

16 hardcore softshells

Softshell jackets are all the rage. A softshell isn't as uncomfortable or crinkly as a rain jacket, but it offers more wind and rain protection than a fleece – and it looks better, too. Here's our pick.

WORDS **NICK DALL** PICTURES **JAMES GARAGHTY**

1 Trail Tech Eco Repel

You won't find a cheaper softshell in South Africa, but unlike the cheapo tents or sleeping bags, this jacket is actually quite good. It's made of 100% polyester so it lacks the stretch of a blended shell, and I don't believe the label that claims it'll keep you "dry and comfortable no matter how much H2O Mother Nature throws at you". Still, if you're just looking for something stylish to stave off the cold, it does the job.

Weight: 610g
R400 at Mr Price Sport
☞ mrpricesport.com

2 K-Way Kids' Skylark

K-Way seems to be the only brand in SA that makes kiddies' softshells. This is odd because most parents will happily spend 500 bucks on designer shoes, so surely they'll shell out (pun intended) less than that on a decent jacket?

The K-Way junior range is made to the same standard as the adult range. The Skylark comes in sizes from age 3–4 and the visor on the hood is ridiculously cute.

Weight: 292g
R450 at Cape Union Mart
☞ capeunionmart.co.za

3 K-Way Felixx

Like most K-Way products, this jacket is made in South Africa from good quality fabrics. It comes in five different colours, from grey to red. I've owned a navy one for the last few years, which has become my standard winter attire. It's not particularly warm or water-resistant, but it does a great job as an everyday all-rounder.

Weight: 518g
R700 at Cape Union Mart
☞ capeunionmart.co.za

4 K-Way Faye

This thigh-length parka has a three-ply softshell (the same stuff as the foul-weather jackets on the next page) and a thin fleece lining, so it'll keep you warm and dry while you're waiting for your train. You couldn't pull it off on the catwalks of Paris (the K-Way logo is a giveaway) and it would look a bit silly in the Cederberg, but for road-tripping and day-to-day city use, it's a warmer, snazzier alternative to a raincoat. There's no men's version... yet.

Weight: 680g
R1 100 at Cape Union Mart
☞ capeunionmart.co.za

5 Salomon 360°

French company Salomon makes some of the best trail-running shoes and hiking boots, so it goes without saying that this softshell jacket is A-grade. It was one of the warmer jackets tested, and its snug fit means it could easily be worn under a rain jacket. The streamlined waist is great at keeping the wind out (as long as you don't have a boep) and the bucket-style pockets on the inside are a nice extra.

Weight: 610g
R1 150 at Sportsmans Warehouse
☞ sportsmanswarehouse.co.za

6 Capestorm Avidity

The classic Capestorm softshell just got a serious makeover. Don't let the slightly gangster look fool you: The Avidity was one of the warmest jackets tested, thanks to a thick fleece inner, and the elasticated wind-cuffs and adjustable waist and hood allow you to batten down the hatches in style. As long as it's not raining too hard, the Avidity will be fine as an outer layer in most South African conditions.

Weight: 712g
R1 300 at Capestorm
☞ capestorm.co.za

7 First Ascent Mistral

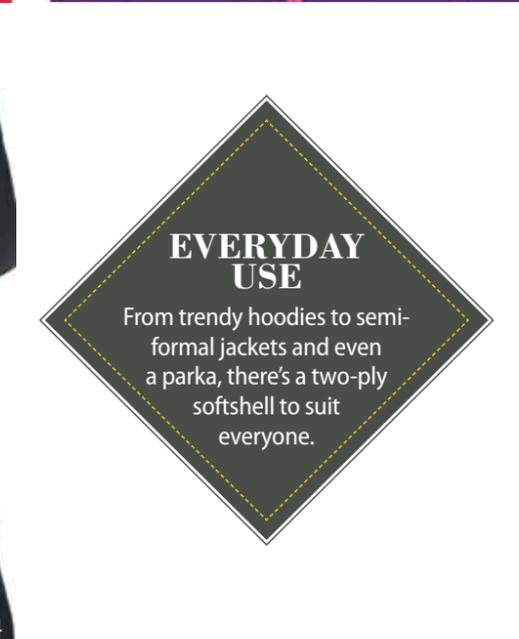
This ladies' jacket is in the same league as the men's Avidity, but is designed with the female form in mind. It's made from first-rate materials and the stitching is top-notch. It has some nifty gimmicks: The chest pocket has a special hole for your iPod headphones and the toggles that adjust the elasticated waist are hidden from view inside the front pockets. If berry's not your bag, it comes in black, too.

