

THE ONLINE SWIMSUIT CHALLENGE

CONFESSION



L.L. BEAN

llbean.com

Subject: Sydney Stoyan
Age: 40-something
Body type: Curvy, especially hips and thighs

By SYDNEY STOYAN

It is a truth universally acknowledged that most women dread shopping for a bathing suit. The tiny change rooms, poor lighting and forced close-ups in cheap mirrors make for instant low self-esteem. For such a woman — a full-time mother of two little boys with scant time to troll the malls but ample opportunity to assess the state of her post-partum figure — online shopping is a godsend. That the Canadian dollar sits at a notable high also makes shopping at major American Web sites an attractive option.

A glance at the dizzying array of bathing suits at L.L.Bean — a purveyor of sporty apparel since 1912 — makes it clear that Lindsay Lohan is not the target demographic. There is nary a string bikini in sight. Instead, there are one-piece suits, tankinis and mix-and-match separates. The aesthetic is clean, crisp and rather conservative, but the sheer volume and variety of suits allows for a lot of choice. The price range is almost as broad: A basic tank can be had for US\$24.95, though anything more interesting, including the "Shape Solver" suits, runs from US\$60 to US\$100.

The main page of the Swimwear Guide is divided into "Shop by Shape/Shop by Style" options. I notice right away that the triangle icon denotes styles that minimize hips and waist. Bingo.

I have never been persuaded by the argument that high-cut bathing suits elongate the leg and hence flatter women who are curvy of thigh. Frankly, if your thighs are rippled with excess flesh or dimples, who wants to see more of them? Thus I am immediately taken by the "Island Print Skirtini," which is charmingly feminine. It's a clever two-piece that overlaps to create the longer look of a tank, but with a skirted bottom that will cover the tops of my legs. The promotional text is encouraging, too: The "fresh woodblock print helps conceal flaws" — good, good — and the Empire waistband "draws attention away from the hips." The price is a bonus: regular US\$79.95, on sale for US\$34.95. With duties, tax and shipping, the total is US\$51.04.

Only the colour choices give me pause. Where is black? Denied my usual sartorial crutch, I am forced to be bold. The wild orchid is unavailable in my size, and I don't wear any shade of blue. This leaves only nectarine, an oddly pleasing dark orange-yellow. It seems a little risky: Will it complement my skin tone or look garish?

And while there is a detailed "How to Measure" sizing chart (and the option of chatting with a toll-free customer-service representative or the "Live Help" e-mail connection), I believe I'm between sizes, and decide at last on the larger of the two, though I am not convinced this is wise. However, I am reassured by L.L.Bean's courteous and comprehensive return policy, a "rock-solid guarantee of satisfaction," which will let me return anything, at any time, if I am unhappy with the product. So I fill out the required fields in my order form and await my purchase.

The suit arrives in about a week, as promised. I dim the lighting in my bedroom and stand in front of my most flattering mirror to assess the results.

And? Well, the colour is brighter than I had expected, and it's a visual adjustment for someone accustomed only to black. But it is undeniably fresh and pretty, and actually sexier than the online picture — that, or my cleavage is ampler than the online model's. While I could have chosen the smaller size, with this one I don't have to worry about extraneous flesh creeping over the edges. No dismal mall experience and room for an après-swim ice cream? Consider me sold.

Delivery time: Five to seven business days

Total cost: US\$51.04

Return policy: Full refund less shipping, for any reason

Opposite page: Fear of changing room mirrors becomes a thing of the past when bathing suits are ordered from Web sites that walk shoppers through their size, colour and style choices.

The Peninsula bandeau top and string bottom, in lilac, which Olivia Stren purchased (top) and the bathing suit that was remade to custom specs for Sarah Bancroft.

J. CREW

jcrew.com

Subject: Nathalie Atkinson
Age: 30-something
Body type: Extreme hourglass

By NATHALIE ATKINSON

I haven't tried on a bathing suit in a store in years. Rather, I swear by catalogue and online shopping. (Lately, Lands' End is my best friend.) I like conservative "swim skirts," which are bikini briefs built into a mini that modestly covers the tops of my thighs and temporarily makes me oblivious to my body issues. But since I still have time to honour Nora Ephron's exhortation for young women to wear bikinis and not take them off until they're 34, I'm looking for a *bona fide* bikini for the season and J.Crew is apparently the *ne plus ultra* for these.

The same lanky apple-cheeked WASPs from the pages of the J.Crew catalogue also populate its sunny online world, where the Swimfinder page proclaims, "It's so much more than the perfect swimsuit." Here's hoping.

In Shop By Body Type, I'm told to either "minimize" (choices include tummy, shoulders, torso, hips/thighs or bust) or "enhance" shoulders, torso, legs, bust. I want to do neither: I just want a bikini that will flatter my curves. But I play along and choose Minimize: Hips and Thighs. It immediately recommends "swim shorts" — hipster shorts with optional ruched sides. In my experience, boy-short-anything makes me look like I'm wearing a '50s girdle. No way.

The Minimize: Bust option offers almost a dozen plunging maillot styles, very Esther Williams. There are two versions: regular and slimming, and the latter comes only in drab colours: dark teal, navy, brown and black — none of the fresh, kicky flamingo pink or sunshine yellows of the original. Is J.Crew subtly suggesting that curvier gals should blend into the background? I give up specialty-size shopping with a harrumph.

A low-slung hipster bikini skirt (\$38) in preppy fresh pine (a.k.a. Kelly green) looks perfect: It's super-short and offers little coverage beyond the brief. (And that's almost a bikini, right, Nora?) The size chart and conversion table specifically for swimwear pops up, and while I'm dubious of the vague and reductive S-M-L sizing on most of J.Crew's mix-and-match pieces, I dutifully measure myself and crunch the numbers. Now I just need a top.

There are 18 bikini-top variations, all padded. The typical J.Crew novelty patterns, such as thin rugby stripes, seersucker, madras, paisley and leopard print, seem to be available only in smaller sizes or non-supporting styles, for A- and B-cup gals. That leaves me with the Solid Wide Band Halter (\$36), though every colour except chocolate is on back-order well into July (summer will practically be over!) and a Solid Underwire Top that looks like a cheap brassiere. So I order the halter in brown (to be exchanged for green later if it fits), along with a matching slimming bikini brief (\$40) and, what the hell, a slimming tank. I even kick in the extra \$17 for super-speedy delivery to Canada.

Three days later, UPS delivers the suit — and a demand for \$27.55 more, payable by cheque on the spot for additional "import charges" (brokerage, GST and PST), in addition to the mysterious US\$29.62 I've already paid in "taxes" by credit card in my original order. Am I paying the same taxes twice? It gets worse. Despite my meticulous measuring, the basic proportions of the halter top are off and it's too big in all the wrong places, and the tank suit makes my slender waist look thick: the opposite of its intended effect.

If J.Crew doesn't know how to adjust its skinny-girl-next-door fit to accommodate bosoms and hips, why did it bother with all that "Special Size" stuff? The only items that fit properly are the cute green bikini swim skirt and the no-brainer brief. But unless I want to go topless, I have to wait another month until the matching halter is back in stock to wear either.

If I had known ordering a J.Crew bikini would make me as grouchy as bikini-shopping at the mall, I would simply have gone to the mall in the first place.

Delivery time: Three days

Total cost: \$219.87, plus \$27.55 in additional taxes, plus return postage and new shipping charges on items being exchanged

Return policy: Full refund on unworn items within 60 days of original purchase

Weekend Post