



High-calibre couture

A Bogota businessman is providing bullet-proof tailoring for presidents, royalty and celebrities. **Robin Esrock** visits the Armani of armour.

Feature



or those in positions of wealth and power, security is embedded into their way of life and, sometimes, even into the very fabric of their clothing.

Just how safe was Barack Obama when he stood up in front of thousands of people to be inaugurated as president of the United States? Obama's last line of defence was, according to sources in the US media, a stylish and discreet bulletproof suit.

There is only one company in the world that is wholly devoted to the manufacture of high-security fashion. Introducing Miguel Caballero, the bulletproof tailor of Bogota, also known as the "Armani for moving targets". Founded in 1992, his eponymously named company has developed an armour-plating technology that allows the subtle infusion of fashion and state-of-the-art personal protection. With a background in marketing rather than weapons or fashion, chief executive Caballero recognised a need for, and subsequently created, what he calls the "high-security fashion business".

Instead of clunky, heavy and uncomfortable Kevlar bulletproof vests, Caballero uses slim panels that can be inserted into a wide range of tailored garments. That such an innovation took place in Colombia, which has one of the world's highest violent crime rates, is no accident. A product manufactured for life in Colombia will do the job just about everywhere else. With 80 per cent of its orders coming from overseas, Caballero's security-conscious customers appear to agree.

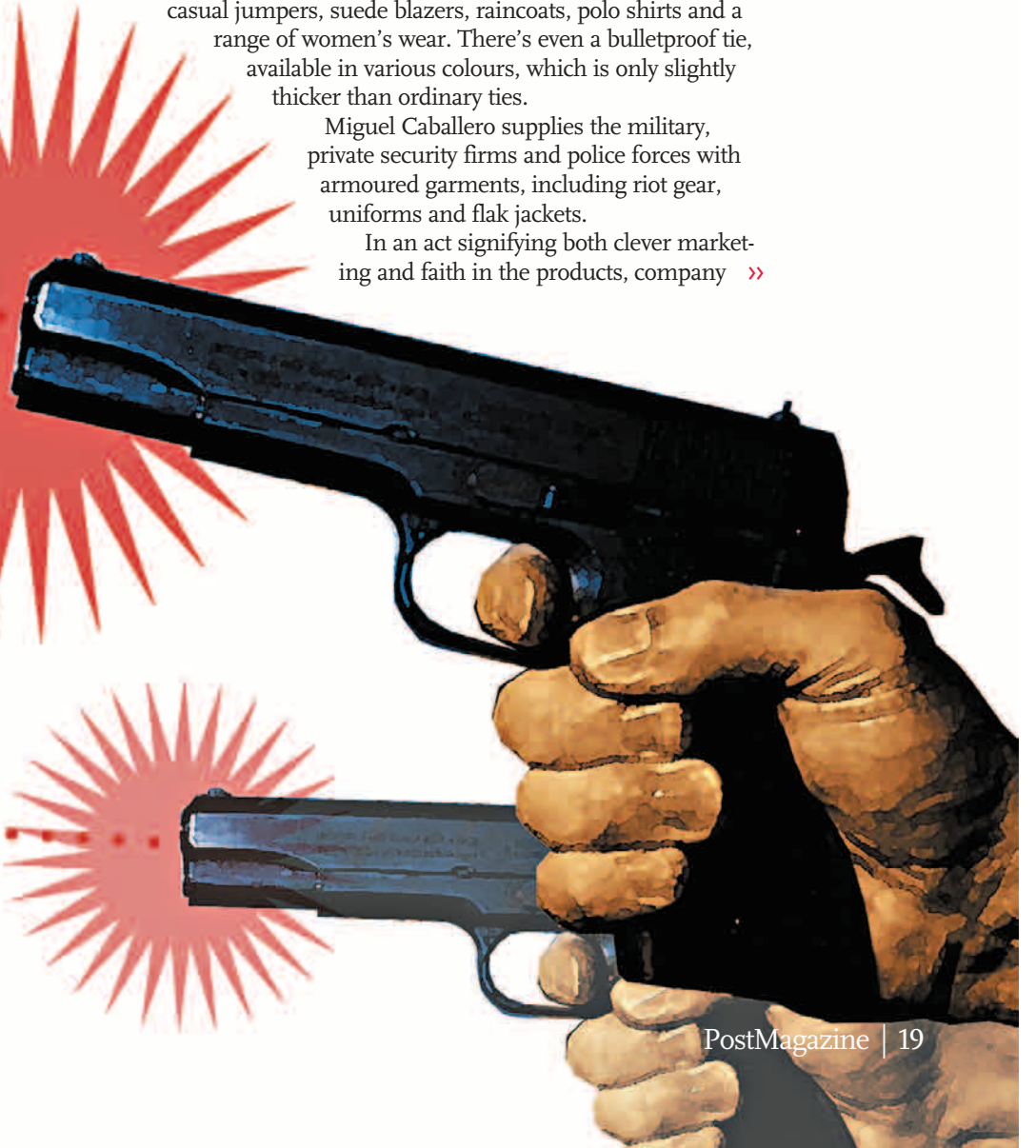
On an unassuming street in Bogota sits the white, low-rise building that serves as the headquarters and factory of Miguel Caballero. With an elite clientele visiting for fittings and some 282 employees, security is tight. Bogota has one of the world's highest rates of kidnapping and Caballero's local clients in the finance and business sectors are prime targets. Visitors are screened in a waiting room before being buzzed into a modest showroom.

Specialised, lightweight plates inside loose-fitting leather jackets are capable of stopping bullets and knife attacks. The product line includes casual jumpers, suede blazers, raincoats, polo shirts and a range of women's wear. There's even a bulletproof tie, available in various colours, which is only slightly thicker than ordinary ties.

