

"The biggest trade fair in the world" seemed almost an understatement when Penny Leese visited the bi-annual Canton Fair in Guangzhou, China, in early November 2014.

All under one roof

Since it covers all types of goods from boots to boats, the famous China Import and Export Fair, popularly known as the Canton Fair, is divided into three phases, each five days long. "It's massive," comments UK-based buyer Antony Nathan, of fashion footwear distributor and manufacturer 33 Joins.

The statistics are impressive. It covers 1,125,000 square-metres, with 56,915 standard booths, and the organisers value the business transactions that take place under their roof each time at more than \$30 billion. They expect 188,000 overseas buyers when the fair next takes place, in April 2015. It is on several levels, with a good infrastructure, walkways and golf carts to transport visitors around.

All major services such as freight forwarders and shippers are on the major walkways. There are food halls and coffee shops offering everything from Starbucks to Chinese noodles in the

middle floor. Major hotels, such as the high-end, Hong Kong-based Langham Place are within walking distance. Entry for overseas visitors is relatively simple, with an entry card with photo ID costing around \$15 lasting 10 years (don't lose it as a replacement costs double). Local Chinese visitors need to re-register every fair, and must be accompanied by an overseas buyer. This means that the visitors are all serious buyers, and there are no "tourists". It is definitely a hard-working fair, with much sourcing, buying and meetings going on.

The footwear phase is the third and final stage, held at the same time as garment and textiles, luggage and bags, office supplies, medicines, and food. There are five large footwear halls. As at GDS, many of the footwear stands are sponsored by local governments, such as Xiamen or Jinjiang. Since the major footwear areas in China specialise in certain types of footwear, this makes finding products easier as they tend to be

China Import and Export Fair Complex in Guangzhou, considered world's largest convention and exhibition centre.

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grouped together. For example, you can find good quality injection factories in Xiamen, and sporty shoes in the Jinjiang area, with more inexpensive fashion synthetic shoes coming from Wenzhou.

Many of the smaller sponsored booths are set up by factories selling directly, whereas the more elaborate stands will often be trading companies representing several different factories. These days, most of the people working at the fair have at least one good English-speaking person to provide information, and to take sample or production orders. The larger trading companies often have staff who either live, or have lived, in Europe so that they have a good understanding of the different markets' needs and of size conversions and so on. Also, more and more Chinese factories today are working to meet EU REACH requirements, and advertise this on their stands.

European shoe agents visit the fair, to sample and photograph shoes from suppliers they know are reliable (which means they deliver on time and can meet specifications and quality) and to meet new ones. Then they go home and present relevant photographs or actual samples to the buyers of major retail chains, and then redesign or re-specify them to each customer's requirements. One danger for inexperienced buyers at the fair is that they can buy a shoe, and then find that exactly the same shoe that has been sold to someone else, or that it is a copy of a shoe already being sold in their home market.

Few of the Chinese factories have western designers and for this reason they often show their own customers' shoes on their stands, or copies they have made of shoes they have bought or seen on the internet. After walking around the fair for a while, you see the same or similar shoes several times. The western agents cover a lot of work for the shoe buyers of major retail groups as they (the agents) know what sort of minimum quantities are needed for placing orders, know what the duty rates are for the different materials and handle the technical side, such as organising fit tests or materials testing. For example, agents know a UK retail group or distributor will be happy to buy direct-injected shoes with PVC outsoles, as they are economically priced, whereas the German market needs to have thermoplastic rubber soles instead, as most major customers there will not accept PVC.

There are European buyers who have visited the fair for several years now, and you can usually hear several Australian accents at the fair, although fewer from North America. Now that Russia is a more open market, Russians were seen looking at warm lined, thermal snow boots, while some buyers from the Middle East were looking for stock. Talking to the Chinese factory owners, they say that Europe is now a stable market, and very price-competitive. Their main interest now lies in growth markets such as the Middle East, particularly the United Arab Emirates (a country mentioned by several people) and Russia.

The Canton Fair is primarily a working fair, a good place to meet existing or new Chinese suppliers. Price comparisons are not always accurate as the prices often seem to magically increase after the initial samples have been ordered. It is not the place to go to see the newest designs, although an increasing number of companies now show own-label shoes with own designs. You need to know what you are looking for, have a fair idea of the price you want to pay, and how many pairs you will estimate to buy before you go. But it is definitely worth a visit, even if only to be impressed by the size. 📍

Some of the footwear featured in November's show.

CREDIT: WTP

