

The basics of formal Highland attire are similar to those of non-kilted formal wear. A black, white, or mess style jacket will be worn. An Argyll jacket is acceptable if worn with a bowtie. Typically the bowtie and vest are the same color. It's advisable to match all of your "leathers". Belts, shoes, and sporran straps should all be of the same color and texture. And your socks or hose and flashes should color coordinate with your outfit.

Hose and flash seem to be one of the bigger challenges when dressing for a formal kilted affair. The highest level of leg dress would be diced or argyle hose in colors that coordinate with your kilt and buckle brogues.



Buckle Brogue



MacKenzie hose



MacKenzie Kilt

Red and white diced hose are just as acceptable, but only for military veterans. Red and black diced hose are acceptable for veterans and non-veterans alike.

If you don't have or want diced hose the next most acceptable for a formal event are solid color hose. When choosing solid color hose you want to pick one that matches with one of the major colors in your kilt. You can never go wrong with solid black. In my case I frequently choose bottle green or navy blue hose to go with my MacKenzie Seaforth kilt.

Since most kilts have red in them you can rarely if ever go wrong choosing red flashes. If your kilt doesn't have red in it or you don't want to wear red flashes then use the following guidance. Your flash color should match the narrow stripe that lays on the stripe of the major color you chose for your kilt hose. So, looking at the picture above if I wanted to wear bottle green hose I should wear either red or white flashes. And if I chose Navy blue or black hose then I should wear red flashes.

Lace up ghillie brogue shoes are less formal than buckle brogues, but are acceptable for formal, semi-dress, and daywear occasions. Daywear brogues may be brown or black. Whether your event is formal or not the shoes should match your straps and belts for a polished look.

Jackets, vests, and ties are often poorly mixed and matched for formal events. The Prince Charlie jacket is very popular to wear with a kilt and is not formal Highland attire. The P.C. jacket is a Lowland (a.k.a. English) invention that came from efforts to alter a tuxedo jacket with tails so that it could be worn with a kilt. The PC is generally cut to high in the

waist and often combines with a kilt that's too short or worn too low and allows the wearer's shirt to puff out the sides under the jacket. This creates a sloppy and disheveled look leaving others to wonder who dressed you and if you have had too much to drink. An Argyll jacket with a bowtie is slightly less dressy than a doublet or mess jacket, but is acceptable at formal events. Here are two examples of formal attire.



The gentleman on the left is wearing a white tie and vest. This mode of dress is about as dressy and formal as one can be without resorting to surgery. This order of dress used to be known as 'Soup-and-Fish' because it shows ANYTHING that gets spilled on it.

The man on the right wears a black tie and black vest. This is considered less-formal than white tie.

You will not be struck by a thunderbolt from Mount Olympus if you choose to wear a white tie with a black vest or vice versa.

People WILL, however, assume that you are unused to getting dressed-up and that you are the unknowing victim of a vindictive clerk at 'Dinner Jackets "R" Us'. For the balance of the evening they will be discretely checking to see if you chew with your mouth open and the silverware will be counted after you leave.

Preferred alternatives to the PC jacket are the regulation doublet, Sheriffmuir doublet, Montrose doublet, military mess jacket, and black Argyll jacket with or without vest and bowtie. Examples provided below.



Regulation Doublet



Sheriffmuir Doublet



Montrose Doublet



Argyll jacket with Black tie

Accessories

Shoes and hose were covered above. For me sporrans are one of those accessories that make me cringe. Horsehair sporrans are acceptable for formal dress, but are a bit of a pain since they typically do not have a pocket and consequently leave you wondering where to put your wallet and keys. Rabbit or bovine hair sporrans are most commonly worn with

formal wear. Less common but considered formal are full mask sporrans which have an animal head integrated into the construction of the sporrان. Several examples can be seen in the jacket pictures above. Notice the chrome, brass, and enameled cantles on the various sporrans.

Solid leather or leather and fur sporrans fall into the day wear and semi-formal categories. These are not formal sporrans and if your circumstances require that you wear one to a formal event try to combine it with an Argyll jacket and solid color hose. Below are examples of sporrans.

Sporrans are typically worn with a chain and leather belt or leather sporrان strap. Here it's important to match your metals and leathers.

Formal



Semi-dress and Daywear



Belts seem to present an interesting dilemma for kilt wearers. Again the application of a few basic principles goes a long way. In formal situations a belt is not worn with a vest. If you have trouble keeping your kilt up in the proper position (1-1/2 to 3 inches above the navel) it's acceptable to wear suspenders under your vest. If you're dressing down slightly by wearing an Argyll jacket and you really want to wear a belt leave the vest at home.

Although it's generally more acceptable not to wear a belt with a vest regardless of the level of dress, it is acceptable to wear a belt with a vest for day wear and outdoor wear such when wearing a tweed jacket and vest. In those situations the belt may be worn over or under the vest, but the better approach is to wear it over the vest. Here's an example of those styles.



