

The in-house metal fabrication room at Arc'teryx HQ allows the company to create exactly what they need to manufacture and test its equipment.



OUTDOOR TECH
ARC'TERYX HQ,
VANCOUVER

FULL FLIGHT

A tour of Arc'teryx HQ in Vancouver, Canada, shows a company at the top of its game.

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Photos ARC'TERYX



For the committed outdoor gear freak there are only a handful of brands that stand head and shoulders above an overabundance of mediocre to good product, and Vancouver's Arc'teryx Equipment Inc. is considered among many to be the very best at what it does.

Committed to its core principles of design, craftsmanship and performance, Arc'teryx has been operating out of its North Vancouver base since 1989. The company was originally called Rock Solid, but was rebranded Arc'teryx two years after its inception; it's an abbreviation of *Archaeopteryx Lithographica*, which is the scientific name of the earliest known reptile to develop feathers and take flight, around 150 million years ago. The Arc'teryx logo is a stylised reproduction of the fossil of this first bird, now housed in the Natural History Museum in Berlin, and the brand has become synonymous with evolution, specifically the evolution of design.

All this information is freely available but when you are relying on your equipment to keep you safe from the elements, either on a daily basis or a gruelling expedition, you form a special bond with it. You come to admire and respect the clothing in a unique way, and this is how most Arc'teryx users would describe their relationship with the brand. When this is the case, the equivalent of a holy pilgrimage is to visit the Arc'teryx headquarters and design centre, which I was lucky enough to do.

COMPANY PHILOSOPHY

After an hour-long bus journey from central Vancouver through the wet suburban snow of a winter's morning, I strolled into the airy atrium of the two-story Arc HQ to be met by Jo Salamon, the Media & Communications Manager, and her dog, Pepper. Among other things, all Arc buildings are dog friendly. Between the desks are strewn numerous doggie beds for the relaxation of the employees' canine pals, and allowance is made for daily exercise. Of course, human down-time is also catered for in the form of a gym, an indoor bouldering room and large bicycle storage area for commuters.

First things first – Jo gives me a rundown of the company's history, as represented in the reception area by a timeline of key points, including the introduction of watertight zippers in 1997 (actually a 20-year design process) which have since become the industry standard, the company's purchase by the Salomon Group in 2003, and subsequently by Amer Sports in 2006. Also displayed in this area is an iconic Alpha SV mountaineering shell, enclosed in a glass cabinet and surrounded by lasers, no doubt.

My tour continues upstairs to the second floor and

a more traditional open-plan office environment ("Pen-pushers and emailers," jokes Jo) overseen by large-format images of forbidding alpine peaks. A series of meeting rooms is named for some of the company's key lines, such as 'Theta' and 'Sidewinder', with even the lettering on the door mirroring the brand's elegant look. 'Push' never looked better.

"Jeremy's whole aesthetic has stayed with this company right from the get-go," says Jo, referring to Jeremy Guard, co-founder and president until 2001. "He's got a very clearly defined style and always wanted to make sure that whatever we were doing was simply designed, functioned the way it needed to function and looked really good. You had to want to wear it, and use it, and that's part of the initial DNA of the company that is still present. As they're working, our designers constantly go back to Jeremy's key fundamental points."

I'm shown around the warranty department, to which every piece of clothing in the world that needs repairing is returned. Consequently, there's a need to keep a bewildering array of old colours, materials and zippers to use in repairs. It's comforting to the consumer but worrying for the environmentalist that even such minor repairs as a frayed hem are done in Vancouver; Arc just doesn't trust anyone else to do a good enough job.

Speaking of environmental concerns, the building itself is a model for a low carbon footprint, including the use of natural light, recycled floor and furnishings, MesoOptics lighting fixtures, the bike room, electric car charging stations and waste water heat exchangers. One day the company aims to run all its facilities with a zero footprint.

Elsewhere on the top floor is a corner dedicated to Corporate Social Responsibility and the projects that Arc funds in the community. Foremost among them is the Bird's Nest Project, in which discontinued fabrics are used to create sturdy rain capes for the city's homeless. Amongst others, the Trail Builder Academy is an educational programme that teaches mountain bike trail building techniques, and the company donates used Gore-Tex jackets to anti-poaching squads in Tanzania.

