



Music, love, life: three reasons why these crocodiles shed no tears

There has been little positive publicity in recent times for crocodile leather. Stories about clandestine tanneries in which the reptiles receive only the cruellest treatment, and about under-cover agents exposing smuggling rings for finished goods have drowned out the sound of any good news.

And yet, away from the glare of mass-circulation, sensationalist newspapers and shared videos on Youtube, the leather industry in Mexico has the most amazing crocodile leather story to tell, one in which the sector, for once, plays a hero's role.

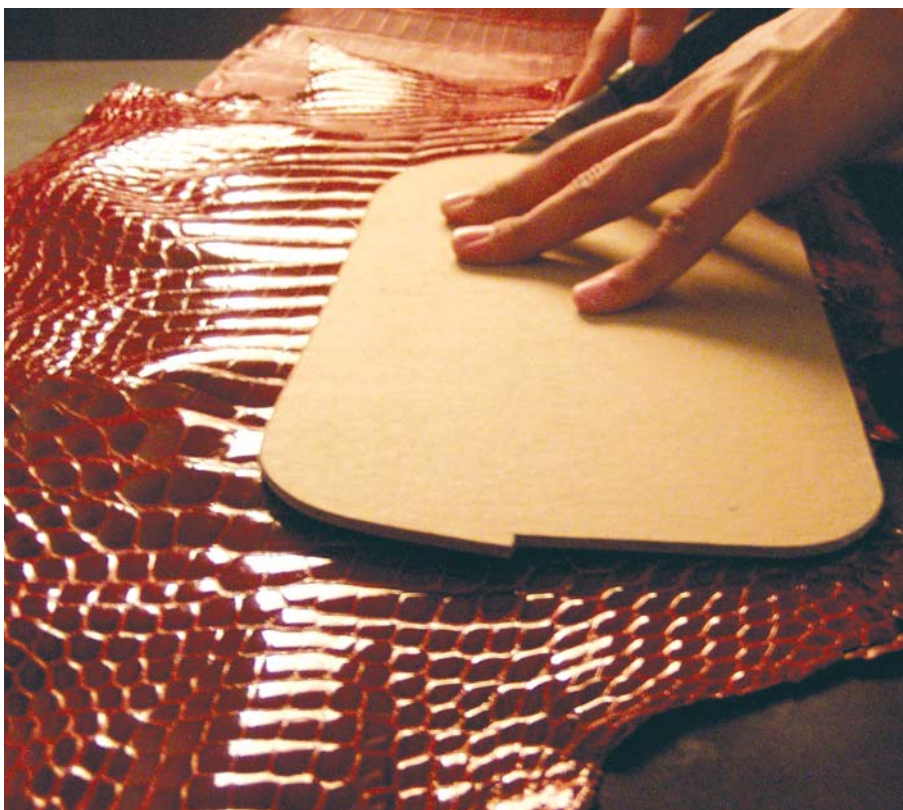
It involves a rare breed of crocodile, the *crocodylus moreletii*; hard to spell, but even harder to see. Apart from small colonies in Belize and Guatemala, the Morelet crocodile is found only in Mexico. Its numbers had reduced to levels bordering on the endangered before the leather industry stepped in to help with preservation initiatives. ►

The Morelet crocodile has a distinctive circular mark on every scale. This adds to the prestige of the leather Cocolé is working with.



Florentine master leather artisan Fulvio Bilanceri lent his expertise to help the Cocolé team learn to make beautiful bags, wallets, purses and belts and left a lasting mark on the company.

THE LOOK of LEATHER



Cocolé works with the Mexican state crocodile protection agency to improve the hatch-rates of Morelet eggs, with 10% of the crocodiles released into the wilds to build the population back up.

That may sound strange, but what happened was a joint venture involving investors, the state protection agency for crocodiles, Cocomex, and Eduardo Huber, an artisan in leatherwork, a businessman and a former president of the chamber of leathergoods and footwear sectors in Jalisco. Together they have launched Cocolé, a new brand of leathergoods made exclusively from the hides of Morelet crocodiles.

Mr Huber is the driving force behind Cocolé and the person who has taken it

upon himself to bring the fascinating story to the world. "It's just remarkably beautiful material," he explains, "with one unique characteristic. You can see quite clearly that there is a light-coloured circle on every single scale."

The unusual initiative involves a farm in Sinaloa, about 20 kilometres south of the state capital, Culiacán. The site contains 30 special circular tanks in which the reptiles live on a healthy diet of turtle, snails, fish and so on and receive every possible encouragement to breed. Soft music plays

inside the tanks, for example. "We have to give them a stress-free environment," Mr Huber explains. "If the crocodiles become stressed they can go seven days without eating."

