

PHOTOGRAPHY ELLIOTT MORGAN STYLING CHRISTOPHE RUIZ

# WHO, WHAT,



Waris wears Thom Browne jacket £1,880, skirt £1,220, shirt £350, tie from a selection and shoes £1,160; Montblanc sunglasses (on table) £300; bracelet, Waris' own

Actor, designer, entrepreneur. It's quite a list. But Waris Ahluwalia's story is far from done yet. GRACE CAIN (sort of) gets to know the man of many talents

# WARIS

"I THINK THE GAME WE'RE going to play is: you invade and I evade," says Waris Ahluwalia (left) as we sit down together in a central London apartment. OK, fun. First question: how would you define yourself? He laughs and jokes and compliments my dress. One-nil to Ahluwalia. "That's like taking something with 26 edges and trying to fit it into a circular box," he says (eventually). "I can be all of it and none of it, because I've learned not to define myself. The world's not necessarily comfortable with that. I'm open to trying anything, and I just let each day unfold. I don't know how I stumbled upon that approach – but it's been one heck of a ride."

It would certainly seem that way. Born in Amritsar, India, and raised in New York City, USA, Ahluwalia has been many things over the course of his life. He's arguably best known for his work as an actor, having appeared in numerous films by director Wes Anderson (the pair first met at a peace rally outside the United Nations more than two decades ago). He fondly recalls the experience of working alongside Anderson at the very beginning of his career on titles such as *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (a film which also had cinematic legend Anjelica Huston in its all-star cast). "I enjoy film because it's a great collaboration," he explains. "One person can't do it all – you need the writer, the director, the costumes, the lighting. It's one of the best examples of different people coming together to make something."

As well as an actor, Ahluwalia can also call himself a jewellery designer, an activist and an entrepreneur (his company House of Waris sells botanical teas and he's also just launched a non-alcoholic elixir). Then there's the fact that he's been a consistent feature on best-dressed lists for more than 15 years, and was inducted as a member of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) in 2010.

So, second question: why does he think his sense of style has proved so popular? He looks slightly worried. "It's a funny thing because – to circle back to the last question – there are so many things of value that I do. But *this* is the thing that people are most drawn to. I have a funny relationship with fashion. I'm not looking for it to define me, so it's with reluctance..." he thinks for a bit. "People say I'm a dandy, but there's no affectation to what I'm doing. So I'm not. I don't know... I'm baffled. Why do *you* think?" he asks, eyes wide. Two-nil to Ahluwalia for Question Evasion.

I posit that the lack of affectation is perhaps the key. That Ahluwalia always seems at ease in what he wears, which is in itself appealing? "It's like my identity, where I'm comfortable in choosing what to do on any particular day," he says. "I choose what to wear because of how it feels and looks and how it was made, rather than because someone told me to wear it. I've never followed trends."

Ahluwalia claims to be a 'reluctant' fashion muse, but that is somewhat questionable given the stories he >





Waris wears Rick Owens acket £3,010  
and trouser £ 795 Casablanca op £360;  
Montblanc Meisterstück document case  
£168 Baudoin & Lange shoes £410

subsequently tells. Like the one where he recalls his first suit – it was white, and he had it made for his sixth-grade graduation (so, age 12...). Or the one about the boots. “In ninth grade, walking down 8th Street in New York,” he recalls, dramatically. “I saw these leather cowboy boots with steel toes, studs and a skull. And I was like: those are my boots. They called to me. I spent a lot of my high-school years wearing those boots. I wish I still had them.”

You get the idea that when Ahluwalia likes something, he *really* likes it. The pink suede shoes he’s wearing on the day we meet are the latest in an illustrious line of identical pink suede shoes stretching back to 2010, when he and the designer of said shoes were both part of the CFDA Fashion Incubator programme. “They were on the runway in a different cut. And I leaned over to him and said, we’re going to have to make *these* shoes in *that* pink suede. I just knew. Now I wear them almost every day, because they feel like me. I have a hard time wearing black shoes, because I look down at my feet and think, ‘Who *is* that?’”

The concept of uniform continues to resurface again and again. Ahluwalia is known for wearing suits, all of which (like his shoes) he has custom-made. “In anything I do, I’m drawn to the makers,” he explains. “I enjoy going through the laborious, lengthy process of going to the tailor. I’m patient.” But he’s quick to point out it’s not *all* about suits. “In the winter, I wear puffer pants,” he says, proudly. “I don’t like being cold.”

