

A MILE IN HIS MOCCASINS

THERESA HAROLD discovers what goes on behind the scenes to create Tod's iconic shoes and bags

TOD'S PRESIDENT AND CEO Diego Della Valle once said, "Real luxury isn't flying by private jet. It's not needing the jet at all." This emphasis on quality – specifically, quality of life – rather than ostentation lies at the heart of the Tod's philosophy.

Each Tod's piece, be it a shoe or a bag, is made entirely by hand at the company's atelier in the Marche region of Italy. What began as a small factory at the beginning of the 20th century has since expanded into a 172,000-square-foot facility, the largest of its kind in Italy. Using time-honoured techniques similar to those of saddle-makers, the artisans of Tod's fuse tradition with innovation to create products worthy of the term "luxury".

There are more than 100 steps in the making of a Tod's shoe. The process begins with the most important part: inspecting the leather. Overseen by in-house leather master Antonio Ripani, the team checks the hides for any imperfections or irregularities, ready to reject any that don't make the grade. As well as keeping an eye out for flaws, Ripani and his team also monitor thickness and colour to ensure a consistent finish. Bought only from the finest tanneries in the world, the exceptional skins are all natural and never artificially dyed. Some will undergo a process whereby they are placed in soil to develop an antique quality, ageing them through careful exposure to light and air. It can often take years for the right texture and shade to be achieved. So there's no need to





worry about your treasured Tod's item losing its sheen, as well-treated leather only improves with age.

Once a hide has been approved, it's passed on to the cordwainer to cut. Using a template, the shoemaker scores the leather with a sharp knife, ensuring a smooth edge as he slices. Small apertures are punched at the edges of the leather to serve as the holes for stitching later. On the same piece of leather, larger holes are made in the centre – these are where the rubber "pebbles" of the Gommimo sole will be pushed through. Only at this stage will the distinctive Tod's logo be embossed on the leather, marking it as impeccable. For the rubber sole, the craftsman will use a tool repeatedly to stamp circles on the material, enabling the "pebbles" to protrude when he bends the rubber. Once this is done and cut out, the studded sole is pushed through the leather that was prepared at the start, before being stitched together tightly. Years of training make this procedure appear effortless, but the level of precision required is difficult to master.

After that, another specialist takes over to complete the sewing of the moccasins. Depending on the design of the shoe, there can be up to 35 separate pieces to stitch together by hand. It's important that each stage of the shoe-making operation be handled by a person trained in that particular skill. Finally, the logoed leather insole is slipped into the shoe, and a sponge is used to polish and buff. It only remains for the finished product to be stuffed with tissue paper (to help it retain its shape), before being packed by hand into the brand's signature orange box.

Thus, the timeless Tod's Gommimo is born. Created in the late 1970s, the iconic moccasin was designed with versatility in mind. Della Valle was inspired by a visit to the US, where he came across a relaxed yet elegant approach to dressing. He longed to introduce this idea to Italy where, he realised, people lacked stylish, well-made shoes that could take them from professional to casual occasions with ease. Named for the 133 rubber "pebbles" located on the sole (*gommino* means rubber in Italian), the shoe has been remade in a multitude of colours and materials – yet it remains an instantly recognisable classic.

Another star of the Tod's family is the acclaimed D-Bag. Understated and refined, the tote has become a must-have since its release in 1997. Its simple design showcases the superior quality of the leather and craftsmanship. At the Tod's D-Bag Retrospective held in Hong Kong last March, visitors were invited to see a D-Bag being handmade by an artisan from Italy. Transforming pieces of butter-soft leather into an enduring wardrobe staple normally takes two and a half days, but the audience was treated to an accelerated version of the process, using pre-cut leather pieces. Watching as each screw was tightened, the lining lowered into position, and the final studs pushed through the base gave a rare insight into the making of an icon.

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