When the females do lay their eggs, perhaps as many as 40 at a time, the breeders place them in special incubators to ensure a higher hatch-rate than the crocodiles can manage in their natural environment. Around 10% of the crocodiles that hatch in this way go into the wild to build back up the population of the reptiles in areas where numbers had become dangerously low. The breeders keep a proportion to keep the reproduction cycle going and the rest go into the meat-leather value chain.

Free trade agreement or no, Cocolé and Cocomex are unable to move meat, hides or finished leathergoods across the border to Mexico's largest trading partner. The United States has its own carefully controlled crocodile and alligator supply, with the trapping and hunting season in Louisiana, for example, limited to one month. Hides from there usually go to Italy and France, while the meat—a delicacy, with the texture and flavour of rib-eye steak—tends to remain in the home market.

"It's true," Eduardo Huber says. "It tastes just like rib-eye and it's in big demand. All of ours, however, goes to Japan where the taste of the meat is not the only reason for its popularity. Crocodile meat has the reputation among Japanese men of sharing the qualities of Viagra and the market there simply cannot get enough of the product."

It's when the meat has gone that Cocolé's work on the hides begins at its own tannery



The company now has its own retail outlet, a concession in one of the Palacio de Hierro department stores in Mexico City.

THE LOOK of LEATHER



Eduardo Huber, the driving force behind Cocolé, worked out that tanning the crocodile leather in Mexico could increase its value from \$1 per centimetre at wet blue stage to \$8. But using the tanned leather to manufacture his own leathergoods could multiply the wet blue value by a factor of 25.

in Jalisco on the other side of Mexico. At first, all the hides the meat-producing operation left behind went for export at wet blue stage, commanding a price, Mr Huber recalls, of between \$1 and \$3 per centimetre. That's not bad considering a Morelet crocodile can grow to a maximum length of 3.5 metres, meaning one hide could fetch \$10,000.

From an early stage, however, Mr Huber and his partners were keen to add as much value as possible to the raw material before it left Mexico. They worked out that if they could tan the leather themselves, the export value of the material would increase to between \$6 and \$8 per centimetre, giving a finished hide a potential value of \$25,000 and a brood of 40 eggs a possible worth of \$1 million.

With this in mind, the next step—attempting to turn the leather into finished goods—seemed only logical. Finished goods in the unique leather from Morelet

crocodiles could have a value of as much as \$25 per centimetre, or \$87,500 per reptile and a staggering \$3.5 million for one collection of eggs laid by one female in a single brood. With this sort of money at stake, you can easily imagine entrepreneurs volunteering to chop up turtles to feed the crocodiles themselves, then tuning up a violin to play the required soothing music live.

Eduardo Huber has not gone to this length, but the figures stack up, he explains, because the joint-venture has its own farm and because labour costs in Mexico are "three times lower than in Italy". Convinced of the value of the idea, he decided to become a trainee again. In 2001, at the launch of Cocolé, he realised that even he, an experienced leathergoods manufacturer, required special training to make bags, wallets, purses, belts, briefcases, card-holders and so on from this very special leather.

He went to Florence and persuaded a senior figure in the leathergoods manufacturing community there, Fulvio Bilanceri (who had worked with Ferragamo, Gucci and other high-fashion brands), to spend a month teaching him some of the tricks of his trade. At the end of that month, he talked "maestro Bilanceri" into returning with him to Mexico to help Mr Huber pass on what he had learned to the Cocolé team.

After a further four weeks under the maestro's supervision, Cocolé's leathergoods artisans felt ready to apply their skills to crocodile leather and start putting goods under their own brand name onto the market.

"What happened next is something none of us will ever be able to forget," Mr Huber explains. "We made a presentation to Fulvio at the end of his stay in Mexico, as a way of thanking him for everything he had done for us, and then I drove him back to his hotel so that he could pack his bags. I waited downstairs to give him a lift to Guadalajara airport. But while he was upstairs packing, he collapsed and died. The shock of this was so enormous that it remains, like a tattoo, on Cocolé to this day."

At the family's request, Mr Huber travelled back to Italy with the designer's ashes and learned from the leather community in Florence that Fulvio Bilanceri had been delighted to take up the task of sharing his knowledge with his Mexican pupils, not least because the members of his own family had decided not to follow in his footsteps. This gave Eduardo Huber renewed conviction that the idea was a good one and he went ahead with the launch of Cocolé in what he calls a homage to his teacher. "We'll be eternally grateful to him," he says.

Since then, the Cocolé brand has built up slowly. It has established its own point of sale, sandwiched between Coach and Salvatore Ferragamo, in one of the prestigious Palacio de Hierro department stores in Mexico City. Its products are also available online. Last autumn, however, Eduardo Huber decided it was time to take Cocolé to a wider market, so he carried out his own whistle-stop tour of Europe, exhibiting at some of the season's key events. He fully expects the world to take notice now. 🌐

