

A feel for the forest

Forests of trees with silver frost on their trunks and snow on their branches constitute one of the greatest attractions of any winter wonderland. Large animals that thrive in these landscapes—deer, moose and reindeer—are often so abundant that they can present environmental problems. This has led to governments in various parts of the world, including the US and Canada, allowing planned culls and official hunting seasons to keep the animal population under control. The carefully controlled kill provides gamey meat for winter menus, while the

A special focus of the next edition of Le Cuir À Paris will be leathers that have their roots in the forests of the northern and southern hemispheres.

animals' skins, after careful treatment by specialist tanners and leathersgoods manufacturers, make some of the most appealing products on the market.

A group of companies specialising in these forest leathers will have samples on display at the next edition of Le Cuir À Paris, which takes place in the French capital on February 8–10.

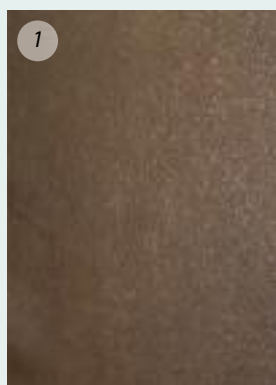
—German tanner Gerecke Leder, for

example, is a specialist in processing North American deerskin. Managing director, Gunther Gerecke, has told the organisers of Le Cuir À Paris that his tannery uses a careful combination of tanning agents to make leathers that meet customers' demands for suppleness and softness. His counterpart at Italian tannery La Biesseuno, Flavio Marangoni, devotes 90% of production capacity to deer skin.

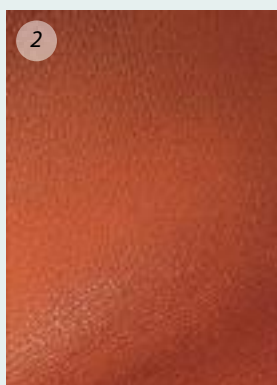


*Deers in the North
American Rocky mountains.*
CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK





CREDIT: GERECKE LEDER



NEW ZEALAND LIGHT LEATHERS



LA BIESSEUNO

- (1) Leather produced from North American deerskin by German tannery Gerecke Leder.
- (2) Bright colours and beautiful grain on deerskin leather from New Zealand Light Leathers.
- (3) Italian tannery La Biesseuno devotes 90% of its production capacity to processing deerskin.

Although it is not winter there at the moment, the exhibition's special focus on deerskin also includes the New Zealand Light Leathers company. Deer in New Zealand are usually larger than their cousins in the northern hemisphere and thrive there, especially in the colder climate of the South Island. The animals live in what the authorities describe as "semi-freedom" and, when aged between 15 and 24 months, they are slaughtered for meat under strictly controlled conditions. The New Zealand government earned around \$195 million in export revenues from venison in 2007 and currently estimates the country's deer population at around one million animals, spread over 3,000 farms.

Barry Parsons of New Zealand Light Leathers explains that this method of rearing the animals provides tanners with greater consistency in the thickness and quality of the skins. His company has found over the years that it's worth using both chrome and vegetable tanning processes on deerskin; chrome tanning produces leather with great softness, while he says vegetable tanning gives more character, particularly in leathers dyed in pastel shades or finished with special aged-leather effects.

Each of these tanners speak in the highest possible terms of the strength of tanned deerskin, in spite of its softness and minimal thickness (around two millimetres), as well as of the extreme

beauty of the grain. This combination gives this type of leather a unique charm and appeal.

Garment manufacturers use the leather in jackets, mostly at the higher end of luxury fashion, such as in the Kamba jacket from Lyon-based Zilli. Leather from deerskin is currently around 50% more expensive to make than calfskin, making luxury brands the most obvious customers for tanners specialising in deer. Gloves are another popular application, and glovemakers such as French company Georges Morand are quick to show their appreciation. Company spokesperson Nathalie Morand has told the organisers of Le Cuir À Paris: "We use it for its softness and stretch, which offer great comfort. An aniline finish enhances the very characteristic grain and gives a touch of sport chic to each model."

Footwear manufacturers are also

showing a growing interest in deerskin leather, with the material's natural resistance to creasing and ability to age well additional attractions in this market. Julien Maire, head of design at French footwear brand Heschung, says: "We mostly use it in summer collections, on sporty models like cycling shoes, desert boots or sandals, which suit the leather's pronounced grain. A thickness of only two millimetres means we do not have to add a lining, which would detract from the leather's natural suppleness. If you factor in its elasticity, this leather is easy to use."

This is something of a return to ancient ways; the skins of deer and their close relations such as moose or elk have long been used by Sami peoples and native North American tribes to make footwear and other essential items. Reindeer, the most iconic winter wonderland animal of all, also represent an ancient source of the essential material that is leather. This tradition, too, is alive and kicking, from the small amount (500 hides) that Iceland's Atlantic Leather tannery (best known for fish leather) produces, to the much larger operations of specialist reindeer leather producers such as Pokka and Ahlskog in Finland. Ahlskog, who will be among the exhibitors at Le Cuir À Paris in February, produces 400,000 square-metres of reindeer leather each year, including options in nappa and suede with a waterproof finish. The hides come from reindeer raised by around 50 co-operatives in the Lapland region; reindeer meat is an essential and popular local food so the slaughter-rate here can be as high as 200,000 head a year, making reindeer leather a logical by-product. ☉

The Yash Elan Blanc Crepe desert boot in deerskin from Heschung.

CREDIT: HESCHUNG

