



The Beauty of Budapest

Life Styles

Photos by
Christoph Bauer

These classic shoes, handmade by master craftsmen, are a lasting value—and their unique construction makes you feel like you're walking on clouds every step of the way.

Join us as we visit the Budapest factory of the renowned German manufacturer Dinkelacker, where its famed Budapest-style shoes are made.



Made by hand:
Each shoe is manufactured in the original sense of the word—made by hand—in a process consisting of about 300 individual steps

However, the leather isn't the only valuable thing here. The company's most precious property is its lasts, which the master craftsmen at Dinkelacker are continually working to improve according to the newest research on the anatomy of the human foot. They are the jealously guarded secret behind the unparalleled comfort of Dinkelacker's Budapest shoes.

Though Dinkelacker is a German company, its Budapest shoes are made in the city for which they are named, a city famous all over the world for its shoemaking craft. And indeed, what makes Dinkelacker shoes so unusual is that they are handcrafted from beginning to end, and thus one-of-a-kind works of art. That was the case when the company was founded in 1879, and the same holds true today.

Visiting the factory is like stepping back in time. The sounds of hammering and the pungent odors of glue and leather fill the air. The veranda on the third floor is taken up by shoes that have been placed in rows to dry. Piles of leather are weighed against iron weights on enormous scales. The few machines that are in evidence look like they would be more at home in a museum. The only thing that ruins the illusion is a solitary computer in one of the offices.

Indeed, the craftsmen here do most of their work with tools that their grandfathers might have used: hammer and anvil, nails, shoemaker's awl and twine, brushes, and, last but not least, the trusty old Singer sewing machine. Hunched over a piece of leather that her coworker has cut to shape with millimeter-precision, Erzsébet Albecker punches holes with meticulous care and stunningly nimble fingers. Perched on a stool, a half-finished shoe strapped to his thigh, master craftsman Gyula Szücs stitch-

Budapest shoes are probably the best known of all styles of men's dress shoes. What is the secret behind their enduring popularity? As a woman, I can't try on a pair myself, so I decide to go to the source to find out what makes them so special.

It turns out that the source isn't easy to find. There are no fancy signs pointing to the Dinkelacker production site on the outskirts of Hungary's capital. Located in the building of a former women's shoe factory, it is tucked away in a quiet, green suburb whose tidy little houses and lovingly tended fruit and vegetable gardens immediately give away its origins as a village. Dwarfed by a giant factory gate, the gatehouse at the entrance to the factory grounds looks uninviting. But looks can be deceiving: it is staffed with security guards around the clock—and for good reason. The leather stored here alone is worth a fortune: finest buffalo leather from Italy, lustrous aniline calf from France, and cordovan—made from horsehide, which stays smoother because of its high percentage of natural oils—from the famous Horween Leather Company in Chicago.

es away—as he has every day from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. for the past 51 years. In total, 62 stitches per shoe, 124 stitches per pair. The calluses on the 65-year-old's hands testify eloquently to a life of hard work put into his craft. Szücs once calculated that he could circle the globe twice with the twine he himself has used in the past half a century. With the pride of a man who holds himself straight as a ramrod in spite of severe back problems, he says, "In all those years, nothing has changed. We still make the shoes the same way we did back then." Though he's not quite as fast as he used to be, his fingers are as nimble as ever and he can still hold his own with any of the other 26 trained craftsmen employed here. "I still manage to get six or seven pairs done per day."

All in all, the company employs a staff of 35 here in Budapest. The jobs are sought after—they are paid at twice the average Hungarian wage. If one considers that craftsmanship like this can be regarded as an art, it is not surprising that it is rewarded handsomely—though, sadly, it isn't awarded the social recognition it once was. And thus, though Szücs himself has stayed true to the old German proverb that says, "A shoemaker should stick with his last," his son did not choose to follow in his footsteps. As Szücs says with a rueful grin, "He decided to become a vintner instead."

The contrast between Dinkelacker's production facility in Hungary and the company's gleaming new headquarters in Bietigheim-Bissingen near Stuttgart could hardly be more pronounced. It includes an elegant shop where customers can have a master shoemaker take measurements to ensure that the new Budapest shoes will fit like a second skin.

With a retail price of €400–600 a pair, they don't come inexpensively. The steep price notwithstanding, authorized distributor Andreas Schläwicke—a passionate salesman if there ever was

Masters of the art:
In the Dinkelacker manufactory in Budapest, craftsmanship is elevated to an art



one—hasn't found it difficult to interest the buyers of the up-scale Hamburg and Berlin shops he caters to. As he says, "People don't need much persuading when it comes to Budapest shoes. They represent luxury in the best sense of the word—exclusivity and pure pleasure."

If you take a look into the craftsmanship that is put into every shoe, it's easy to understand why they cost what they do. The leather is steamed to make it supple; then the pieces of leather for the upper are "clicked" (i.e., cut out) and stitched together. The next steps are "closing"—stitching the pieces of the uppers and lining together—and "lasting," or pulling the stitched-together upper and lining over the last and clamping it in place. It remains on the last for several days before it is removed—that ensures the shoe will retain its shape for a long time. Then the upper and lining are hand-sewn or "welted" to the flexible insole, with the thread knotted after every stitch. An additional cork insole is added for extra comfort and a "springy" step. Other steps include "making" (stitching the welt to the outsole and building the heels of the shoe) and "finishing" (polishing the uppers and soles, smoothing down the heel and sole edges, applying the edge dressing to the sole and heel edges, etc.).