Jo explains one of the company's four guiding principles – to extend the lifespan of products: "Our key environmental stance is that we're creating a product that will keep out of landfill as long as possible. It's about creating a product that performs and lasts. We work on all sorts of fabrics, testing performance against durability and weight and look for that magic spot between all three." Rather than erring on the side of lighter weight, Arc makes sure its clothing is built to last.



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Clockwise from top Arc'teryx keeps a huge backlog of fabrics for repair/warranty work; the 'Men of Arc' are charged with fabricating the tools and equipment needed for the company to test and manufacture equipment; the craftsmanship involved in manufacturing is incredibly high; having the ability to tweak designs in-house, then test them in the mountains outside Vancouver, is a huge advantage; threads galore.





“We can test them on mountains, come back in, tweak them, go back out, etc.”

FACTORY TOUR

Five minutes' walk down the road is the second building, dedicated to design and sample production. There I'm introduced to Greg Grenzke, Design Manager for Ascent & Footwear, whose most recent major project to come to fruition after several years' work is the Procline ski boot. Greg shows me possibly the most exciting part of the operation – where the design teams have begun working on the Spring 2019 range.

“Having a manufacturing facility right here means we get to make incremental changes that other companies wouldn't be able to,” he explains, “because we're not shipping something back and forth to Asia every time we want to get a sample made. We can prototype, we can make full finished samples, we can test them on mountains, come back in, tweak them, go back out etc. until we can perfect the performance. This sets us apart because not everyone has the ability to do that.” Unfortunately, no matter how I pry and wheedle, Greg remains tight-lipped about what exciting products may be in the pipeline for the future, and I am barred from photographing the special presses and laminating machines in the interest of intellectual property protection.

I'm led through a labyrinth of metal workshops, testing labs and fabric storage areas to a department that is less secretive – the colour lab, where I'm treated to previews of next season's colourways such as Lunar Mist, Electrolyte and Himalayan Sugar. I'll leave you to guess what hues those names represent.

The third building, which I don't get to visit, is Arc One – the company's flagship factory situated an hour down the road in New Westminster. This is where all of the safety equipment (harnesses and avalanche packs) is made, as well as the Veilance line, much of the LEAF gear (Law Enforcement & Armed Forces), and some of the more iconic products such as the Alpha SV. This proximity allows Arc to make big changes in manufacturing processes with little fuss, plus the company can make small runs of pretty much anything (except footwear) on short notice for anyone from REI to Search and Rescue teams across the continent.

Clockwise from above Arc'teryx has recently moved into footwear; apparel is rigorously checked and tested; prototype down jackets await testers – unfortunately we couldn't bring them back to the AG Outdoor office!

PEOPLE AND PARTNERS

Arc'teryx currently has about 800 employees and is looking to take on an additional 50 per year, going forward. It uses a Lean Manufacturing model – a system developed in Japan for the elimination of waste in the production process. “Before this everyone worked on piecework,” explains Jo, “so you might be great at hoods or sleeves but you never really saw a finished product, and if one person was held up that would hold up everything. With Lean Manufacturing teams of 12 to 15 people work on the whole product and are paid as a team. Each person is cross-trained so they can do sleeves, hoods, laminating, whatever. This process has changed the lead time in the factory from 30 days to 10!”

Most products are no longer made in Canada, however. “We consider our 20 or so partner factories across the globe as extensions of our own facility, so they have to adhere to the same standards and quality control that we do,” continues Jo. “Our product is very technical so any partner we work with has to have skilled labourers who are paid way above minimum wage in their regions. We see these facilities as partnerships, some of which we've had for over 15 years. It's not just somebody making jackets for us. Our partners invest in their employees, because it might take six months to train each one, and we invest in our partners – it's kind of like a circle.”

My tour ends at the factory shop, where old season product and seconds are sold on the cheap to Arc-hungry consumers who buy armloads at a time. I come away more impressed than ever at the operation and feel privileged to have been allowed a glimpse inside the workings of the 'Dead Bird Society'. Arc'teryx is at the pinnacle of the global outdoor industry and is still pushing its game. Long live the Evolution! 

