

Soft shell vs. Fleece

In spite of the soft shell concept being in the market place for a number of years now, it is still greatly misunderstood. At what point is a soft shell a shell? Is it insulation with a water repellent outer? Is it supposed to replace your Gore-Tex or hard shell, as it is known these days? How breathable should it be? And where does fleece fit in to the set up? Is it still relevant in today's clothing system? How warm should it be? **Bruce Goodlad** provides some of the answers.



What follows is my take on the perennial soft shell, hard shell, fleece and insulation debate; hard shell is a Gore-Tex or equivalent fabric product that will keep out rain and any other moisture that the mountain may throw at you. Soft shell should be an extremely breathable, flexible garment that will keep out snow, light rain and all wind. It can incorporate some insulation but not much. Fleece should provide insulation. If you need more warmth than a fleece can provide then look at synthetic like Primaloft or down itself.

Sounds simple doesn't it, but things gets confused by the manufacturers marketing departments who use the concept of soft shell to sell a huge variety of garments. The prime example of this being Gore-Tex soft shell. What Gore do incredibly well is laminating their PTFE (polytetrafluoroethylene) membrane to a variety of fabrics for use in waterproof and windproof shell clothing. To increase their potential market they have laminated the membrane to a soft fabric, which gives, effectively, a soft feeling hard shell which, in the case of their Windstopper fabric, is actually less breathable than their standard hard shell. I personally feel that the breathability of their products is so poor in a soft shell context that I am not going to feature them. Polartec also use a membrane in their garments and I deliberated long and hard about their breathability, but having used one of theirs for a week's mountaineering I felt it was up to the job.

What do I want from a soft shell? It should be cut to give complete freedom of movement when climbing, without bulk, and to be considered a serious mountain garment it should have a hood. I have no idea why manufacturers continually try to convince us of their mountaineering pedigree without putting a hood on their shell jackets. It probably doesn't even appeal to the dog walking market! I suppose if rock climbing on a high mountain crag in summer then you could argue that you don't need it, and that it gets in the way of slings etc, but personally I would like to have a hood.

A couple of pockets out of harness line, and not too much bulk at the wrist to get in the way of axe leashes would be great as well.

As to insulation, what do I want from a fleece? It doesn't need to be windproof or shower resistant, just warm, comfortable and fit into my layering system – I often wear a light fleece between my base layer and soft shell, on cold winter days. This seems to keep me warm, combining wick-ability with versatility.

There are loads of different types of fleece on the market; from really lightweight Polartec 100 to full on pile for the coldest days, so it should be simple to find a good one. I make no apology for the number of Arc'teryx pieces in the review, but they showcase the different fabrics on offer really well and are still way ahead of the competition in terms of design and quality.

Fleece

My three favourite thin fleeces are:

A Lowe Alpine Micro Grid Zip Neck £40

A simple lightweight pullover, with a long zip neck for ventilation. Includes thumb loops to keep the sleeves in place and a small chest pocket.

B Mammut Paragon Jacket £70

A simple jacket using a thin fleece with Powerstretch panels for complete freedom of movement. It also has thumb loops and a chest pocket.

C Patagonia R1 Hoody £90

My all time favourite thin fleece, the R1 has a long form fitting cut to keep the back warm and bulk to a minimum. Unlike the other designs it has a balaclava style hood with an offset zip for comfort. This is great to hide inside and fits neatly under a hat and helmet on really cold days. There is a laminated chest pocket and thumb loops to keep the wrists warm. The only drawback is the price.

Moving up a layer in thickness...

D Outdoor Research Spectre Pullover \$89

Slightly warmer, the *Spectre* has a smooth face fabric which sheds snow and light moisture but has a warm cosy brushed inner fabric. It comes with a laminated face fabric. (OR gear is only available on the web in the UK.)

E Mountain Hardwear Mastiff £120

A super-warm fleece from Mountain Hardwear, the warmest so far in the review. The *Mastiff* is a pullover design using a shaggy Polartec fleece, which traps all the warm air going. This is combined with Powerstretch on the waist, wrist, cuffs and sides giving a neat, comfortable, warm fleece, suitable for all mountain activities.

F Arc'teryx Covert Cardigan £125

The *Covert* range from Arc'teryx has been one of my favourites for years. It uses Polartec Thermal Pro Sweater knit which just looks like a wool sweater, but has all the performance of a high tech fleece. The cut on the cardigan is that of a neat fitting jacket, with a full front zip, laminated arm pocket, and two hand warmer pockets. It is perfect on the mountain or in the pub.

G Outdoor Research Factor Jacket

The *Factor* is constructed from DWR coated Polartec Windpro fleece, so is technically a fleece but the hard facing to the fabric makes it behave in a very similar fashion to a soft shell. The *Factor*

has a great minimalist cut, and the fabric is really stretchy which is aided by power stretch panels. The pockets are a bit low to work with a harness but there is a chest pocket. This jacket is perfect for spring or autumn rock climbing on its own, or as a layering piece in the winter.

H Arc'teryx Fugitive Hoody £160

The *Fugitive* is also constructed from Polartec Windpro with a hard face to keep out the weather. Like the *Factor* it is on the fence between soft shell and fleece. The design, as you would expect from Arc'teryx, is excellent with a simple comfortable cut. The hood is a similar balaclava shape to the R1, which is great for slipping under a helmet when it gets really cold. The only negative is the pockets aren't very well placed for a harness, other than that a great piece.

