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8 MINUTE READ

MR PORTER's Ultimate Guide To Men's Shorts

Words by Mr Chris Elvidge

19 July 2020

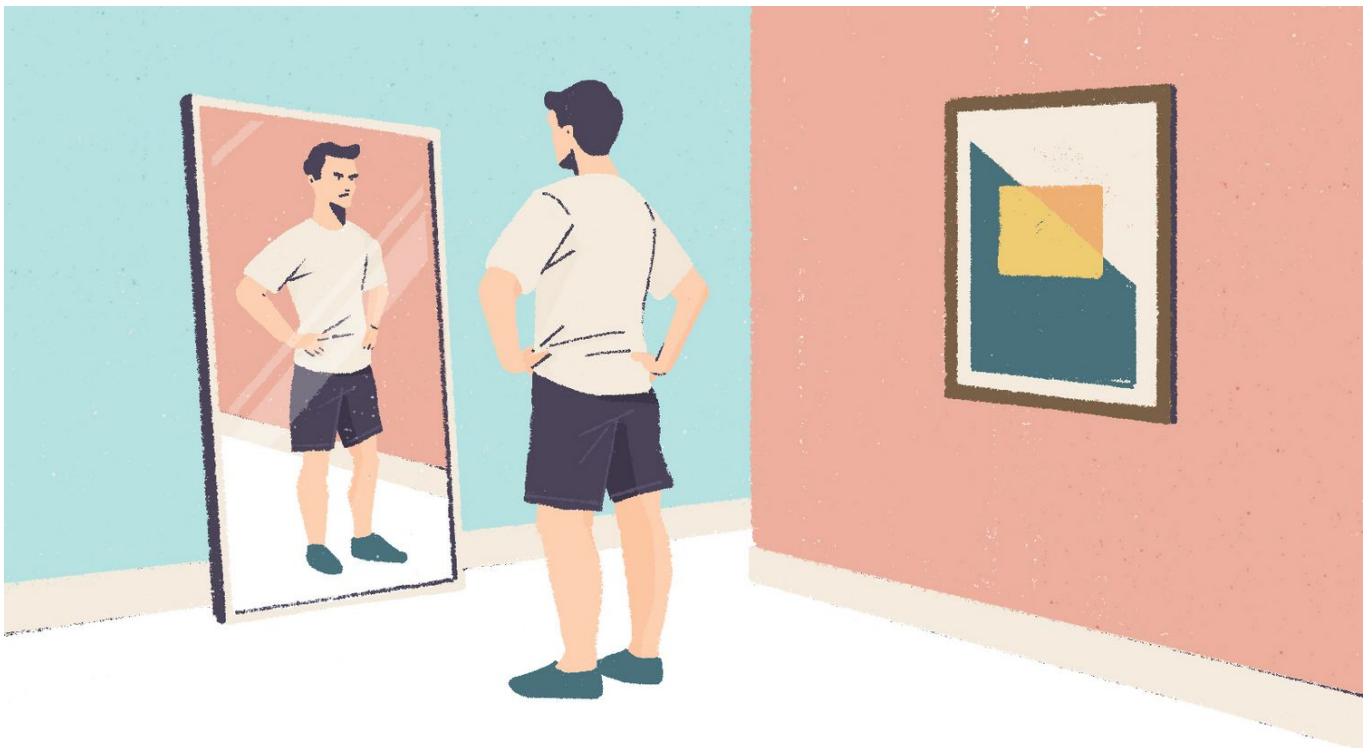


It is perhaps the single most controversial issue in men's style. Should grown men wear shorts? If you're on the wrong side of the debate, you might want to move on now. If, however, you're a fan of cargo shorts with sandals or like to emulate the wealthy denizens of Cape Cod by wearing chino shorts in a shade of washed-out lobster pink (known as Nantucket Reds) or if you're a denim-shorts-for-weekends-in-the-park kind of guy or brave

enough to rock a pair short shorts on the beach, this definitive guide to men's shorts will help you pick the right style for you.

