



Tanneries for tourists but not for real leather manufacture

The conversion of raw skins into leather as a durable and protective product is among the earliest of crafts. Leather manufacture has now evolved into a sophisticated and technically developed industry but there are a few remaining examples that provide an illustration of early practices.

The following series of images shows the most basic procedures that might have been typical in medieval processing. However, this type of operation today serves the tourist industry, complete with guided tours, and the opportunity to purchase leather goods made from these leathers.

Unfortunately, these tours have a strong reliance on a smell of putrefaction, an emphasis on the use of pigeon dung for softening the leather, and people working in filthy and unhygienic conditions. These enterprises may provide significant revenue for the local economy, but it is regrettable

that any visitors might be left with the impression of bad practices and an industry that has disregarded for the health and safety of the workforce and the environment.

These examples of “shock tourism” continue regardless of any legislation that could be applied, or without any attention given to the good practices and responsibilities that can be found within small-scale or ethnic leather making.

Moreover, the final impressions are not limited to those who actually visit these tanneries, but also those who choose not to visit these sites due to the nauseating odour that permeates the surrounding areas. A perception is generated that is clearly detrimental to progressive and responsible leather manufacture, and those who work within the sector. At least it would be helpful if the tourist guides could explain this type of leather production is far removed from modern reality. ☹



Goat skins are soaked in lime solution only for 10-days. They are hauled out daily and re-immersed in the solution.



After liming, the hair is sufficiently loosened to be pushed from the grain using a blunt hand held scraping blade.



The alkali swollen flesh is then removed from the skins using a shaped flat bladed tool.



To neutralise the alkalinity, deswell and soften the skins they are immersed in a solution of pigeon dung. They are turned regularly as shown over a 15-day period.



The next stage is a 20-day tanning period. Various natural tanning materials are used to provide colour, and the pits are covered to avoid bleaching by sunlight.



During the tanning period the skins are regularly removed from the solution, then re-immersed to minimise creasing.



Mostly the leathers are tanned as "natural" due to its versatility. After tanning they are washed then slowly hang-dried tension free.



Leather is placed over a beam and held in place by the operative's thigh pressure. The skin is extended by hand, and then scraped to soften using a wooded block or blade.



Skins are traded in the local markets, although some tanners also own small factories for the manufacture of leather goods.



The crust leathers are hand-finished in many vivid colours for a wide range of leather goods.