longer periods. Accessorise right with bracelets and rings. I love using a vintage / brightly coloured handbag with my outfit to add a "pop" to my overall appearance. Do not match your hijab to your outfit. A contrasting hijab can give your appearance a "wow" factor.

★ Priti Salian