

A modest proposal

By Shari Shallard

Rarely can a piece of sportswear be credited with changing lives, but the burqini comes close: this practical and stylish alternative to traditional swimsuits has made beaches, pools, parks, and any other combination of water and sun more accessible to religious Muslim women (and to others wishing to cover up for a variety of reasons). The irresistibly named burqini (formed by combining the words 'burqa' and 'bikini') is actually the patented name of the line created by Ahiida founder Aheda Zanetti, though comparable full coverage swimwear is offered by other online stores such as My Cozzie, Veilkini, and Splashgear. As evidenced by the growing list of designers, the burqini's popularity seems on the rise as the appearance of fully-clad swimmers (and, in New Zealand and Australia, fully-clad life guards) becomes more common.

Introducing the burqini

Ms Zanetti describes the burqini as resembling a full length wetsuit with an attached hood, though it is looser and made of polyester instead of rubber. The garment covers the entire body except the face, hands and the feet (adhering to Muslim modesty guidelines), and is light enough for comfortable swimming. Technically speaking, Ahiida's burqinis have UV protection of 50+, low water absorbency, and are chlorine resistant, water repellent and quick drying—factors that combine to offer an immeasurable improvement over wading into the water in traditional day clothes, and emerging with soaking, heavy wet layers that could take all day to dry.

Visually, suits can be so vibrant and playful that the staid connotations of full coverage swimwear instantly evaporate.

Burqinis like this Slim Fit two-piece (with a reef design) by Ahiida have enabled a new generation of women to enjoy the beach in style without sacrificing modesty.

 Ahiida





Sold as separates, this Splashgear ensemble includes an island shirt, resort Pants, and a swim hood.

 Splashgear LLC

Blues, pinks, purples, and greens intermingle stylishly, with a chic graphic (such as flowers, broad strokes of colour, Arabian dots or a New Zealand fern leaf) on the front of most tops. Sizes and styles accommodate different ages and body types, ranging from Slim Fit's snuggler top and straight pants to Modest Fit's baggier top and boot-cut bottoms, along with a selection for plus sizes and girls.

If necessity is the mother of most inventions, modesty was the impetus for this one. Ms Zanetti cites her own experience growing up in Australia as the inspiration for the burqini: noticing that Islamic girls and women who followed strict dress codes were missing out on sporting opportunities, she felt compelled to act. "It wasn't just about planning to launch a range," she says. "It was more [a question of] 'when will I have the courage to introduce a design that was going to change the image of Muslim women?'" A former hairdresser, this mother of four (her most important job, she points out) had been sewing since the age of ten, and ultimately decided it was time to revolutionise swimwear.

"The design was based around me," she says. "It was based around what I needed and how I would like to feel and look." Consequently, the Ahiida designs embody these pillars: freedom (to participate in any sporting activity and to stay active), ease (in getting the garment on and off, and in washing and drying), comfort (from the fabric used to the degree of coverage), and confidence (so that any woman can compete and participate without compromising cultural or religious convictions). The fact that others embraced Ms Zanetti's design was a surprising bonus; she was "shocked that the people around the world appreciated and viewed it like I did".

And its California counterpart

As the burqini was emerging in Australia, a similar story was unfolding in California. When it struck scuba diver Shereen Sabet that other Muslim women should be able to enjoy the modest coverage afforded by her scuba outfit, the idea for Splashgear took root. Ms Sabet began researching full-coverage swimwear that was in accordance with Islamic dress code, safe for unhindered movement in the water, fashionable and affordable.

"One of my main goals was to be sure that Muslim women—who are already very conspicuous and stand out in a non-Muslim crowd—did not feel uncomfortable wearing full coverage swimwear in public, which was practically unheard of ten years ago," Ms Sabet says. "I was very sensitive to the issue of creating more negative attention if the swimwear was perceived as very foreign or strange-looking. So, from the beginning, one of the criteria was to provide swimwear that would help Muslim women to assimilate more easily in a predominantly non-Muslim environment."

The Splashgear line is based largely on surfwear, which Ms Sabet—a resident of "Surf City, USA" (Huntington Beach)—says was a natural move. "I was already familiar with clothing that both surfers and scuba divers wear and all I had to do was to make slight modifications." Pieces are sold as separates: shirts of varying length and fit, three styles of swim pants (including one with a skirt attached), and swim hoods and caps are sold separately. The mix and match approach serves customers well, Ms Sabet explains: "Some Muslim women are quite conservative and will purchase the La Femme skirted swim bottoms, because they don't believe in wearing pants in a mixed

gathering, while other Muslim women do not cover their hair and would not use the swim hood or cap."

