

KRUISSING

with **KURT**
ULMER

Catching up with KRU's ski wear designer in Maui and St. Moritz.

by HILARY NANGLE

Alpine fashion icon Kurt Ulmer isn't an easy man to pin down. Maui. St. Moritz. Asia. New York. The intrepid 50-year veteran of the ski wear industry, Swiss boutique proprietor, and founder of the ski brand Jet Set, is perpetually out in front, leading rather than following.

Ulmer's latest brand, KRU — an acronym for Kurt Rob Ulmer — is case in point. More than only ski jackets and pants, the KRU label cuts across defined categories, blurring traditional lines between ski wear and ready-to-wear. KRU's down jackets, for example, look just as chic draped over an evening gown by night as they do on the slopes by day.

"We try to be avant-garde," says Ulmer. "You can wear KRU everywhere. Justin Bieber wore one on stage."



clockwise from left

1. Outside Ulmer's boutique, JOY St. Moritz.
2. JOY St. Moritz interior.
3. Montana Ulmer modeling her father's new collection.

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Kurt Ulmer has always been ahead of the fashion curve. Born in Zurich and reared in Davos, he eventually settled in St. Moritz, where he still owns a boutique and continues skiing fast on Corviglia's groomed cruising terrain. After a brief stint as a banker, and a marginal career in ski racing, he began attending ski fashion shows, quickly finding his niche.

"I was always interested in fashion, and I was always one to dress differently," he admits of his young adult life in the 1960s. "I was one of the first to wear the tight pants from France!"

Friends admired his style and wanted the same, so in 1969 Ulmer opened a ski and ready-to-wear boutique called Jet Set on the outskirts of St. Moritz, importing clothing from France. A few years later he created an edgy ski wear brand of his own, also called Jet Set. It featured bright colors and innovative patterns that, at that time, were rare in ski jackets and pants.

"It was a gift I had," he says of his vanguard approach to design. "I was having fun."

Ulmer not only loved working for himself, he also possessed the rare combination of creative flair and business acumen. Jet Set's success allowed him to continue working and skiing in St. Moritz, but also to purchase an oceanfront estate on Maui for his other passion, windsurfing. That in turn informed his design, first with Jet Set (which he sold in 2008), and now with KRU.

Although Ulmer has since sold his Maui estate, some of his designs still reference Hawaiian prints. He finds inspiration in a mix of styles, from high-end fashion to functional army clothing, kids' street wear, surf wear, and breezy summer clothing. He'll see a picture or a piece of art that sparks inspiration, then design his own prints. "I get ideas from pictures, and I'll say, *Let's go in this direction; make me a print like this, and this, and this,*" he explains. "I mix it all together."

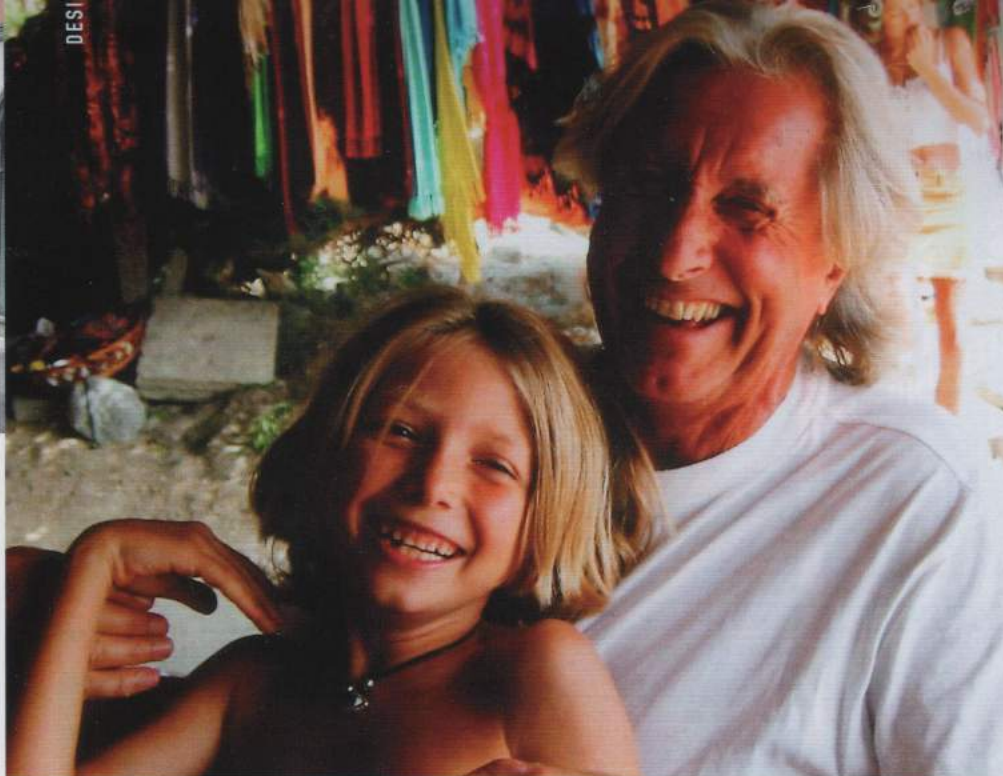
KRU's beauty isn't only skin deep. After selecting a fabric