The man on the left is wearing a laird's plaid with belt over vest, much finer clothing and many more accessories. His style of dress indicates that he is of a higher economic class than the fellow on the right. The fellow on the right has no belt, is wearing a rough tweed jacket and vest, and is carrying a shepherd's stick. He is most likely the other fellow's shepherd or has achieved his success through hard work rather than inheritance.

Sgian duhb's with antler and bone handles are not usually for formal situations. Those with highly polished wood handles are more appropriate. Since the Highland apparel market has been flooded with plastic and chrome handled sgian duhbs most of us wear those for dressy events. Dirks are not usually worn with formal attire because you are not wearing a belt to hang it from and because they get in the way. The handle interferes with the jacket and they can snag on chairs when sitting and rising.



Dress



Modern



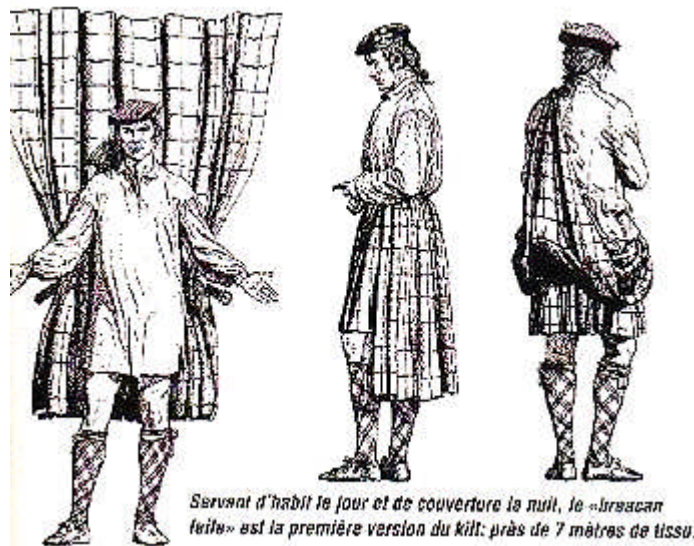
Semi-dress



Daywear

Now for the plaids. Belted, fly, piper, laird's, or none. There are plenty of choices with the easiest being no plaid and it's perfectly acceptable not to wear one. If you're going to wear one then it should be of the same tartan as your kilt. Once you've decided to wear one you have to choose one of the other types. A piper in full dress will have on a piper's plaid which is wrapped tightly around the chest and pinned at the left shoulder with a large broach.

Choosing the belted plaid, which is the most traditional and equally at home in formal and casual events, leads to the choice of half belted or full belted. The full belted plaid is a large piece of material that is hand pleated and belted around the wearer's waist in such a way that it makes a kilt and a sort of cape or over the shoulder plaid. See the sketch below.



The half belted plaid is a two to four yard piece of material that is tucked in the belt in back and one corner is pulled over the left shoulder and pinned to the epaulette like a fly plaid. See below.



Half Belted Plaid



Laird's Plaid – Semi-dress and Daywear



Fly Plaid



Piper's Plaid

Choosing whether or not to wear a hat is a choice that is independent of the occasion. Whether you pick a Balmoral, Glengarry, or feather bonnet your headwear should reflect your style of dress and the occasion. Match it to one of the colors in your kilt or your hose. If wearing a Glengarry you don't want to look like a rooster or a dinosaur so the hat should be tipped to the right at a "jaunty" angle so that the cap badge is facing up.

The last thing I'll mention in this article is metal. The buttons, badges, cantles, buckles, and trims of your outfit and accessories should match. The ideal choice for these items is silver. The Highland apparel industry knows that few of us can afford to be fully decked out in silver so they have pacified us with chrome. Honestly chrome belongs on cars, but how many of us can afford full silver.

After silver an excellent second choice is pewter. When it's lightly polished it can look very much like silver, and it's much cheaper than silver. When you're purchasing items for your Highland wardrobe ask your vendor if you can substitute bright pewter for chrome

Because the Highland apparel industry has us so hooked on chrome few of us look at brass as an alternative. Brass is affordable and it comes in a variety of finishes. It works well for dress, semi-dress, and casual settings. Brass can be very dressy when it's smooth and highly polished. It's an excellent alternative metal for buttons, sporran cantles, buckles, cap badges etc.

Always try to buy the very best quality items you can afford as these will last longer, look better, and require less maintenance than poorly made items. And try to buy on sale or clearance when possible. I hope all of this helps you when selecting items to purchase and wear to formal and other events. I'd like to recommend the following sources for highland apparel. They are not in any order of preference or quality.

Ebay, Henderson Group LTD., Skye Highland Outfitters, West Coast Kilts, The Inner Bailey, Thistle shoes, Wyvern Leather Sporrans, St. Kilda Jackets, The Piper's Hut, X Marks the Scot, Rainnea, Cold Steel

Credits for information and pictures go to West Coast Kilts, Skye Highland Outfitters, Ebay, Thistle shoes, Scottish Tartans Authority, St. Kilda Jackets, Scotlandinoils.com, Henderson Group LTD., Josh brown, Mathew Newsome, Robert MacDonald, and Don MacRae

All the best,
Bruce