Miguel Caballero supplies the military, private security firms and police forces with armoured garments, including riot gear, uniforms and flak jackets.

In an act signifying both clever marketing and faith in the products, company >>

Illustration: Post Magazine





employees are requested to try on each product before it is sold. Then they get shot, to test first-hand its ability to stop a bullet. When your job description includes taking a bullet, you had better believe in what you're selling. Caballero fires the shot, sometimes shooting clients or their bodyguards to satisfy a buyer's peace of mind.

The factory receives regular and curious visitors, many of whom are given guided tours of the premises, although certain parts, such as the vest assembly area, have a strict ban on photographs.

I am handed an Uzi sub-machine gun and told to fire into a vest, which is supported against soft clay that will absorb the bullet, simulate the impact on human flesh and allow accurate measurement. The secured room is small, with employees looking on through a glass window. Standing about 10 feet away from the target, I slowly squeeze the trigger and am surprised how real guns make a sharp, deafening pop, as opposed to the bang we hear in movies. The bullet hits the target almost dead centre. Arias unhooks the vest to reveal a one-inch

Left: Miguel Caballero prepares to shoot an employee dressed in a bullet-proof jacket at his factory. Above: the target of the shooting holds up the bullet.

black leather coat, endorsed by Seagal, I slip on a traditional armoured vest and can immediately feel the difference. While both products protect, one makes the wearer feel like a target, the other makes him feel stealthily invincible.

There are various collections in the Miguel Caballero range, differing greatly in function and price. The Silver collection is designed for private security and includes the kind of vests you see on bank guards, transportation agents and bodyguards. The Classic collection, in standard army or camouflage colours, is designed for military, government and police operations. The Gold collection is for high-profile clients who lead an "American lifestyle" and includes sports clothes and leisurewear.

The newly launched Black collection (with items ranging from HK\$15,000 to HK\$50,000) is designed to appeal, according to the company's catalogue, to "people that prefer European fashion; sober, elegant and exclusive". It includes polo necks, slim-cut leather jackets and lightweight Gore-Tex waterproof coats. Each garment is further customised with a low, medium or high level of armour, depending on the amount of risk and the weapons one expects to be on the wrong side of. The heavier and thicker the vest, the bigger the bullet it is capable of stopping.

Caballero regards the Chinese market as a "very safe one" and in an interview has said his products are not manufactured with markets such as Switzerland in mind. But "there are Chinese business people in Hong Kong and from the mainland who are increasingly travelling to countries, for instance in Southeast Asia, that have security problems," he says.

Whether you are a president, a princess or a businessman on a trip to a city renowned for instability and violence, there's no doubting the peace of mind that comes from knowing your leather jacket will stop a bullet. However, while the labels inside Miguel Caballero's high-security fashion pieces give washing instructions, they do not explain how to prevent someone aiming a gun at you in the first place. ■

Robin Esrock visited Miguel Caballero in Bogota as host of the Nat Geo Adventure series Word Travels. The episode will be shown on April 17 at 8pm.

"There are Chinese business people who are increasingly travelling to countries ... that have security problems"

While company policy is not to reveal the identities of clients, Caballero says satisfied customers include politicians such as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe; royalty such as King Abdullah of Jordan and Prince Felipe of Spain; and Hollywood stars including Steven Seagal, who owns several items, including a one-of-a-kind bulletproof kimono.

When it was reported that the US Secret Service had revealed Obama wore a bulletproof suit, all eyes turned to Miguel Caballero. Caballero, who founded the company while still at university, cites company policy and is content to neither confirm nor deny the claim. While the company has received its share of media attention, it promises clients discretion. They are, after all, only safe as long as the bullet hits the area protected by the armoured panels.

The aim of bulletproof vests is to save lives, not prevent injury. Antonio Arias, the company's ballistics director, carefully measures how each vest absorbs the impact of a bullet, ensuring that while the unfortunate recipient might walk away with a bruise, at least they will still walk.

The exact design is a carefully guarded trade secret but the company has been certified by a number of defence and security regulators (such as the US National Institute of Justice) and holds half a dozen certificates from companies with impressive-sounding acronyms, such as Renar and Icontec.

Arias says that the armoured panels are constructed by layering and compressing nylon and polyester, which absorbs and minimises the impact of a bullet. The advantages of not using traditional Kevlar are lightness, flexibility and discretion.

crater in the soft clay. Smaller bullets might feel like a "finger flick" but an Uzi shot is going to leave a considerable bruise, he says.

With more than a dozen distributors in countries such as Lebanon, Spain, Ukraine and India, Caballero has been on the road a lot these days. The company has showrooms in Guatemala, Miami and Mexico City – where it stands alongside Louis Vuitton, Cartier and Armani stores. Harrods of London also stocks its wares.

Hong Kong-based Ennvy Capital distributes Miguel Caballero products across the Asia-Pacific region. With offices in Central, Ennvy employs a sales force of security experts and people with experience in the fashion and luxury-goods sectors. According to the company, its clientele includes the wealthy elite: royalty, politicians, businessmen, bankers and celebrities. It is also targeting gadget collectors, who are drawn to the technology and the rare nature of the garments.

Being able to embed safety discreetly into fashion is a prerequisite of Miguel Caballero and this means incorporating international styles and customs. While a three-piece suit or leather jacket fits into the lifestyle of many in the United States, it might not work elsewhere. To address this, the company is developing Kurta pyjamas, Nehru vests and coats for India, while colourful tunics have been customised for African clients.

I try on a hooded jumper that would not look out of place on a college campus. Covering my chest are flat panels stitched directly into the fabric of the garment. It feels like I have a paperback book in a pocket, albeit one filled with state-of-the-art technology that could save my life. After trying on a