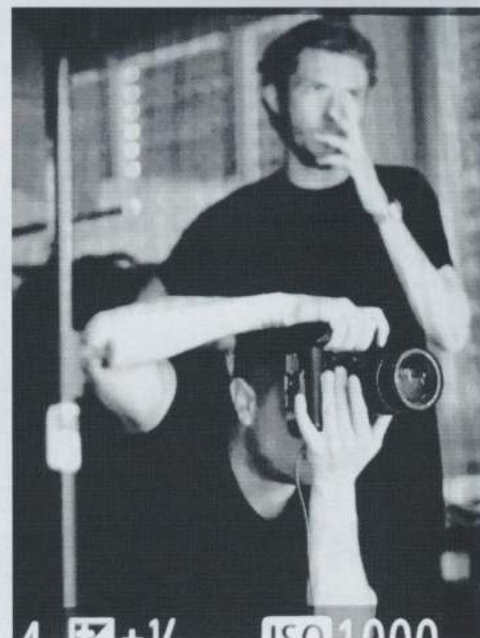
sample, Ulmer works with the manufacturer on technical specifications; it must be waterproof, breathable, and include a specific coating.

"People don't want to spend so much for just a ski jacket," he says. "They want it to be multiuse couture." As a result, Ulmer insists KRU's garments are always functional. They're made with technical fabrics that are waterproof and breathable — you can wear them in wind, cold, sun, and rain. They're also stylish.





The 2018 line is fun, with forward-thinking designs that avoid being trendy.



clockwise from top left

1. Ryder and Kurt Ulmer.
2. Shooting the collection.
3. Modeling a jacket from KRU's 2017-18 collection.



"This year we did garment-dyed pieces," Ulmer explains, "you finish a garment, a certain fabric like it is, and then you dye it. The process results in a crinkle look. It's very vintage but not stiff; a garment has to have *life in it*."

The 2018 line is fun, with forward-thinking designs that avoid being trendy. KRU's big and invitingly comfortable down jackets feature high-tech must-haves for skiing, but they don't resemble traditional ski wear. Trimmed with fur — rabbit, coyote, fox, raccoon, or sheep — Ulmer plays with unexpected juxtapositions of color and pattern: fiery camouflages; tie-dyes that mix silvers and whites; Jackson Pollock-like *mélanges* of greens and bright pinks. A band of color here and a stripe there transforms monotone jackets into memorable fashion statements.

While the KRU collection appears this season in some of the world's most exclusive ski shops, it's also carried by retailers such as Barneys New York and similar upmarket boutiques in Japan and Europe.

KRU is a family affair. Ulmer's wife, Juli, buys for JOY, the family's current store in St. Moritz. "She has really good fashion sense, and

she has input into the collection."

Their daughter, Montana, models for KRU's catalogues and helps with sales and other tasks. But it's their son, Ryder, who's following in his father's tracks. At 24, he's already involved in all aspects of KRU except production and finance, and he's making a difference. Kurt credits Ryder's marketing skills with growing KRU in new markets. "He brought in a new agent for Japan, one for Europe, and he's working with agents in the U.S. and Canada."

Increasingly, Ryder is backing up his father in KRU's creative department. "He's really good with fashion for younger clients," Kurt says. "He's now interested in design as well as graphics. I'm still the owner, and I have the experience, but together we're doing a nice product that's different on the market."

That "nice" product not only continues Ulmer's vision and his desire "always to be unique," but also takes it to the next level, moving beyond ski wear into fashion and assuring a legacy as a designer with an eye for *avant-garde*. **S**

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