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Why Rich Men in Palm Beach Love These Loud Pants

It's high season in the glitzy Florida town. For some bold dressers, that means awfully bright trousers, worn with a wink.

By **Holly Peterson** [Follow](#)

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Tom Shaffer, a former ad man, in his colorful pants. DAVID VICTORY

I know. You wouldn't wear melon-colored pants with white tortoises printed on them

if I offered you a free Rolex. You're not that man, never will be. The only guys who'd wear a bright pant are those preppy country club tools we all love to hate.

But let's say a man rolls into a cocktail gallery opening in Palm Beach, Fla., in said melon pants. He's paired the ripe cantaloupe hue with a white linen shirt, a rumpled green safari jacket and light-brown driving shoes. He's grabbed a cold Peroni and, impossibly, there's something cool about him.

Why? Because cool means you don't take yourself seriously, that you're deep in on something others want in on. Hell, it's high season in Palm Beach and every party is a swirling cocktail of colored outfits that match the drinks.

Deftly styling a loud pant says that you don't need a remedial lesson in the ridiculous life here. The updated versions of these whimsical trousers—around \$220 each and seen on many game men in this resort town—read fun and festive. Worn in the right way, they telegraph a welcome and healthy sense of humor in our short time off the grind.

“Look, you're not wearing these pants on an airplane for God's sake. They're to be used judiciously,” said my pal, attorney Tim McVay. He's that guy with long silver locks, rocking Page & Smith custom-made sunglasses and driving a vintage Mercedes. McVay coordinates colorful pants better than anyone I've seen in years of Palm Beach winters, often pairing them with a neutral shirt and Tyrolean jacket. “If you wear the same ones more than once, you'd better style them differently every time,” he said.



Tim McVay, an attorney, in J. McLaughlin pants. HYON SMITH

For the 1950s Ivy League set, colorful pants conferred insider status to folks for whom everything came easy (one would sweat on a grass tennis court, never at work). Tom Wolfe called them “go-to-hell” pants. In the ’50s, embroidery machinery improved, so those clever, industrious preppies plastered frogs, lobsters and bees on bright trousers, often called “critter pants.”

In 1959, Lilly Pulitzer created outlandishly over the top fabrics personifying the flamboyance of her Palm Beach hometown, where a stitch of black in winter is a bigger no-no than putting your elbows on Aunt Fifi’s dinner table. Pulitzer started with dresses, then added a men’s line. Her pants (and other items) endure in colorways

with names you cannot make up, such as Rutabaga El Morocco and Capri Blue Galloping Gals. “They are meant to [let you] express yourself,” said Craig Reynolds, senior vice president of merchandising of Lilly Pulitzer.



A recent campaign photo for Lilly Pulitzer. GABOR JURINA/LILLY PULITZER

The Protestant WASP ruling establishment that created this cornball look is now, well, last century’s news. A new urban crowd has taken over these resort communities. High prep is now worn with a wink. Men’s pants made using home fabric toiles and chinoiseries, and printed with images of, say, monkeys and palms, were initially launched by Steven Stolman’s eponymous, swanky brand in the mid-’90s. J.McLaughlin is the current leader of this look.

“Today these pants are a conversation starter,” said Jack Lynch, vice president of retail marketing at J.McLaughlin, which has collaborated with Stolman on women’s designs. “You know, they’re kind of loud, it’s almost like a fraternal handshake,” he added.



J.McLaughlin Madison Fancy Pants in Vibrant Palms, \$228 J.MCLAUGHLIN

First-timers could start by pairing J.McLaughlin's tan-and-white desert toile Madison pants with a white shirt. Sure, you've got more design on than you're used to, but you're still 100% khaki-and-white. Those more daring could tone down yellow pants with a white shirt and dark jacket—or pair a retina-burning pink pant with a tan linen jacket. The main rule to pulling off colorful pants? Make sure the rest of your outfit reads classic as they come.

We save the shoes for last because they're the hardest to nail. Many men, young and old, swear by the needlepoint or velvet Stubbs and Wootton slippers accented with, say, martini motifs. However, if you're asking, this woman respectfully advises you skip those if you want to have the evening go from vertical to horizontal.

Tom Shaffer, a tall and commanding former ad man and current high-end man about town, dons a blazer six nights a week in Palm Beach, and has strong opinions on shoes. Asked if Adidas Stan Smith sneakers would fly with colorful pants, he said, “I just don’t see that. Too casual.”



J.McLaughlin's Jack Lynch (far left), and colorful-pants fan Tom Shaffer (far right). TOM SHAFFER

Those Zegna Triple Stitch slip-on sneakers everyone from my blind date to my dentist now wears? “Nope, too urban.” If not a “Stubbs”, he said, he would go for Tod’s Gommino suede loafers, a plain navy suede loafer or a caramel Gucci Horsebit 1953 loafer.

What about socks? Shaffer is shocked, shocked at the question. “My God, socks are worse than black—never ever put on a sock in this town!”

Holly Peterson, a journalist based in New York City, writes the Earn Your Luck column for WSJ. Magazine and contributes lifestyle reporting and topical essays to The Wall Street Journal. Previously, she worked as a contributing editor for Newsweek, an editor-at-large for Talk magazine and as an Emmy Award-winning producer a...

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