Weight: 670g
R1 300 at First Ascent
☞ firstascent.co.za

8 Columbia Tectonic

This ladies' jacket costs a pretty penny, but it's warmer than any other softshell in the same weight category. It uses Columbia's patented Omni-Heat thermo-reflective lining, which does the same thing to your skin that tinfoil does to your spuds. It's 20% warmer than fleece. The Tectonic also has snazzy wind-cuffs with thumb loops (like the First Ascent Renegade on page 84) to keep your hands toasty.

Weight: 446g
R1 700 at Columbia
☞ columbiasportswear.co.za



EVERYDAY USE
From trendy hoodies to semi-formal jackets and even a parka, there's a two-ply softshell to suit everyone.



Thread your headphones through here.



GEAR JACKETS

ACTIVE JACKETS

Thin, lightweight and stretchier than Nadia Comăneci, these single-ply shells are good for hiking and biking.



Use the thumb loops to keep your hands warm.

WHAT'S A SOFTSHELL?

Like toilet paper, you get three types of softshell jackets: single, double and triple ply. The shell itself is made from some sort of synthetic material and has a water-resistant coating.

Single ply: This is a shell and nothing else, which doesn't mean it's cheap or nasty. A single ply is usually a technical garment for running, cycling or rock climbing – designed to be breathable.

Double ply: This is the most common softshell. Most have a shell and a lining, usually fleece.

Triple ply: This kind of jacket is like a sandwich: shell on the outside, fleece on the inside and a waterproof membrane in the middle. A good quality one can be amazing, but cheaper brands can make you very sweaty.



1 Hi-Tec Sugar Hill

This was the cheapest single-ply softshell we could find, and it's great. The stretch fabric makes it really comfy and there's a bit of extra wind protection on the chest. There's even a fleece strip around the throat. It's designed for cycling or running, but it could be worn for general use, too.

Weight: 394 g
R700 at Hi-Tec hi-tecdirect.co.za

2 First Ascent Renegade

This jacket, made from a combination of XT-1 softshell (a windproof, three-ply shell) and lycra, is designed for cyclists.

The XT-1 dominates the torso area while lycra improves flexibility under the arms and on the sleeves. The only pocket is at the back of the jacket and thumb loops mean you can wear the cuff low on your hand. The Renegade is small enough to fit into your saddlebag.

Weight: 332 g
R1 000 at First Ascent firstascent.co.za

3 The North Face Nimble

The North Face is one of the biggest brands in the US and Europe, but sadly they're not very well represented here. Like the Hi-Tec Sugar Hill, this jacket is a

performance garment that can also be worn casually, although The North Face version is cut from superior cloth. The shell is much stretchier and it's noticeably more breathable.

The North Face also makes a high-spec single-ply softshell called the Iodin, which goes for R1 650.
Weight: 490 g
R1 050 at Sportsmans Warehouse sportsmanswarehouse.co.za

4 Black Diamond Alpine Start Hoody

Black Diamond has been making some of the world's best tents and

climbing equipment for years, but they've only recently entered into the world of outdoor clothing.

The Black Diamond website describes it as a "windshirt" rather than a jacket. It's so small that you can stow it in its own chest pocket. It's specifically designed for mountaineers (you can wear a helmet under the hoody and there's a carabiner loop in the pocket), but its impressive weight-to-wind resistance ratio makes it perfect for hiking. Look for it on shelf from August 2014.

Weight: 232 g
R1 700 at speciality stores like Drifters; rammountain.co.za

FOR REALLY BAD WEATHER

These jackets will keep the wind and most of the rain out, but if it gets seriously wet you'll still need a hard-shell rain jacket on top.



These snazzy zips are completely watertight.