It is worth noting that the sporting industry is ripe for substantial development in the area of religiously-compliant sporting apparel. Most people watching the 2008 Beijing Olympics noticed that Ruqaya Al Ghasara, the winner of the women's 200 metre sprint, was wearing a hijood as she powered through the finish line. Because the Ahiida logo was not allowed, few spectators realised that Ms Zanetti designed the technically sophisticated hijood (a hijab combined with a sports hood), though Ms Ghasara spoke glowingly of the hijood to the media. That same year, the World Taekwondo Federation allowed women to wear hijabs during the Olympics, and a more recent ruling determined that the same applied to the World Taekwondo Championships. (However, Hijabs may not be visible at this year's Winter Olympics in Vancouver. As Alpine skier Marjan Kalhor, the first Iranian woman to compete in the Winter Games, points out: skiing is a sport that requires everyone to be fully covered.)

More than a dress code

And yet, it is not only Muslim women who are catching this new wave of swimwear, as evidenced by the proliferation of burqinis and other full coverage options—and the language and marketing that surrounds them. In fact, MyCozzie's website doesn't explicitly mention the Muslim faith, but refers more generally to consumers' desire for modesty and comfort. "The MyCozzie range of swimwear is inspired by Dubai, where cultures meet and flourish," the brand claims. "The marriage of traditional values with high fashion has created swimwear that respects your wish for modesty and comfort but gives you the freedom to be fit and active and have fun in the sun ... [while giving] optimum protection from the harmful effects of the sun's rays."


Illustrating that emphasis on general modesty over religious adherence, more than half of My Cozzie's range features hoodless ('hoodies' are sold separately) ensembles comprising semi-fitting long tops with three-quarter length sleeves (which end just past the elbow) and three-quarter length pants (which stop just past the knee). Though decidedly more conservative than a traditional swimsuit, these reveal more skin than the burqinis—appealing to women who seek the extra coverage but not to the extent offered by burqini-style garments. Ahiida too carries a small line of three-quarter length suits called "Sun-Safe"—its name as descriptive as the 'burqini' in conveying its respective purpose.

Indeed these brands are wise to reach out to the gamut of modestly-inclined swimmers.

Splashgear's Ms Sabet says that although the majority of her customers are Muslim women, she has observed an increasing number of orders coming from Orthodox Jews, conservative Christians, plus-sized women, women who are very sun sensitive or have a history of skin cancer, women who simply prefer to dress modestly, and women who have physical abnormalities that they wish to cover up. "Overall sales have also increased annually," she says, "which indicates to me that the word is getting around and more people—both Muslims and non-Muslims—are discovering the modest/full coverage swimwear market."



The island shirt (paired here with resort pants) is similar to a surfer's rash guard shirt, but looser around the chest for a more modest fit.

 Splashgear LLC

A controversial trend?

Ms. Sabet has been pleased with the response she's seen from what she calls the non-Muslim and non-religious segment of society; however, today's headlines reveal that global opinions are mixed on the very existence of such full-coverage swimwear. Although this new market marks a leap forward for women who have heretofore had to compromise comfort and appearance for a modestly-attired jaunt at the beach, much of the western world views the garments as a leap backwards from the bikinis, tankinis and even one-piece swimsuits that represent more typical beach attire.

Last summer, in the suburbs of Paris, a 35-year-old Muslim woman was asked to leave her local swimming pool because her apparel did not meet the pool's hygiene standards. The management was referring to rules against any baggy apparel (including loose surfer shorts), but many individuals and organisations have since complained that the unique nature of this woman's attire should have eluded this ban. Carole, as she was called by the media, was wearing the Georgie by MyCozzie (a blue and

black hooded, long sleeve, long pants suit).

Unsurprisingly, this news story launched thousands of blogs, tweets, editorials, and coffee shop conversations about whether or not Carole was treated fairly—along with questions about religious freedom, human rights, and other such issues that don't typically arise from swimming pool excursions. The heated topic has been further fuelled by subsequent related announcements: an Italian mayor has banned the burqini completely in his town, while some UK swimming pools have begun hosting Muslim swim sessions during which all swimmers—regardless of religion—must wear apparel that complies with Islamic custom.

Or more than a trend

It may seem glib to say, but in this case the saying is probably true: there is no such thing as bad publicity. Propelled by such stories and discussion points, the burqini has found a place in the global spotlight and may therefore more quickly find its place in ordinary swimming apparel—and perhaps even a place the 2012 Summer Olympics.

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