

Tango shoes for men and women are one of the specialist footwear categories that the Argentinean Footwear Association hopes will bring an export boost. PHOTO CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK



Argentina wants to boost footwear exports

The vice-president of the Argentinean Footwear Association (CIC), Sergio Panossian, and the organisation's general secretary, Horacio Moschetto, began the year with a meeting with the minister for overseas trade, Beatriz Paglieri, telling her that the country's footwear manufacturers were aiming to produce 125 million pairs in 2012, 8.5% more than in the previous year. They asked her to consider setting up a new footwear arrangement with Brazil. For the last three years, Argentina has limited the number of shoes that have come across the border from its larger neighbour, to 15 million pairs in 2009, 14.2 million pairs in 2010 and, with final figures still to become clear, a similar number estimated for 2011. CIC would like to put a similar arrangement in place for 2012 and beyond.

Another topic of conversation was a request from CIC that the government help Argentinean footwear manufacturers to boost their exports. The organisation said Argentina had only exported two million pairs in 2011, although it noted an increase in demand in overseas markets for higher-end made-in-Argentina footwear, including specialist boots for polo, shoes for dancing the tango (especially popular in Japan, apparently) and high-end fashion shoes for the Australian market. At the end of the meeting, Horacio Moschetto said it had been "excellent and very productive".

Local needs

The ministry of industry has said that its policies of controlling imports are helping the local industry meet the needs of the Argentinean market. In addition to the policy governing imports from Brazil, antidumping measures on shoes from China mean importers have to pay the customs authorities \$13.38 for each pair they bring in from there. In an earlier footwear plan announced at the end of March 2011, the ministry said it aimed to help the local industry produce 200 million pairs by 2020 and export 50 million of them (creating 12,000 new jobs in the process). Total output of 200 million pairs seems achievable by the end of the decade, if annual growth of 8.5% continues (there is no certainty it will, of course); the increase from 2002 to 2011 represents growth of 153%.

Exports have increased too over this period but, at 1.7% of the total output, the target of 25% seems a long way off. A focus on the internal market means shoe imports decreased in volume by 10% in 2011 compared to the year before, with the total reaching 24.8 million pairs. This means Argentinean-manufactured shoes supplied 82% of the country's footwear needs of 137.8 million pairs (around 3.4 pairs per person).

Follow-up comments that Horacio Moschetto has given to

Representatives of Argentina's footwear industry have met with the country's minister for external trade, Beatriz Paglieri, to discuss aims for 2012.

World Footwear suggest that high demand from Argentinean consumers is the main reason why only two million out of 115 million pairs of shoes made in the country in 2011 went to customers overseas. "There has been an enormous increase in the national demand for shoes," he says. Mr Moschetto makes it clear that CIC views an increase in export trade as "fundamental for the growth of the sector". His organisation is working hard to raise the profile of Argentinean footwear in external markets and to promote exports, he says, and to make sure that a higher proportion of the domestic footwear industry's output leaves the country in future. The institution has organised overseas trade missions in the recent past and encouraged Argentinean footwear brands to take part in exhibitions in other countries. Examples that the general secretary offers include special show-room events for Argentinean shoes in Chile and Peru, and participation in exhibitions in Germany, China, Colombia, the US and Italy.

Since 2007, CIC has also played a part in arranging for groups of international buyers to attend the EFICA footwear exhibition, which takes place each year in Buenos Aires with summer editions in January or February and winter ones in July or August. Footwear buyers from Bolivia, France, the UK, Ecuador, Japan and Norway have been participants at recent events. Principal export destinations for Argentina's footwear brands at the moment are Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Brazil and Bolivia in their own region, and beyond that the United States. Targeting lucrative markets in Asia and Australia is part of the policy to expand the reach of the country's footwear exports, even if polo boots for China and tango shoes for Japan seem unusual ideas at first glance.

Sport of kings and gentlemen

Of the 77 countries in which people regularly play polo now, Argentina is one of only a handful in which there are professional players. The game in China is amateur for the moment, but is attracting a following among the newly wealthy in big municipalities such as Beijing and Shanghai (see panel). The boots are typically riding boots that come to just below the wearer's knee, leaving room for separate protective knee-pads. An expensive product, polo boots by brands such as Bautista

POLO PROVES POPULAR IN CHINA

Xia Yang, a former architect based in Beijing who turned his hand to property development and has made large amounts of money in the Chinese economic boom, founded the Sunny Time polo club in China's national capital in 2004. He told the *Daily Telegraph* in a 2008 interview that he believed polo was one way for the newly wealthy there to gentrify themselves a little. He said: "In the West, polo is said to be an aristocrats' sport. We don't have aristocrats in China, but we do have a lot of people who have become very rich very quickly. I want to encourage them to behave like gentlemen, and playing polo is part of that."

Soon after this, China set up its own national polo association, under the auspices of the Chinese Equestrian Association and the number of clubs grew. In February 2012, 12 top international teams gathered in the municipality of Tianjin for the first Snow Polo World Cup to be hosted in Asia.



Polo boots are another specialist luxury product that the Argentinean footwear industry believes can make an impact in export markets, especially in emerging economies such as China's. PHOTO CREDIT: LA MARTINA

Heguy are often handmade with high quality materials, from high-end bovine leather to hand-waxed thread for durability and long, especially robust zips.

Perhaps the best known international brand for polo equipment in general is Buenos Aires-based La Martina. Its boots come in buffalo as well as cow leather, tailor-made with prices starting at \$600 per pair. La Martina claims that the vegetable-tanned leather it uses on the soles of its polo boots undergoes a seven-month tanning process to achieve the right level of durability.

Tango in Tokyo

Wealthy people are also responsible for bringing the tango to Japan, although originally this was a dance of the working-class areas around the ports of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. As a result of a Japanese aristocrat, Tsunayoshi Megata, developing a lasting passion for the dance while visiting Paris in the 1920s and taking it back home, Japan has a long history of tango academies and orchestras. No less a figure than famous Argentinean tango composer Edmundo Rivero dedicated two tunes to Mr Megata and travelled to Japan on tour in the 1960s. In recent years, Japanese dancers Hiroshi and Kyoko Yamao and Chizuko Kuwamoto (with a partner from Argentina) have won world tango championships, and in so doing have helped maintain the popularity of the tango in their home country.

Just as the tango is an elegant and sensual dance, tango shoes for women tend to be spectacularly sexy, high in the heel (7.5 or 8.5 centimetres is typical) and open at the vamp, with straps across the ankle to secure them. Alicia Muñiz loved tango and the milongas (dance halls devoted to tango) of Buenos Aires so much, she founded a footwear brand, Comme Il Faut, dedicated to hand-made tango shoes in 2003. She says the secrets of a good tango shoe are the design, the quality of the materials and the technical know-how to make the shoes (especially the heels) strong, safe and comfortable enough to dance in. Other prominent brands include Flabella, Bandolera, Raquel, Soy Porteño and Delié. For men, classic spats in black and white are very popular. The tango delights and entrances audiences and participants all over the world now and it's only natural that Argentina's footwear brands should seek to gain popularity for their tango shoes in the wake of this.

CIC organised special commercial missions to Japan and China in the course of 2011, Mr Moschetto confirms, and "worked arduously" to secure openings in those markets for polo and tango footwear. He explains: "The success we have had is down to the fact that the Argentinean footwear industry has always counted on leather as its main raw material. This is a competitive advantage and it has allowed us to earn prestige at a world level. It's all thanks to the capacity and experience of our tanneries and our skilled workforce." 