For further reading, check out our guide to [the best shoes for men to wear with shorts](#) or get more detailed style advice in [our five-point guide on how to wear shorts](#). For now, though, let's get started with the first and most important consideration when choosing a pair of shorts: you.

01. Choose shorts that suit your legs



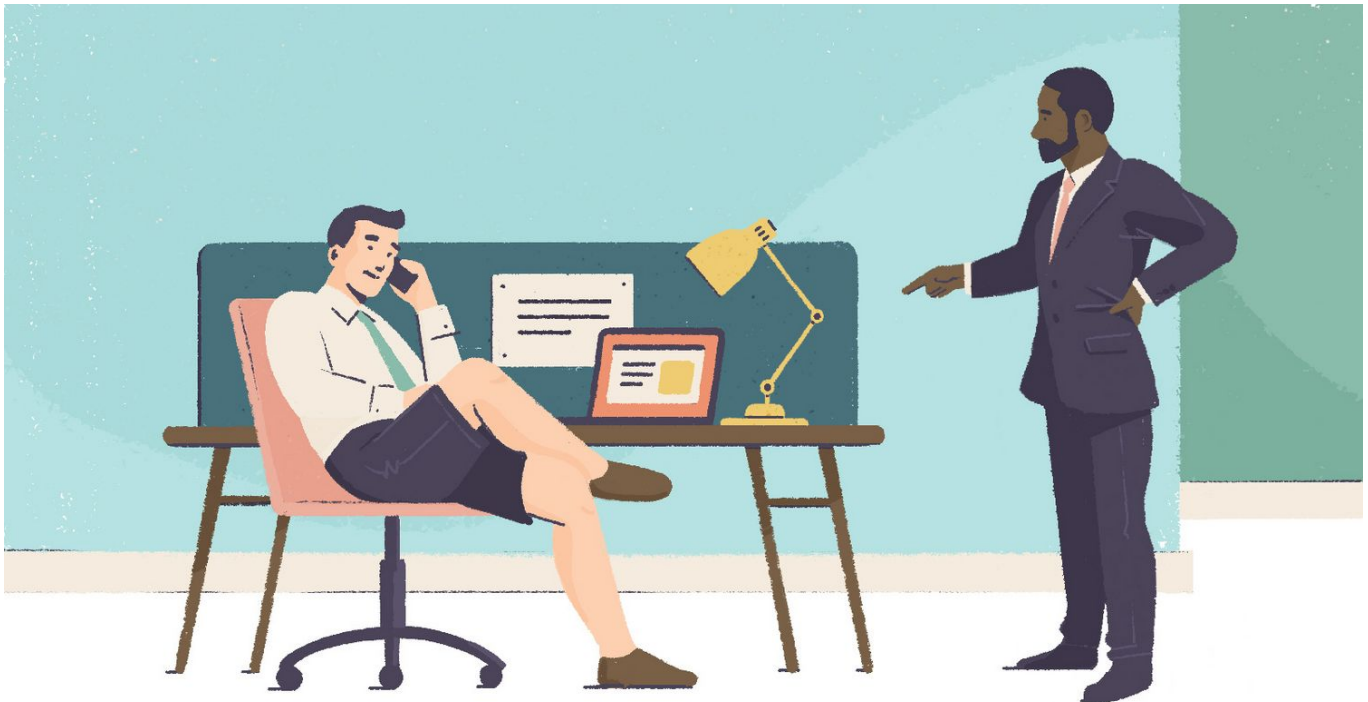
Let's get back to basics. The first thing any man should ask himself when choosing a pair of shorts – or any piece of clothing, for that matter – is how well they suit the proportions of his body. This means engaging in an honest appraisal of your legs. Stand in front of a full-length mirror and take a look at them. How long are they? Are they tanned or pale? How much hair do they have? Do you have slender calves? Knobbly knees? The thighs of a rugby player?

