



The Buyer's View



Buyer's View: Berghaus

"Leather is fantastic for the appropriate end use"

There may well be a myriad of synthetic materials now available to manufacturers of footwear for outdoor activities, but UK-based outdoor clothing and equipment manufacturer Berghaus still believes that leather has a firm footing in the mountaineering and outdoor market place.

Founded in 1966 by Peter Lockey and Gordon Davison, Berghaus began life as an importer and distributor of outdoor products. The company soon started designing and manufacturing its own product lines, specialising in rucksacks and jackets—which established it on the international market in the mid-1970s. It then moved on to develop footwear for outdoor activities including mountaineering and hiking footwear and a full range of apparel. The company was bought by the Pentland Group—which

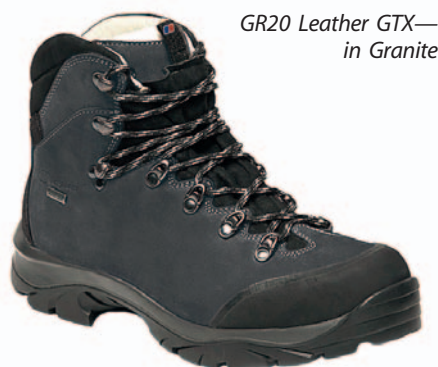
counts big brand names including Speedo, Ted Baker and Kickers amongst its brands—in 1993 thus offering Berghaus further opportunities to develop its product range through the resources now available to it.

Despite the success that Berghaus has enjoyed, after 40 years in business the brand is still relatively small compared with the big US outdoor brands such as Columbia and Timberland. This is not, however, regarded as being a negative. On the contrary, Berghaus is regarded as having maintained its focus on the hard core outdoor enthusiast and having remained a 'true' sports equipment brand, whilst the bigger brands have tried to service a more marginal outdoor consumer who is more likely to head for a coffee at Starbucks than to set off for the mountains.

This means that the company is constantly innovating, developing and improving its products to ensure that it offers the maximum protection and comfort in what can be extreme conditions. The footwear is rigorously tested before it arrives on the shop shelves and the company works with the world's top mountaineers such as Sir Chris Bonington, whose career has included nineteen expeditions to the Himalayas, including four to Mount Everest and achieving the first ascent of the south face of Annapurna—he is also non-executive chairman at Berghaus. But, with so many new, lightweight materials on offer and the technology to produce seamless, waterproof, thermo-regulating, 'all singing and dancing' footwear now available, where does this leave leather? Surprisingly, it is in a pretty comfortable position as ►



THE BUYER'S VIEW

GR20 Leather GTX—
in Granite

footwear for the outdoors is one area where leather has had reasonable success in holding its market share, unlike sports shoes where leather is not necessarily the material of choice nowadays.

Weighing up the options

CEO of Berghaus, Richard Cotter, told *World Leather* in a recent interview that for Berghaus there are a number of factors which decide whether leather is used in its footwear—weight is one of the most important factors, while price is one of the least relevant. One major aspect of this is the way the market is itself polarising into two groups: the core outdoor and the new entrants. The new entrants generally look for more multi-use footwear for hiking, trail walking and mountain biking, etc., they are even likely to wear them to go out for a drink and the elements such as the colours and styles demanded are hard to obtain with leather. In this sector, synthetics, mixed materials and some lightweight suedes are the most common fabrics. The core group, however, still looks for the classic sturdy walking boot that will withstand all that the weather can throw at

it. For this segment leather remains the material of choice and is always used and this group is by no means dwindling.

Richard Cotter makes the point that while the new entrant market is growing quickly, the traditional market is not in decline, it is just growing more slowly. He points out that, “The actual market for quality leather for that classic three to four season boot market continues to grow. Sturdy brown leather is still important.” And he sees leather as more durable. “Going across rough terrain for sustained periods it is ultimately more robust.” He adds that, depending on the construction of the shoe, more structural rigidity can be obtained and “the warmth properties of a 2.4mm to 2.6mm leather at the top of Kilimanjaro are easy to recognise.” While he accepts that synthetics are more appropriate for certain activities he is quick to state that, “Essentially, leather is fantastic for the appropriate end use.”

At the same time technology does play an increasing role. In the 1980s Berghaus became synonymous with high quality clothing through its strategic alliance with US textile company W. L. Gore. This brought the company international prominence and, according to Mike Parsons of the Institute for Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development (IEED), represented one of the most successful network arrangements in the outdoor trade. This relationship with W. L. Gore continues today and extends to the use of Gore-Tex XCR breathable fabric technology in some of the footwear. A lot of consumers now prefer XCR to the traditional Gore membrane, but the downside is that you cannot use full grain leather effectively with this fabric. However, it is possible to combine it with suede or fine nubuck.

Quality not quantity

In looking at leather sources, Berghaus splits tanners into two groups: branded and non-branded. Amongst the non-branded it has found plants that it considers to perform well in terms of quality, price and delivery. The branded tanners are much better at marketing and are used by

Berghaus when they consider component branding, which adds value to the end product. Cotter's personal view is that European leather remains “infinitely superior” to the Far East for Berghaus’

needs. For footwear manufacture the company mixes footwear sourced in the Far East with Europe, but for technical high performance products it tends to stay in Europe as the batch sizes are smaller and they consider it more effective. For high performance year-round footwear it looks for oil- or wax-finished technical leather with advanced properties as the end product must protect the foot in conditions that can be dangerous in terms of the terrain and the weather conditions.

Berghaus works closely with tanners on certain leathers. As each shoe is designed for a specific end use, the company must be very clear about the performance of the leather. “We would never design a shoe without being eighty to ninety per cent sure of the precise leather,” comments Cotter.



Richard Cotter at the summit on Kilimanjaro

Having decided on a particular leather, the company may occasionally change this before production if the sample does not work out, and this means that tanners sometimes produce leathers especially for Berghaus. The best example of this is the XCR compatible leathers for its travel range. These leathers balance the correct breathability with a DWR (durable water repellent) finish in order to achieve the correct functionality.

Cotter argues that what counts is the “end use rather than component costs” and it is this which decides whether a leather, synthetic or textile is used. “Leather cost is not really the deciding factor,” he adds. At Berghaus it is performance that clearly counts, and thankfully this means that leather is likely to keep a foothold in this market. 🌐

Women's Explorer
Leather GTX