Soft Shell

There is a large range of soft shells out there, ranging in weight from just a shell to having a bit more insulation.

I Patagonia Ready Mix £160

This to me is the definitive soft shell. The *Ready Mix* is a thin, soft, water resistant jacket, and the fabric is a pleasure to wear. The composite seam system, which uses a mix of stitching and gluing, saves weight and bulk. Heavier fabric covers the shoulders, down to the elbows and the hips. Mesh lined pockets double as vents and there is a small chest pocket perfect for storing the route description. The hood is big enough to cover a helmet – everyone else take note!

J Arc'teryx Gamma MX Hoody £260

This has been my favourite soft shell this winter. The stretchy Polartec Powershield Lightweight fabric moves effortlessly with you, the cut is neat with no extra bulk but enough length to keep out the drafts. The hood fits comfortably over a helmet, the two chest pockets are perfect for holding a guidebook or map, and there are a couple of handwarmer pockets. This a brilliant jacket – I'm off to do a route on the North Face of the Midi tomorrow with a client and this is what I'm taking.

K Mountain Hardwear Velocity Guide Jacket £150

Made from Schoeller Dryskin the *Velocity* is incredibly breathable and hardwearing, it has reinforcements on the shoulders and arms so this jacket will last. The cut is excellent with plenty of movement aided by the stretch in the fabric. There are a couple of handwarmer pockets and a chest pocket.

L Marmot Driclime Windshirt £60

Back by popular demand, we have featured this many times in the past but it is still one of the best soft shells out there. A super thin micro fleece, the *Windshirt* is covered by a nylon shell making it a superbly versatile piece. Marmot made a smock version with a hood one year that was awesome – any chance of doing it again chaps?

M Rab Vapour Rise Trail Smock £100

Someone must have been listening to my request above. Redesigned for this year, Rab have used a



Pertex Equilibrium fabric over a micro-wicking inner to give one of the most versatile soft shell pieces on the market. The cut is excellent and a hood has been added along with a kangaroo pocket to keep your hands warm. If you buy one of these you'll soon find that it's your most used piece of gear.

Ⓚ Mammut Laser Jacket £175

Constructed from bomb proof Schoeller Dryskin Extreme the Laser is ready for any mountain activity. The cut is nice and long to keep the draft out and gives good freedom of movement, the hood will fit over a helmet and you can vent through the mesh pockets if you need to. The fabric is reinforced on the shoulders and arms and I felt was a winter weight fabric so if you are looking for a summer weight jacket the Laser Light has all the same features.

Ⓛ Marmot Ascend Jacket £170

This was one of the more waterproof soft shells we tested, the water just seems to run off the fabric. Unfortunately, as there is no hood, it goes down your neck instead. The Ascend is glued together rather than stitched, saving bulk and weight, which gives the jacket a really clean look. The cut is athletic with plenty of movement aided by the stretch fabric, which has a nice warm feel to the interior. The pockets are covered by a harness, but there is an arm pocket for your lift pass. We really liked the Ascend but it is probably

more suited to skiing and ski touring than mountaineering.

Ⓜ Berghaus Baltoro £150

Constructed from original Schoeller soft shell fabric the Baltoro is a jacket for all seasons. Our testers have had it out climbing and skiing and think it's great, though would be better with a hood. The cut is excellent with minimal bulk, a good-sized chest pocket keeps the essentials and the hand warmer pockets are just above harness height. These are mesh lined so also act as vents.

Ⓝ Lowe Alpine Multi Pitch Jacket £80

The Multi Pitch is more of a summer weight piece utilising Lowe's own Storm Weave fabric. The cut is great with a shaped hem allowing the back to come low and keep out the draughts. The pockets are nice and high, well above harness level, the wrist closures have inner cuffs to keep any wind out and there is a comfortable brushed collar. Perfect for high mountain rock climbing.

Ⓞ The North Face Apex Magic Jacket £124

The Apex is not stitched together but sonically welded with a thin tape welded along the back of the seam to increase durability. This produces a light, comfortable and compressible jacket. The Apex Magic has a great cut giving freedom of

movement, the fabric is not as stretchy as some tested but performs really well. A brushed collar and hem add to the comfort and the weight is perfect for spring in the mountains.

Ⓟ Arc'teryx Easy Rider £200

The Easy Rider is constructed from Polartec Power Shield High Loft, which is their warmest fabric. It's hard face has all the properties of other Power Shield products but it has a shaggy pile interior. The Easy Rider showcases this really well with a relaxed clean cut. It is great on cold days on its own, or under a shell when the weather gets nasty. The pockets are not placed for a harness but I have still used the jacket loads this winter on cold days skiing and climbing.

Ⓠ Marmot ATV Jacket £110

If there is such a thing as a classic soft shell this is it. The ATV has a relaxed comfortable fit suitable for all mountain activities. The fabric has plenty of stretch and a nice soft warm feel to it. There are a couple of pockets that are a bit low for a harness but there is a chest pocket for essentials. I have had a pair of the matching pants for years and can't wear them out!



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