The conclusions to be drawn from this exercise should be fairly obvious. If you've got muscular thighs, slim-fit shorts are going to be uncomfortably tight, so choose a more generously proportioned pair. If you've got short legs, a pair of shorts designed to finish just above the knee will finish lower, so choose some with a shorter inseam or with hems that can be neatly cuffed. If you've got pale legs, avoid white shorts and choose a pair in a colour that provides a little more contrast, such as navy or black. Consider using a [tinted moisturiser](#). Etcetera, etcetera.

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None of this is intended to give you a complex, just a better understanding of your own body. Men's legs come in all shapes and sizes, so it's highly unlikely that one pair of shorts will look the same on you as they do on the next guy. More to the point, they certainly won't look the same as they do on the guy who models them for MR PORTER. He's 6ft 2in, just got back from a two-week beach holiday and definitely does not skip leg day. Trust us. We work in the same office.

02. Can men wear shorts on all occasions?



We 21st-century men live in an age of sartorial enlightenment and this is no more evident than in the emancipation of our lower legs. In years gone by, men's shorts were frowned upon in all but the most casual of settings. In his 1964 treatise on style, *ABC Of Men's Fashion*, Mr Hardy Amies wrote that a man should "never wear shorts except actually on the beach or on a walking tour". Mr Tom Ford echoed the sentiment in 2011 when he said in an interview with *AnOther Magazine* that "shorts should only be worn on the tennis court or on the beach".

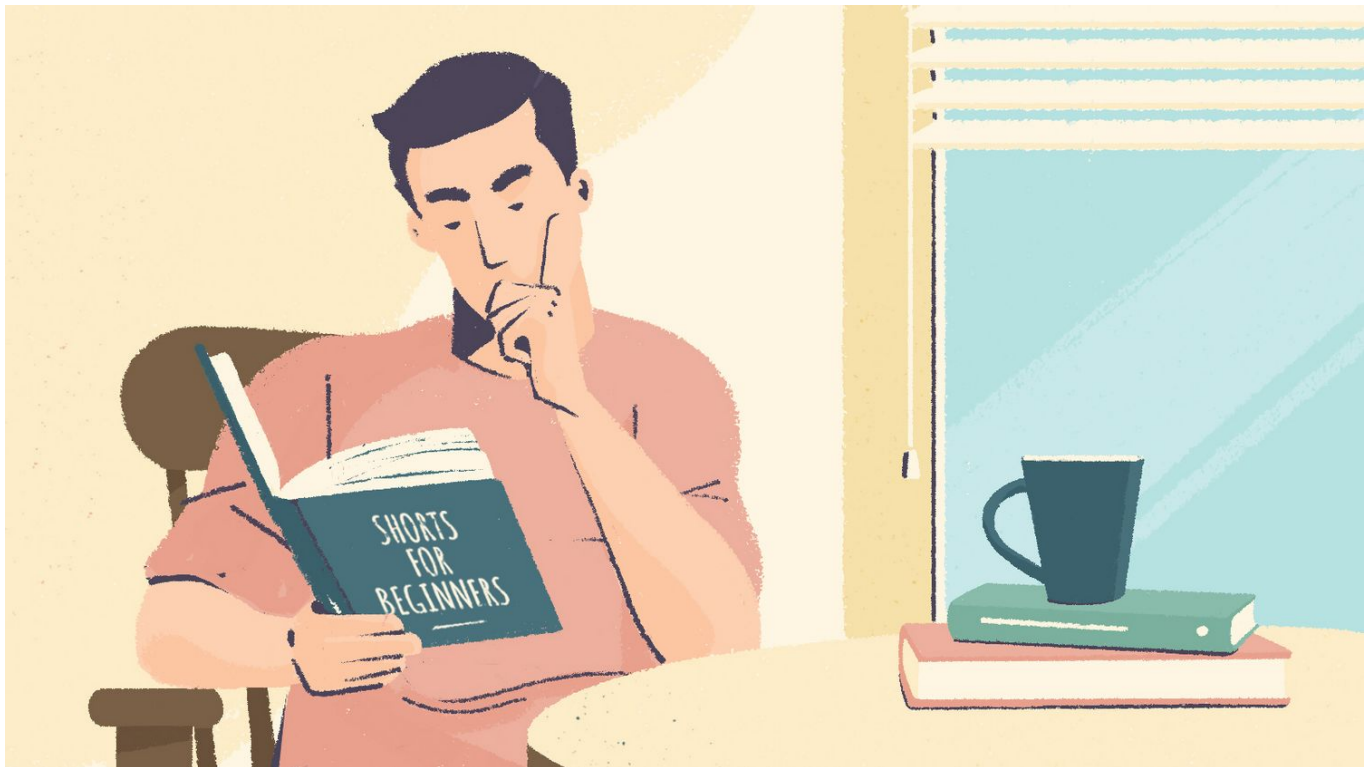
Comments such as these seem quaint by today's standards and it's hard to imagine that they ever represented the popular consensus. Still, it's important to treat views that are not our own with respect. In the rush to reject old ideas in favour of new ones, it can be easy to forget that men such as Messrs Amies and Ford might have had a point. Maybe shorts aren't as formal as full-length trousers. Maybe they shouldn't be worn everywhere. Maybe your office's failure to ban them should not be taken as an invitation to wear them.

