

Still sexy at 60

Skimpy, scanty and sometimes scandalous, the bikini is 60 years young this year. With our love-hate affair as passionate as ever, Pippa Kelly looks back at the star-spangled history of a fashion phenomenon

Bikini – the very word is full of sun-kissed promise and holiday romance. It's fun, flirtatious and, surely, forever young. But amazingly, the timeless two-piece is 60 years old this summer.

So let's rewind to 1946, and a sizzling July day in Paris when French designer Louis Réard dropped the fashion equivalent of an atom bomb...

Flirty Forties

Just days earlier, nuclear tests had been conducted at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, and Réard hoped that his creation, unveiled at a poolside beauty contest, would burst upon the world in a similarly explosive way.

It did – once he'd found a model brave enough to wear it. Shimmy forward the made-for-bikini body of Micheline Bernardini, a strip dancer from the Casino de Paris, who dared to bare when other, more modest models, would not.

The sensation she caused was everything Réard could have hoped. Strictly speaking (and detail is all with such a tiny garment) the bikini is almost as old as civilisation itself, with similar garments appearing in Minoan wall paintings from 1600BC and Roman mosaics from 300AD. But then it vanished for nearly two millennia – and when it reappeared, the world rubbed its eyes in disbelief.

Compared to the cumbersome two-piece swimwear of the day, Réard's creation was shockingly scanty. Little different from the bikini we know today, it was essentially four tiny triangles of fabric held together with string. And in humorous recognition of the furore it was bound to create, the fabric was printed with