

FAMILY TRAVEL • ILANA GLAZER • SUMMER SKIING

# Hemispheres

JUNE 2021




THIS MAGAZINE  
HAS BEEN  
TREATED WITH AN  
ANTIMICROBIAL  
PROCESS



Where you  
can watch the  
sun set over  
the Blue Ridge  
Mountains from  
a treehouse at  
Primland

Three  
Perfect  
Days

# Virginia

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

UNITED 





## In Good Shape

Athleta CEO Mary Beth Laughton balances pragmatism  
for the present with innovation for the future

By Sahar Khan • Illustration by Lucie Birant

Mary Beth Laughton took over as president and CEO of Athleta five months before COVID-19 hit. “It was definitely a challenge, but I realized that it was also an opportunity for me to push myself as a leader,” says Laughton, who previously served in executive positions at Sephora and Nike. The laser-focused Harvard Business School grad in turn pushed the women’s athleisure brand, which comprises 5,800 employees and more than 200 stores, to become the only division of Gap Inc. to report an overall increase in revenue in 2020. (Athleta hit more than \$1 billion in sales, up from \$978 million in 2019.) While the athleisure industry as a whole boomed during the pandemic, the company’s success wasn’t guaranteed. “I had to make some tough calls pretty quickly, on everything from our customer and employee experiences to what do we do with the inventory sitting in our stores to how do we evolve our creative processes when everyone’s working from home,” Laughton says. “We were navigating uncharted territory.”

**On guiding Athleta through the pandemic:** “I had to learn to balance being in triage mode and operational mode with continuing to innovate for the future and for the customer. We had to change gears and explicitly do all of

those things, because it was easy to just stay in triage mode. When our stores closed, we ramped up our online business. We ensured we had the inventory we needed, an attractive shipping offer, and good customer service to support more online demand. We brought breathable masks to the market within 90 days of the start of the pandemic, because we knew our customers needed those right away. A little later, we launched a sleep collection, because we saw that our customers were searching more than ever for sleep on our website.”

**On introducing extended sizing:** “In January, we launched inclusive sizing: 350 styles [now 500, ranging from xxs to 3x, plus petite and tall] in all of our stores as well as online. We wanted to do this in a way that allowed customers of all sizes to have the same experience. We added, for instance, 1X to 3X mannequins in all of our stores. We don’t have a separate rack that’s 1X to 3X; every product has all the sizes on the same units. We also did a store-training certification for all store employees to guide them in how to best assist and speak to our inclusive-sizing customers. [We’ve had] customers come into the stores and break down in tears because they haven’t ever had this offering in this integrated way.”

**On building community:** “One thing that was core to our experience during the pandemic was recognizing that customers were craving authentic connection. We were able to offer things like live-streaming community events where thousands of women came together. They could work out together, they could talk to each other about relevant topics, they could hear from strong women like [six-time Olympic gold medalist] Allyson Felix and [best-selling author and activist] Glennon Doyle. It goes back to the importance of relentlessly focusing on your customer. The pandemic showed us that’s more critical than ever.”

**On the future of athleisurewear:** “[The pandemic] debunked the myth that you can’t look stylish when you’re comfortable. As the pandemic evolves and we get back to normal life, people are going to be excited to get dressed up a bit more again and [will want] versatile products. We see a lot of customers who love to wear our comfortable joggers, for instance, with a stylish wrap or a sweater. Mixing and matching that performance product with a performance-lifestyle product is what customers are going to love to do when they go back to the workplace.”