There's no one-size-fits-all rule for wearing shorts, which is probably the reason why they're so contentious. Given that this is an adult's guide, perhaps the best advice we can give you is to act like an adult, which means giving full consideration to the nature and context of your actions before going ahead with them.

Imagine, for example, you've been invited to a garden party. The weather is set fair. Should you wear shorts? Ask yourself: is it better to feel the breeze around your ankles or to avoid the icy stare of your host? Unless you're in intimate company, is it not better to err on the side of caution?

Now, how about at work? "Is it OK to wear shorts to the office?" is a question that MR PORTER's editors have been fielding for a few years now and, if we're being honest, we're yet to come up with a proper answer. The best we can do is say, it depends. It depends on a lot of things. The office you work in and the people you share it with, first and foremost, but also the shorts you're planning to wear and what you're planning to wear them with. Context is everything and, unless you're absolutely sure that you're not going to get fired, then it's perhaps best not to break with convention. Most offices are so harshly air-conditioned that shorts aren't necessary anyway.

03. Men's shorts: the four pairs you need



You've completed the painful but important self-assessment. You've given some consideration to the circumstances in which it's appropriate (and inappropriate) to wear shorts. What now? The next step is to get your credit card out because we're going shopping. Before you jump in at the

deep end, though, it's worth getting to grips with the basics. The following four styles have proved resilient to the ebb and flow of seasonal fashion and, taken together, should be more or less all you need.

First, your workhorse: a pair of neatly tailored chino shorts in navy. Pick a pair that finish two or three inches above the knee in a cut that complements the shape of your legs. What does that mean, exactly? In a nutshell, it means that if you're slim, choose a slim fit. If you aren't, don't. While you're here, pick up the same or a similar pair in a neutral shade: beige, stone, sand, écru or whatever the designer felt like calling it. These two pairs have the benefit of going with more or less anything and look especially good with billowy Oxford shirts (see Mr Armie Hammer in Call Me By Your Name). Avoid wearing beige chino shorts with a white polo shirt unless you want to look like the pool boy at a chain hotel.

Next, grab a pair of cargo shorts in olive green. Cargo shorts have been the subject of much derision over the past few years. There were even semi-serious calls to ban them not too long ago for crimes against style. But before you write them off, look at the company they keep. Socks and sandals? Once anathema to fashionistas, now the height of style, thanks to Prada. Crocs? Ridiculed at first, then reinvented by fashion designers such as Mr Christopher Kane. One of the unwritten rules of the fashion industry is that as soon as something reaches the nadir of style, an intrepid designer is sure to pluck it out of the gutter and make it cool again. And so to cargo shorts, which are firmly back in favour with the cool crowd and form a key component of the utilitarian, outdoorsy look being presented by brands such as LOEWE. Fashion is cyclical. When wearing cargo shorts, remember that they are utility shorts and best worn with similarly utilitarian garments. They look awful against the elegant sportiness of a polo shirt, for instance. Regarding length, cargo shorts will invariably finish a little lower than more formal styles, but again, try to find a pair that finish above the knee rather than below it.

