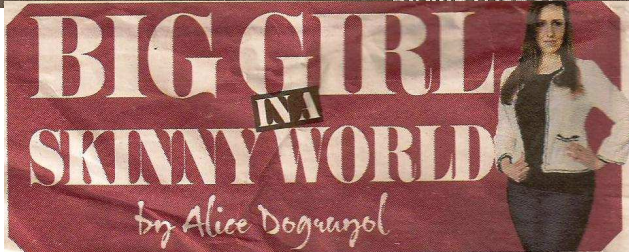




Life & Style

Looking great... self help... relationships... the inner you

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SIX WEEKS to go until my sister's wedding and I'm the size of a house. Forget How To Lose 10lb In Two Weeks. I could write a book entitled How To Gain A Stone In A Month. I can't seem to get a grip on my overeating (and my under exercising) at all. What is worse, I have three weeks to go until my holiday.

I haven't got on the scales, but I don't need to. I am bursting out of all my clothes and developing rolls of fat where I didn't have them before. I have to be honest, it doesn't feel good. I quite like being a size 16. But creeping up to an 18, or even 20, is getting into uncomfortable territory, especially in this heat.

With these extra curves, I have rather high hopes for this season's must-have dress: The Maxi. They always look so good on the hanger, and the fact they are

floor length means there's no need to worry about pasty, untoned gorilla legs.

So, it was with great excitement that I slipped on a maxi from Jigsaw the other day, hoping to emerge a summer sex goddess. First impressions were good. I felt light, floaty and summery. But then I caught sight of my reflection. Less summer goddess. More a potato stuffed into a Bedouin tent. Not a good look.

There are three problems with maxis and big girls. First, the straps are rarely wide enough to conceal a supportive bra. Second, these dresses are often very tight in the boob area. And third, the fabrics tend to be too lightweight, so they billow out and you look far wider than you actually are.

The tiered styles are very unflattering on me. I guess you have to be super slim to pull that off — and even then you'd probably look five months pregnant.

Don't get me wrong. Big girls can wear a maxi dress, but it has to be the right one. The rules to follow are: the heavier the fabric and wider the straps, the better. The odd ruffle to distract the eye is fine, but be wary of bold prints. Some work. Some will make you look (and feel) huge.

Out of the ten maxi dresses I tried on in Jigsaw, only three had potential. The red silk ribbon neckline maxi (£99) was nice, but would have to be worn with spanx, as the dress showed every lump and bump.

The colourful Zanzibar maxi (£145) in pure linen was surprisingly flattering if a little too revealing in the cleavage area.

The everyday linen maxi (£139) was borderline acceptable thanks to the heavyweight fabric.

For those who need to go a bit bigger than size 16, Curvety.com is bound to have something. There is a great range of flattering maxis that go up to a size 32. The Nikki ruffle maxi in black (£89) and the Anniston beaded maxi in wine (£90), by U.S. label Kiyonna, are a fantastic fit and cover what needs covering.

One of my favourites is the nip tuck Yummie Tummie black maxi (£105, yummietummie.com), which has a built-in body-shaping slip. Good-bye jelly belly and lumpy legs. Hello gorgeous curves. I almost look slim in it. When a maxi works, it gives you a great silhouette.

But the *crème de la crème* of big girl maxis is the more dressy blue crepe wrap dress (£275) by Anna Scholz (annascholz.com).

The lovely fabric glides and smooths over your boobs and bottom. The cut nips your figure in, with no need for control pants. It's my greatest hope for my sister's wedding.

When it's as hot as it has been lately, you want cool clothes. Another option is a kaftan, but I've never been a big fan. They generally aren't smart enough for work. Tunic tops are far better, as you can dress them up or down. And I have discovered a great range from a new label called WomenLikeUsClothing.com, set up by Tina Malhamé and former Monsoon and Per Una designer Judith Clutterbuck.

Everything in this funky and generously cut collection (sizes go up to a 22) is 100 per cent cotton and I'm already a fan.

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In the evening and at weekends, I have been wearing the white coconut flower tunic (£35), which is a bit Woodstock chic.

The blue Medici tunic (£49), with its jewels and beads hand-stitched on to the Ottoman neckline, is divine.

For those unpredictable British summer evenings when it suddenly gets cold, I bought the cashmere poncho (£95), which looks glam and is quite warm.

To finish the look, I'm on the hunt for comfortable open-toe shoes. I can't do flats with no cushioning.

Super-trendy they may be, but I need a bit of support, and the French brand Mephistos takes the funky Jesus sandal to another level, adding bouncy high-tech soles. These beauties make tired feet a thing of the past.

The coolest designs are the Hatty (£59.95) in black or silver with a jewel-encrusted toe ring (shoesinternational.co.uk) or the classic style, which are unbelievably comfortable.

The gold Cobra (£49.95) are gorgeous, too.

Even though I'm a bit heavy at the moment, it's a comfort to know not everyone sees me that way. I've been chatted up a few times. I'm not complaining — in fact, I have my eye on a man at work who I keep seeing in the lift.

I don't know his name — yet — but among my colleagues he is known as Mr Muscle. And he's not wearing a wedding ring. So here's hoping I'll be wearing my magnificent maxi to a date.

Maxi profits
Fashion retailer ASOS says demand for maxi dresses helped drive up UK sales by 25 per cent in recent weeks