“It’s not like I’m always trying to be formal,” he continues, indicating his jacket. “This is comfortable for me.” Suddenly, he looks confessional. “I don’t own any sweatpants,” he says apologetically. He is, however, a big fan of denim. In response to my question about style inspiration, he comes back with, “Chuck Close said inspiration is for amateurs.” Three-nil Ahluwalia. There is a caveat to that, though:

## “IN NINTH GRADE, I SAW THESE LEATHER COWBOY BOOTS WITH STEEL TOES, STUDS AND A SKULL. THEY CALLED TO ME... I WISH I STILL HAD THEM”

“When someone asks about my style icons, I always say Kris Kristofferson in *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, because the denim was an additional character in the film. And David Niven in *Around the World in 80 Days*, because of how his suits stayed so crisp on the boat.”

The thing that suits and denim have in common is the same thing that draws Ahluwalia to them both. “They’re workwear,” he says. “Uniforms. It’s the simplicity of choice in the matter. This is me trying not to be fashiony. But, I suppose, if you do something long enough, people will be like: oh, that’s *A Thing*.”

Ahluwalia also puts a great deal of stock in history and heritage, making him the perfect candidate for another of his many roles: ambassador for Montblanc. “I mean, it’s a pen company – but it’s not just *any* pen company,” he grins. “I love that they’ve stayed true to their

original product, but they’ve also built on that story. And the written word is such an amazing cornerstone to build on.” Ahluwalia strikes me as the kind of person who *would* write by hand – and in fact he does during our shoot, using a Montblanc Meisterstück Gold-Coated 149 Fountain Pen. “We can’t lose *this* – and here you can type ‘he moves his thumbs,’” he says. “We can’t lose this skill that’s evolved over time; the ability to create amazing things with our hands. For me, the thought comes from the head and then it has to come out through the hand. So, I write.”

I initially assume he means journaling, but that turns out to be wrong. Ahluwalia pens love notes for his wife, which he leaves around their home in NYC. And he now also writes letters to his daughter, which brings us to a new facet of his identity: fatherhood. At the point when we speak, Ahluwalia still qualifies as a new >





Waris wears, this page Prada top £1,020 and trousers £3,050; bracelet, Waris' own; Montblanc Notebook #146 small, Black – Lined £60, Meisterstück Gold-Coated 149 Fountain Pen £860. Opposite page Comme des Garçons coat £1,955, shirt £370 and shorts £1,225; ring, Waris' own; Montblanc Meisterstück Gold-Coated 149 Fountain Pen £860



parent – his daughter, Ocean, is just eight months old. How's he finding the new role? "Exhausting," he says. Then, after a pause: "And, you know, magical and the greatest thing in the world; all that stuff applies. But it is exhausting. But also, it doesn't really matter that it's exhausting. It's like – hey, I haven't slept in two months, and it's OK! It's one of those singular experiences where everything else around you becomes noise."

Later, he follows the phone in his hand from room to room, trying to connect to the Wifi. Somewhere on the other side of the Atlantic, it's time for Ocean to wake up. "Something else about becoming a parent," he says,

quietly and thoughtfully, "is that fatherhood leaves me in further awe of motherhood. When you see your child's mother go through pregnancy and birth and breastfeeding... it's almost like *god-like* powers. It's giving life. Like, God does that." His wife, the designer Maddie Moon, answers the FaceTime call and Ahluwalia's face illuminates.

"I'm preparing to start seeing the world through her [Ocean's] eyes, which I think is the biggest change one has in their life," he says to me after they've hung up. "I've seen the world through my eyes for so long. Now, I'd rather just ask: what do *you* see? And not to tell her that this is a tree, but to have her

tell me that it's a dragon. As a parent, it's such an incredible position to be in, if you can just find the time to listen. There'll be plenty of time to teach, but in this moment, I just want to bear witness."

Very poetic. So does Waris Ahluwalia, the charmingly evasive 26-sided man, also consider himself to be a storyteller? "It's all stories," he says. "For me, the story is the life. But I won't get the sum total until the end. And that's OK. I'm OK to wait until later to find out what this all meant." □



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If the interiors here caught your eye, it's hardly surprising. Waris Ahluwalia was shot at 60 Curzon, a new collection of 32 boutique apartments in the heart of Mayfair, located on the former site of famed London restaurant Mirabelle and created in collaboration with some of the world's most visionary interior-design studios, including Elicyon and Tatjana von Stein. Anyone lucky enough to call 60 Curzon home can enjoy access to the private spa and wellness floor – complete with swimming pool, gym, sauna and fitness studios. At ground level, there are temperature-controlled rooms for personal belongings (perfect for wine, whisky or cigar aficionados) plus a Club Lounge/meeting room. And in a nod to the location's culinary history, there will soon be a new restaurant, with private dining rooms available exclusively to residents.