Denim cut-offs are a great choice for weekends in the park and, if you don't already own a pair, it's quite easy to make some. Just take some old jeans and cut the legs off with a sharp pair of scissors. Don't worry about being too neat – frayed ends are all a part of the look. As for how to wear them, we'd suggest channelling the laid-back surf aesthetic by throwing an oversized tie-dyed T-shirt over your denim shorts.

Finally, in acknowledgement of the increasing influence that sportswear is having on the way we dress (yes, that old chestnut) we recommend rounding out your collection with a pair of

loopback-cotton jersey shorts. These can look a little slovenly if you're not careful, so opt for a more refined pair from a designer such as Thom Browne.

04. How shorts can add colour to your outfit

Men have a history of using their legs as a way of injecting a little colour into their outfit. On Nantucket, an elite resort island off the coast of Cape Cod in Massachusetts, wealthy holidaymakers wear shorts or chinos in a shade of washed-out lobster pink known as Nantucket Reds. Their more adventurous neighbours on Martha's Vineyard might opt for a pair in lime green or a brightly coloured Madras plaid or perhaps a pair embroidered with tiny whales, lobsters or anchors. Describing these garish garments in a 1976 article for *Esquire*, the late journalist and author Mr Tom Wolfe wrote that they had a "go to hell" air about them, presumably because if you didn't like them, then... Well, you get the picture.

Our advice? Embrace colour and pattern, but do so with care. Shorts are a great way of adding a little vibrancy to your look. Not only are they inherently casual, but they have the added advantage of being quite small in surface area and a long way from your face when you wear them, so any colour you do employ should feel fairly unobtrusive. Just remember that not everybody's as open-minded as they are on Martha's Vineyard, so it's still possible to overdo it. Avoid big colours, unless you have the big personality to back them up. Try a washed-out pastel pink over a pillar box red or a pale lemon over a New York taxi-cab yellow. And keep the rest of your outfit understated.

05. Blur the lines between swimwear and shorts

And so to the world of seasonal fashion, which recently decreed that swim shorts are no longer just for swimming. With the addition of a short-sleeved shirt, a pair of retro-inspired sunglasses and some leather sandals or suede espadrilles – think TOM FORD or Bottega Veneta – they can now take you from the beach to the bar with ease. At MR PORTER, we're in favour of any development that enables us to dress in a way that's more versatile and less beholden to stuffy rules. This is especially true during summer, when ease and simplicity should be high on your list of priorities when choosing what to wear. At first glance, then, this is a trend we can all get on board with.

Having said that, current-season fashion should always be taken with a pinch of salt, especially when it's being driven by forward-thinking brands such as Prada and Dries Van Noten. A few considerations, then, before you jet off to the beach with nothing but a couple of pairs of swimmers in your suitcase. First, bear in mind that they tend to finish much higher than the average pair of men's shorts. You'll be exposing a great deal more flesh, making any points that may have arisen during your self-assessment (see point 01) all the more relevant.

Second, consider the material. Most swim shorts are cut from a lightweight, quick-drying nylon, rather than a more substantial cotton-twill, which gives them a cling factor that, when combined with the shortness of the cut, can prove hazardous when sitting down. Finally, let's reiterate something we've already mentioned, which is to consider the occasion. This is very much a holiday look and it's less appropriate the farther you are from a body of water.

That said, there are degrees of formality even within the confines of swim shorts. The British casualwear brand Orlebar Brown was the pioneer in creating "shorts that you can swim in" and its flat-fronted Bulldog shorts, complete with side tabs, zip fly and popper fastening, are a world away from those with a drawstring or elasticated waistband. Fabric is a consideration, too. Thom Browne's seersucker swim shorts are inherently smarter and more versatile than a pair in shiny nylon. And don't forget colour and pattern. If you do intend to wear your swim shorts away from the pool, a plain colour – ideally navy or black – will take you farther than a vibrant floral pattern.

Illustrations by Mr Paul Reid

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