

Coats, Coats, Coats, and then Peacoats.



The feel of a proper-fitting [peacoat](#), firm against the back and chest, is unlike anything else. Unchanged for 200 years and more, the basic Navy peacoat has everything a person wants in clothing: esthetics, function, and durability.

The term “peacoat” has been used for almost 300 years. As the Oxford English Dictionary entry for “pea-coat” explains, “pea” has nothing to do with vegetables. The term is derived from a Dutch word “pije,” used to describe a coat of coarse woolen fabric as long ago as the 16th century. Back then, of course, the Dutch ruled such of the naval world and so “peacoat” quickly became a standard term. (Another example is cotton “duck” pants, derived from similar sounding Dutch word (“duk”) for the cotton canvas used in sails, uniforms, and other nautical garb.) In short, “peacoat” has been used for centuries to describe a double-breasted, blue wool coat worn by [working sailors](#).

Originally designed for “reefers,” sailors who climbed up the riggings of sailing ships, the classic peacoat is close fitting, has a slightly indented waist, and flairs out slightly around the hips (it was used climbing up ropes, after all). That’s also why some people, mostly Brits, still called it a “reefer coat.” As structured, the peacoat hits a nice middle. It’s longer than a jacket, and thus covers the backside, but it’s also short enough to climb and move about in.

The esthetics of this design — narrow at the waist and slightly flared at the hips — also make the peacoat equally (if not more) appealing as a coat for women, and I suspect more women wear them than men. Perched on the shoulders of a tall, thin man, the broad shoulders and slim waist of the peacoat mimics the broad shoulder and thin waist silhouette used on traditional military uniforms. Plus, a peacoat has another feature often missed when designing winter coats: a double-breasted coat, with its two overlapping layers, is warmer and also blocks heat loss from the wind, a common problem today with modern, single-breasted zipper coats.

The peacoat inspired other classic coats as well. The peacoat started as a coat for working sailors. A similar but longer coat, called a “[bridge coat](#),” is worn by Naval officers. The bridge coat is suited for standing on the open bridge of a ship. As a coat for officers, the bridge coat has a double set of brass buttons down the front, a half-belt in the back, and epaulets (by military custom, officer rank is shown on the shoulders and lesser rank on the sleeves). In various forms, a blue coat, once supplied with brass buttons, became a standard part of the nautical wardrobe, as well as the model for the [double-breasted navy blazer](#) still used today.

A classic feature of the peacoat is the distinctive, oversized collar. This gives the coat a slightly dressy esthetic, but there’s a wonderful practical advantage behind the design, described in the Navy regulations as a “convertible” collar. The collar on the peacoat was designed, and designed well, to serve sailors exposed to the inevitable cold and open winds at sea. The collar can be worn up, almost as a half hood, without impairing vision (hoods are rarely used in naval dress for this reason). Plus, it can be closed up or left open to regulate heat. Once popped up, the collar frames the face, and — in a properly constructed coat — feels like a gentle hand against the back of the neck (another place of otherwise of prominent heat loss).

Wool is all you ever need, too. The melton wool of the peacoat is heavy, tight, and durable, keeping out cold, wind, and, if needed, even some rain. The peacoat is just wool, thread, and buttons. No fancy nylon, Gortex, Velcro, or even zippers. Just six main outside “fouled anchor” buttons (current Navy regulations require six, while some earlier versions required eight), plus one more button high for closing the collar around the neck, and one button inside on the left to secure the double-breasted front. As a practical matter, fastening just one button closes the coat, and many wearers routinely leave the top or bottom button open, just for esthetics and ease of movement.

The peacoat buttons have a special history, too. Official-issue peacoats all have large, thick plastic buttons. Imprinted on the front is a “[fouled anchor](#)” design — an anchor

swaddled in rope. The design goes back over 400 years. It started out as the personal seal of [Lord Howard of Effingham](#), the Lord High Admiral of England when the British defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588. Following the victory, the design was then adopted as the official seal of the [Lord High Admiral of Great Britain](#). From there, it went to naval insignias throughout the world. A real peacoat never has anything else.

Finally, a peacoat is the only coat designed with pockets for cold hands. No other coat is really made for this, something we all do most of the time outside in winter. Even better, the right outside pocket has a small change pocket sewn in (remember, the famous Navy pants — the ones with the 13 buttons — did not have pockets). The Navy model also has two inside pockets, one that can be used for a wallet or car keys, and another lower and slightly smaller pocket (used at one point for storing cigarettes) that happens to be exactly the right size for a cell phone.

In the end, the peacoat is a classic for a reason. Practical function combines with wonderful esthetics. The peacoat has a simple, classic cut, and can be anything from casual to slightly dressy. A peacoat keeps a man warm in all kinds of weather — at sea or otherwise. It wears well, holds up to abuse, and is one of the least fussy coats ever made. Most important, the peacoat makes a man look good. The broad shoulders, thin waist, wide collar, and double-breasted front quietly make a man look slightly bigger, stronger, and taller than he really is. Plus, once the collar is popped, it frames the face and draws the eyes of others to the face, exactly the aim of most male fashion, from ties to tuxedos.

For now, if you want the real thing — what all those men and women in the US Navy wear — you can buy them from [Sterlingwear of Boston](#), the main [contractor](#) for Navy peacoats today. With only a tiny change (e.g., a full satin lining rather than partial), Sterlingwear sells to the public the same peacoat they make for the navy. The Sterlingwear “[Navigator](#)” model (100% wool) is the coat and the only choice for the purest. Sterlingwear offers it, too, in a [full range of sizes](#). As a final bonus, the real thing from Sterlingwear costs less than most of the imitations. Here, the original is cheaper than the knock-off. If you want to study up, [vintage coats](#) are another option. With some patience, you can often find good ones on ebay.

It is, flat-out, the best constructed coat I’ve ever owned.

dhg

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