

Footwear fair GDS took place in Düsseldorf in September and has something for the entire family, or family retailer. It covers high-end Italian footwear from brands such as Fratelli Rosetti, trendy young styles from Nat-2, mainstream sneakers from KangaROOS, comfort shoes from Clarks and children's shoes from companies such as Primigi.

A fair for the family

Although the US might be the world's largest market for city comfort footwear, the European brands arguably still lead in innovation at the upper end of the market. Högl and Ara from Austria with their women's shoes, clogs by Softclogs, nature form footwear from FitWear (the German name for FitFlops) and Birkenstock, and wide-fitting comfort leather shoes for the mature market from Solidus are all popular well beyond their home markets.

At GDS, there is an entire hall dedicated to comfort and wellness and it is an excellent place to study the big (and smaller) players. Many of the shoes are 'brown shoes', rather than sneakers, although sneaker and athletic technology is often used, and the younger brands like to go for a hybrid sneaker look—such as suede uppers on rubber or blown PU soles on day shoes for smart work wear.

Inside the shoes

With so many brands competing, each needs a point of difference or unique selling point. Marketing and point of sale can be just as important as the look of the product. But what goes inside the footwear is even more important. With increasing use of orthotics, a soft insock alone is often not enough, so comfort shoes now regularly have lasts that allow for the insock to be replaced with a custom orthotic.

Dromedaris, which makes its own-brand comfort shoes in Portugal, sold mainly in the US and Canada, has patented a triple layer insock with Carbosan cushioning at both the heel,



S Oliver shoes feature a new ANTishock heel system.

CREDIT: GDS

where it is thicker, and at the forepart where it is slimmer. There is additional latex sponge cushioning and a leather top cover. These insoles provide excellent comfort because each one is moulded to follow the shape of the last. They have an instant comfort feel when the customer tries on the shoes.

Air keeps feet cool in summer, and acts as a cushion too. Mephisto's soft air midsole ventilates and cushions and claims to make tired feet a thing of the past.

In comfort shoes, cushioning and air are key words. Since many of these shoes are aimed at the older market segment, there is less talk of "barefoot technology" and more of cushioning not just the feet, but reducing shocks all the way up the legs and the spine.

TredFlex from the UK debuted at GDS with its "24-seven" comfort system for men. It uses leather uppers and lining, an active charcoal insock with padded arch support, airflow for extra ventilation, an additional foam layer for comfort, a flex control insole board with cuts in the forepart for additional flex and a rubber outer sole with air pockets.

Comfort doesn't just mean flat shoes either. High heels are cushioned too. The Wortmann group, which includes big brands such as S Oliver, Caprice and Tamaris, has successfully marketed its Europe-wide patented ANTishock heel system with air chambers and stabilisers inside which are claimed to "cushion the step by over 50%". The Tamaris collection also has "Touch It", a soft insole that moulds to the individual's foot.

In the same Wellness and Comfort hall, Gore-Tex promoted Surround Technology with 360-degree breathability. The upper is highly breathable but uses a waterproof membrane, while the sole has holes covered with Gore-Tex and a layer of metal mesh to protect the membrane, so that the foot can breathe underneath as well as via the upper. Tore Stromfors, Gore's Scandinavia representative, explained that a lot of research has been done with brands such as Legero, Primigi and Viking, and the company is working hard to make the new technology understandable to both retailers and consumers.

New at GDS was SeeSawShoes from South Korea, with a newly invented and patented forefoot rocker system. The soles are designed to reduce energy consumption and allow the wearer to go further. The extended metatarsal bar raises the joint on the inside of the foot only, with a cushion pad above built into the midsole. This creates a forefoot rocker system to improve plantar pressure distribution.

The designer and inventor, with many footwear papers and patents under his belt, believes that his system is suitable for children as well as adults – especially for women, who tend to have more forepart discomfort than men. Samples were made on sports-inspired soles, but the system is just as suitable for leather dress shoes, where it can be very discreet.

Natural materials

Sustainability is also a key word, especially in the German market which is very precise at following EU environmental guidelines on many matters, from not using azo dyes to recycling shoe boxes. Softclog clogs have a rubber section in the forepart to make them flexible. The clogs are made of high-quality alder or poplar and come from a sustainably managed forest in Europe.

Pure boiled and felted wool has long been popular in



SeeSawShoes



TredFlex



Nat-2



FitWear

CREDITS: PENNY LEESE/TREDFLEX



Heel Bopps for placing on stilettos, which reportedly add comfort and stability. CREDIT: PENNY LEESE



The Glow Brand glows in the dark, designed for nightclubs.

CREDIT: PENNY LEESE

Austria for clothes and indoor shoes. Giesswein and Living Kitzbühel are able to compete in the market as nobody else has yet mastered the process to make their felted slippers. They are made from long-staple-fibre wool which is boiled and felted, often with a rib-knit collar and the flexible shoes are then dipped in non-marking latex rubber to make the soles. Bright colours and constantly changing designs help, of course. Pure wool's qualities are well understood by consumers.

Even kids shoes get comfortable – and ethical. Kavaf of Sweden has the Swedish ecological (organic) certification with full vegetable-tanned leather uppers and linings, with the shoes built on foot-friendly Scandinavian lasts.

Wild fashion

In contrast to all this comfort, there was some crazy fashion at GDS. Brands such as Nat-2 showed iridescent, lenticular and reflective sneakers made for the P1 Munich night club, a co-branding – all naturally PVC free, of course.

The Glow Brand – also designed for night clubs – had neon high-heeled moulded platform court shoes which glow in the dark. Eco credentials are not forgotten though – the shoes are recyclable and 10% goes to charity – a different charity for each colour.

There is room for the wild and creative in the beach-themed area with small booths. Anne Vaandrager showed handmade latex shoes that are plainly works of art, rather than shoes to wear.

To end, wild and comfort get combined with function, clunky pyramid-shaped Heel Bopps are placed on stiletto heels to add more comfort and stability – and they are made a feature of in their bright colours and glitzy decorations.

Next year, GDS will be held earlier than usual, from March 12-14 March, in Düsseldorf, Germany. 📍

Softclox wooden sole with rubber flex part.

CREDIT: SOFTCLOX

