



LIGHTING

What is the flavour of the month?

MARK JOHNSTON discusses what's hot, or not, in outdoor lighting products

The revolution has been swift and absolute.

Ten years ago, when I first began writing about outdoor equipment, light emitting diodes (LEDs) were practically unheard of and headlamps were still only used by a fringe minority of rock climbers and spelunkers.

Today you'd be hard-pressed to find any outdoor lighting product that doesn't contain LEDs. And you just have to visit any campsite, backpacker's hut or nighttime trail-running or adventure-racing event to see that every woman and her schnauzer has made the move to hands-free illumination.

It seems almost twee to mention the benefits again, but in case you've been in jail or something, here goes: LEDs differ from the old incandescent light bulbs in that they're practically indestructible, so much so that manufacturers promise lifespans of up to 100 000 hours (which is essentially another way of saying that you never need to replace them). They also sip electricity, which means significantly longer burn times between battery changes.

The big advantage of headlamps, of course, is that they leave both hands free to hold your ice axes... or flip the boerie without having to put your beer down.

But that's old news. Where are we at now?

What's hot and what's not?

Well, you would also need to have been locked up in prison for the last decade not to know that one headlamp brand has eclipsed all. Petzl. Like Hoover and Tipp-Ex, the name has all but been embraced by popular culture as a synonym for noggin lights (delightfully bastardized to *Pretzel* by some folk here in SA).

This had led to two things. One, the Petzl bosses in France have traded in their Peugeot 306s for Ferraris. Two, the competition has become white hot as rival brands try to grab a piece of the pie.

Obviously, this is healthy for the industry and great news for the customer, who can only benefit when companies are racing head to head like this.

But, as Simon Larsen of RAM Mountaineering (the importers of Black Diamond headlamps)

points out, retailers have their work cut out: "They need to do their homework and stay on top of what's on offer. It's easy to sell what the customer asks for – but when a brand is not offering the best performance or value, then the retailer does his client a disservice by continuing to push that brand."

Indeed, the battle is being fought on several fronts.

What counts

Price, as always, is where much of the heavy artillery is aimed, although interestingly here it doesn't always trump. Yes, cheaper players like Energizer and Leisure Quip have cornered the entry-level market, but at the mid- and top-end Petzl is so well established that it seems many customers are willing to pay more and stick with the name they know.

Looks continue to play a role, with Petzl and Black Diamond both updating their ranges in the past year.

Funky-coloured casings and psychedelic headbands seem to be the order of the day. Packaging, too, has been drawn

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into the fray. According to Cape Union Mart's Evan Torrance, LED Lenser has set the standard in this regard: "Their *Test-It* packaging is a key factor in the consumer's purchasing decision, allowing them to try the product before they buy it."

But, undoubtedly, the most exciting developments have been with performance. Simply put, headlamps have hit the gym in a big way. Not only have they slimmed down; they're more potent than ever before.

Says Torrance: "The most noticeable trend has been the ability of manufacturers to generate far greater power in much smaller units."

Take our trusted friend, the Tikka XP. The old model weighed 95g and had a maximum beam throw of 35m; the new one tips the scales at 88g, yet has a range of up to 60m.

But watch this space. Black Diamond's current Spot already throws 70m on high and is firing a further salvo later this year in the form of the new-generation Spot. A sneak preview has revealed some enticing specs - weight: 89g, beam 70m, plus a bunch of new, yet to be seen technology.

Keep your eyes open for the new Princeton Tec MPLS (Modular Personal Lighting System) designed for the US Military, available from Ram Mountaineering (hint: check out their website www.princetontec.com)

Handhelds

So, does this mean handheld torches are headed the same route as the dodo?

Depends who you ask... and where.

John Fontyn says there has been very little demand for them at his new Camp and Climb store in Cape Town.

Ditto for the Trappers Trading in Fourways, Johannesburg.

But head north to Pretoria and it's a different story entirely. Says Trappers' Richard Turkington: "At our Wonderboom branch we sell one headlamp for every six to eight handhelds."

What gives?

Demographics. Your old-school Afrikaans speakers – the kind with a PO Box number in Wonderboom, for example – still prefer the good ol' handheld torch. It's what they've always used and trusted, and they're in no rush to change.

Tactical lights

Interestingly, one slice of the handheld pie that has seen considerable growth is tactical flashlights. In the past this segment was dominated by the likes of Streamlight and Surefire – both awesome products in terms of durability and performance, but too expensive for your average punter.

That's all changed.

The arrival of more wallet-friendly brands like Fenix, Sniper and LED Lenser (available from Awesome Tools), coupled with leapfrog-

ging advances in LED technology, means you can now become the proud owner of a 120 lumen pocket-sized torch for under R400.

As with headlamps, the competition in this sector has also hotted up.

Smith & Wesson, the American handgun experts, now also make a range of tough, ultra-bright and far-reaching tactical flashlights that are locally available from Kalahari Arms.

The range includes a model featuring super-tough aerospace aluminium casings, a weapon-mountable model with up to 180 lumens brightness with 6-8 hours runtime for self-defence pistols with a tactical rail under the barrel, a LED flashlight that can double-up as a lantern, and carabiners sporting white, blue, red or green LED's.

"The LED Lenser range of products has made a massive impact in the market," says Evan Torrance. "This has caused other brands to innovate faster."

The result is models like the new Maglite XL100, which has a built-in motion sensor that allows you to select different beam settings simply by rotating your wrist to the left or right. It comes with five settings - normal (can be dimmed and brightened), signal, strobe, SOS, and a nightlight that can be reactivated simply by moving the flashlight...

Gimmicky? Perhaps.

But as Richard Turkington puts it: "Guys love gimmicks!"

Battery power

Batteries, it seems, also have the power to make or break a sale, with customers avoiding more obscure or expensive types, such as CR123s, in favour of penlights or AAAs. Not surprisingly, more and more torches now use penlights and AAAs.

One step ahead, however, are the companies that have eschewed batteries altogether in favour of rechargeable or renewable technology.

Camp and Climb, for example, have included a solar-powered lantern as part of their outdoor lighting range, while Black Diamond now offer a fully-rechargeable headlamp called the Sprinter.

At this stage, these items still sell for a premium (the lantern retails for R610 and headlamp around R900), which explains why sales have been slow.

But, as prices come down - as they inevitably do with new technologies - this will almost certainly change. "There's been lots of interest," says John Fontyn.

Perhaps the biggest indication that this is where the market is moving is Petzl's announcement that they'll be launching a rechargeable battery pack in September. Called the Core, it will be compatible with the current crop of Tikka headlamps, and will be sold both independently and bundled with new models.

Let the rechargeable wars begin!