

It's more than geography that separates Mexico's two main centres of footwear production, Guanajuato and Jalisco. Unlike its more famous neighbour, Jalisco devotes itself almost entirely to designing and manufacturing shoes for women.

A woman's world

There is no doubting the dominance of the city of León and the state of Guanajuato in the overall Mexican shoe industry. It claims to make around 70% of the 260 million pairs of shoes and boots the country's 11,500 footwear producers are making per year and 63% of the more than 25 million pairs that Mexico exports each year. But when it comes to women's shoes, there is another Mexican state, Jalisco, that insists it leads the way.

In May last year, on taking up the position of president of local industry association CICEJ, José Isabel Arias Frías said the industry in Jalisco has a workforce of just over 21,000 people at the moment producing 55 million pairs of shoes a year, six million of which go for export. He said then that he wants producers in Jalisco to expand and to recruit 2,000 new workers. The demand justifying this expansion is real, Mr Arias insists: Mexican women clearly love shoes as much as women in most other parts of the world.

Locally made

Naturally, the women of Mexico are more likely to choose locally made shoes if these satisfy a desire for elegant, stylish, fashionable footwear with high levels of design content. Fortunately for them, there are programmes in place in Jalisco to nurture local design talent and to make sure local manufacturers have good access to new ideas and materials. Mr Arias believes it is of great advantage to CICEJ that its headquarters are co-located in one building in Guadalajara with Jalisco's main industry bodies for furniture, jewellery and apparel manufacturers, all of which have strong design teams of their own. "The simple fact is that we all feed off each other," the CICEJ president says. "We inspire each other. This is very important in helping us keep up with the fashion demands of women's footwear."

Footwear also features prominently in the work of CIAD, an "integrated centre of advanced design", based in the same building in Guadalajara. Michelle Casillas, who runs promotions and events for CIAD says a student design competition called ModaArte, which she co-ordinates, is helping boost the fashionability of made-in-Jalisco women's shoes. "It's a programme that has been going for 19 years now," Ms Casillas says, "and there are past participants, including people who didn't win at the time, who are now making shoes and selling them under their own brands. Participants get to use the 3D printers and other high-tech equipment we have in place at CIAD and we help pair them up with manufacturers so that they can have prototypes of their shoe design ideas made."

Student links

Over the years, the ModaArte (the name combines the words for fashion and art) team has presented the programme



The winner of the 2017 ModaArte student design competition, Sandra Carolina Escalante.

CREDIT: CIAD

to more than 11,500 university students and forged links with universities at home and abroad. As a result the programme has received a total of almost 10,000 entries.

On each occasion, CIAD launches the ModaArte programme, takes its message to students and then receives drawings of students' design ideas. A dedicated panel of judges selects finalists and it's at this stage that the future footwear designers are given time to work in the CIAD studios to turn their two-dimensional design idea into a three-dimensional design. Each finalist's design will then go to a local manufacturer, more than 250 of which have engaged with the competition since its inception, to produce a shoe. Participants have plenty of freedom, but in recent years there has been a growing emphasis on specifically Mexican style.



All of these shoes go on display at a glamorous ModaArte gala final at which the winner is announced, and all the prototypes and designs later make up an exhibition that the CIAD team takes on tour. In 2017, the winner was local student Sandra Carolina Escalante. As part of her prize, she was able to visit the Inspiramais materials exhibition run by Brazilian footwear association Assintecal in São Paulo in January this year, which she described as the opportunity of a lifetime.

A different set of skills

Ms Casillas makes light of any rivalry between the footwear industry's representatives in Jalisco and Guanajuato and points out that the ties between the two are strong, not least because Jalisco producers materials, including leather, and components

If Guanajuato dominates the production of men's and children's shoes in Mexico, Jalisco is the leading producer of fashion shoes for women.

CREDIT: CIAD

from Guanajuato. She says she doesn't know for sure why her state focuses more on women's shoes while Guanajuato concentrates more on men's and children's footwear. "It's a tradition that has grown up," she says.

For José Isabel Arias, who runs his own women's footwear brand, Arifree, it's an extremely important tradition. He explains: "Women's shoes require a different, more delicate set of skills and those skills have been building up in Jalisco for generations." 