1 K-Way Kano

At first glance, this men's jacket doesn't look any tougher than a regular two-ply softshell, but it plays in the A-team thanks to its waterproof membrane. It's slightly more waterproof than the Hi-Tec Kanya and a bit more breathable, but unlike the Hi-Tec, the zips are unsealed so water will get in eventually.

The Kano has a thin fleece lining and comes in a great variety of colours.

Weight: 646 g
R1 000 at Cape Union Mart capeunionmart.co.za

2 Hi-Tec Kanya

This attractive jacket doesn't have a fleece lining, which means it packs smaller than any of the others in this category. However, you'll need to do more layering on a cold day.

The Dri-Tec membrane had the lowest breathability rating of any jacket on test, which means you'll sweat a lot if you plan to ride or run, but it's okay if you just want to stand on a rock in Gansbaai waiting for a galjoen to bite while the north-wester wreaks havoc around you. It was the only jacket on test with seam-sealed zips throughout – reinforcing the point that it's more of a rain jacket.

Weight: 660 g
R1 100 at Hi-Tec hi-tecdirect.co.za

Got a big head? Control the volume of the hood with this toggle.



3 Columbia Phurtec

This sleek-fitting ladies' hoody looks good and it will keep you darned toasty. The softshell layer is treated with some serious waterproofing and it has a patented Omni-Wind membrane, which is very breathable.

But the best part is the luxuriant "phurry" fleece lining that extends all the way down the sleeves and into the hood. It was by far the warmest fleece on test. Sorry guys, there's no men's version in SA at the moment.

Weight: 766 g
R1 300 at Columbia columbiasportswear.co.za

4 First Ascent Oracle

The Oracle is First Ascent's softshell poster boy. It thrives in horrid conditions but still has a trendy urban look. The main zip is seam-sealed and all of the other zips are hidden from the elements. The waterproof membrane can withstand light to medium rain, and it's more breathable than the Hi-Tec or the K-Way in this category, so it's better for active use. The elasticated inner-cuffs keep the wind out and the fleecy lining keeps you snug.

The Oracle is the jacket of choice for the South African National Antarctic Expedition and for South African skiing champion Alex Heath.

There's a ladies' version too, which costs R1 400.

Weight: 718 g
R1 700 at First Ascent firstascent.co.za

LAUNDRY LIST

All softshell jackets can be machine-washed (on a cold cycle, to be safe). Three-ply softshells require a little more care: avoid fabric softeners and use a technical detergent like Nikwax or Storm (about R50 for a bottle) instead of your regular Omo.

MY STUFF



Trail runner **AJ Calitz** won the 100 km Verdon Canyon Challenge in France and recently broke the Guinness World Record “for greatest vertical height climbing stairs in 12 hours” by running up Table Mountain’s Platteklip Gorge 14½ times in a day!

I never travel without: The daypack containing my running kit, because you never know where there might be an awesome trail or a mountain to explore. The silliest place I’ve ever run was probably in a national park that had recently introduced lions. I’m not saying which one...

Favourite softshell jacket? My waterproof K-Way Kano has a thick fleece lining so it’s great to wear after a race in Europe (it always rains there) or out and about during the Cape winter.

Biggest waste of money? Trekking poles. That’s not to say they’re useless, but they only come in handy on very specific terrain in particular weather conditions. Or if you have an issue with your knees. If you’re a newbie trail runner, don’t bother.

WE TEST

Conductive pads on the forefinger and thumb make the glove touchscreen compatible.



One thing about gloves is that when you’re wearing them, operating the touchscreen on your phone, camera or GPS is a real pain. Not any more! We put these **Capestorm Smart Touch gloves** through their paces.

What are they? Gloves with special pads on the end of the thumb and forefinger, which allow you to use your touchscreen device without having to take the gloves off.

But how? Apparently touchscreens operate by conducting electricity through your fingers. Normal gloves break this circuit, but the pads on the Smart Touch are conductive. Shocking!

Are they worth it? Hell yeah. They don’t cost much more than normal gloves, but they offer a lot more. Apparently the touchscreen pads will wear out eventually, but if you look after them this should take a while. They’re also quite thin, as gloves go, so your hands won’t get too hot.

R170 at Capestorm capestorm.co.za

– Nick Dall