All in all, it takes about eight hours of work to make one pair of shoes, or approximately 300 steps—each executed by hand, don't forget—before the finished product undergoes its final inspection. If it passes muster, it is stamped with an inspection number and hand-signed by the master craftsman before it is ready to go to stores.

Currently, Dinkelacker produces about 8,000 pairs of shoes a year. The distinguished company can look back on a 130-year tradition and was until recently run by the family of founder Heinrich Dinkelacker. Recently it opened a new chapter in its history when Heinrich's grandson Burkhardt Dinkelacker decided to place his grandfather's lovingly maintained legacy into the capable hands of Norbert Lehmann.

He couldn't have made a better choice, because Lehmann believes in traditional craftsmanship as passionately as Dinkelacker ▶



himself did. Lehmann bought his first pair of Budapest shoes 35 years ago. The native of Bietigheim had just graduated with a degree in business management and was set to apply for his first “real” job, an executive-level position at IBM. Because his closet contained neither the requisite dark blue suit nor dress shoes, he went shopping. He was hooked. “I haven’t worn any other kind of dress shoes since.” And indeed, his “Budapesters” seem to have worked like a charm—at least as far as his career is concerned. Lehmann held numerous high-level positions on the executive and supervisory boards of various companies before joining Dinkelacker as managing partner.

The position represented a perfect opportunity for a firm believer in the Dinkelacker product, though Lehmann does admit to being “shocked” when he first saw the rustic factory. “But I was soon captivated by the charm of the traditional methods and the passion put into every shoe.” Shortly after he came on board, he recruited the help of an experienced expert: Hermann Hoste, a former member of the board at Salamander, one of Europe’s leading shoe companies. They are both confident that the current sales volume of €1.6 million per year can be increased. According to Hoste, “Dinkelacker shoes are an exclusive niche product, and with a good marketing strategy stressing the quality of our handcrafted shoes and fostering personal identification with our brand, I have no doubt we can tap into a larger segment of the national and international markets.”

By the way, human beings walk an average of about 100,000 miles during their lifetime. That’s a lot of miles. But when it comes to Budapest shoes, the same principle that applies to a Porsche applies here: the key to getting maximum mileage and performance is maintenance.

The good news is—with good care and frequent tune-ups, they’ll last a lifetime. ◀

This article is one of the last ones written by our esteemed colleague, the late Jutta Deiss, though a few facts were brought up to date.

Going the Distance

A Guide to Men’s Shoe Styles

As a rule of thumb, wear lace-up shoes for your most formal occasions. Open-throat or wide-set laces are less dressy than shoes with closed-throat or close-set laces. Cap-toed shoes are considered dressier than wingtip shoes.

BUDAPEST

Originating in Hungary, the classic among men’s shoes is a full brogue with sporty Derby-style open-throat lacing that lends it a refined yet casual look. “Budapesters” are double-stitched and fashioned on special round-toe lasts that give them their characteristic form with high walls upturned at the toe. They go equally well with suits and casual clothing.

BOOT

Boots come in a wide range of cuts, but the shaft always extends at least to the ankle. Boots are now considered appropriate for work during cold weather in all but the most conservative offices.

DERBY

The Derby is characterized by its wide-set lacing; the various styles have between two and five holes. The classic Derby has a smooth vamp, but it is also produced in half-brogue styles, with a straight toe cap featuring decorative perforations, and as a full brogue with a wing tip. They usually have a more casual, sporty look than the Oxford.

FULL BROGUE

This sturdy shoe features a robust sole and sides and is characterized by the elegant decorative perforated hole pattern on the toe cap. Full brogues are the perfect companions for practically any occasion.

SEMI-BROGUE

Though closely related to the Full Brogue, the design of the Semi-Brogue is finer and more filigree, and the pattern of holes is more restrained. This less sporty men’s shoe model is probably not for every man, and its elegant look is more suited to events of an official or formal nature.

LOAFER

Typically flat, slip-on shoes with no laces, loafers come in many styles, both elegant and casual. Most loafers have a strap across the vamp incorporating decorative elements such as buckles, tassels, or, in the case of the classic “penny loafer,” a cutout. A shoehorn is a must when putting them on, or else they can easily lose their shape. Loafers are considered more appropriate for leisure pursuits than for business wear.

LONGWING

A striking, more sportive variation of the classic wingtip, in which the wings extend all the way back to the heel. Especially popular with younger buyers.

MONK

An extravagant cross between a loafer and a Derby, Monks have a buckle on the side rather than laces.

OXFORD

The “father” of all men’s business shoes. The restrained design makes for a very elegant effect. Usually made of high-quality, smooth black leather, Oxfords are easily recognized by their close-set lacing.

Stepping Out



Quality has its price, and that's as true at the Dinkelacker store as anywhere else. But customers can rest assured they'll be getting excellent value for their money at Talstrasse 19 —conveniently located near Bietigheim's medieval city center and just a few minutes' drive away from Porsche's hometown of Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen.

The pleasurable anticipation of getting a handcrafted shoe quickens the pace of the customers who come here from all over the world. Dinkelacker uses twelve different lasts to make a total of 60 different models.

In the shop, customers are fitted for their personal pair by master craftsman Christoph Renner. This constant contact keeps him in close touch with the Zeitgeist, and in the course of his private "market research" he has discerned a new trend. "People have become more quality-conscious, and now the younger generation has started to discover us." And why not? After all, the desire to buy a pair of shoes that will last a lifetime is not restricted to any one age group. "If you pay for custom-made shoes, you have the right to expect something special." And that's what you get—every step of the way. ◀

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Measure of success:
Master shoemaker Christoph Renner

