



Via La Moda, a South Africa-based manufacturer of handbags made from ostrich, crocodile and python skin, keeps a respect for leather at the centre of everything it does.

Via La Moda breathes new life into exotic leather

Each product that handbag manufacturer Via La Moda creates at its facility in Johannesburg has one thing in common: it is made with a deep respect for leather. The company's German motto "Leben Einhauchen" (the best translation into English would be "the breathing of new life") inspires the company to think not just about the "new life" that the material takes on as it is turned into a luxury product, but also the life of the animal from which it

came. Via La Moda believes that "every hide deserves respect" and this principle is followed all the way through production. From the sourcing of raw materials to final storage, each stage is carefully managed with sustainability and responsibility in mind. Materials are spared any unnecessary chemical treatments. A reluctance to waste any of the exotic material that comes through its door has prompted Via La Moda to find a use for all parts of the skin.

As well as handbags, the company produces wallets, belts, purse and keyrings from exotic leathers, including ostrich, crocodile and python. It only sources its materials from trusted suppliers, who can guarantee that the skins they provide have been obtained in an ethical manner. It is fully compliant with the regulations laid out by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which governs the international movement of hides and ensures that the harvesting of

Via La Moda uses ostrich (left), hornback crocodile (centre) and python (third right) in the designs of its signature handbags.



endangered animals (including certain species of crocodile and snake) is not detrimental to the survival of the species.

The company tries to retain the natural qualities of the materials it uses. Examine a handbag from Via La Moda and you will see the pattern created by the feather quills on an ostrich skin or the distinctive natural contour and ridges of hornback crocodile. It believes that consumers have been "misled" to believe that "imperfections in materials represent flaws and defects" and is committed to dispelling this misconception by preserving them in its designs.

Family heritage

Via La Moda was founded in 1989 by Hanspeter Winklmayr and Walter Hauser, who were both born in Austria. While Mr Hauser is a master of cabinetry and design (with more nearly 40 years of experience in the manufacturing industry in South Africa), his partner comes from a long line of leather craftsmen; his forefather, Johann Kammerer, began making leather saddles at his home in Vienna as far back as the



Co-founder Hanspeter 'HP' Winklmayr still plays an active role in the production of Via La Moda products.

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17th century. His knowledge was passed down through the generations and Mr Winklmayr learned his trade from his father and grandfather in the family-run leather factory. The family still runs a leather craft workshop in Austria. He honed his skills at the Vienna Fashion School, where he studied the art of leather craftsmanship, becoming the school's youngest ever graduate in the process.

He continues to oversee a workshop with a team of highly-trained artisan, who see him as a father figure and refer to him affectionately as 'HP'. All that Mr Winklmayr asks from his artisans is discipline and a willingness to learn and improve daily.

Traditional European methods, which have served his family well for centuries, are complemented by modern facilities where staff have the use of up-to-date technology, including advanced cutting tools. The company describes the collaboration between traditional craftsmen and trained machinery technicians as the "marriage of art and science at work".

The company prefers to retain the natural qualities of the materials it uses, including the quill marks from an ostrich skin (below).



African adventure

The partners chose to establish Via La Moda in Johannesburg due to its proximity to reliable sources of exotic leather. It prefers to use materials native to South Africa and says there is a “vast pool of raw talent drawn from all walks of life” in the area. The city also provides easy access for buyers from Europe, a key market for luxury handbags, and its good infrastructure provides easy transport of raw materials and finished products.

During the first two years of the company's existence, Via La Moda's founders dedicated themselves to testing potential materials and refining its production processes so that the company was ready to hit the ground running. Its initial customer base was made up of international clients searching for exotic leather products away from the expensive fashion capitals of Europe. Contact with these customers showed Via La Moda that it needed to up its game if it wanted to meet the exacting standards of high-end clients. It has endeavoured since then to constantly improve and expand, now offering several different brands in a range of price brackets. With Mr Winklmayr taking a hands-on approach to design and craftsmanship, Mr Hauser is free to manage the business side of the company.

In 1991 Via La Moda opened a showroom above its manufacturing unit in Johannesburg so that potential buyers could view its products and see how they were made all in one visit. It now contains an impressive assortment of exotic leather handbags and accessories, all crafted to the company's high standards. It believes that the true value of a handbag is more than just how it is made and attaches great importance to the way in which its pieces are stored and displayed.

In harmony with nature

A balance between the aesthetic appeal of its products and a desire to preserve the natural qualities of the exotic materials defines the company's style. It wants the design of each piece to be “in harmony with what nature provides”. This has resulted in a style visibly inspired by



Via La Moda's staff are trained in the European artisanal techniques handed down through the generations of the Winklmayr family.

Africa's natural environments. Combine it with European artisanal techniques and the multicultural feel of Via La Moda's designs begins to emerge. The range of exotic accessories in its Via Veneta Untamed range typifies this. It is described as a mix of “African nature and traditional continental craftsmanship”.

The eponymous Via La Moda brand, which features ostrich and crocodile leather handbags designed to match the latest seasonal trends and colours in Europe, remains the “cornerstone” of the company's collection. The 1691 brand, named in tribute to the year the Winklmayr family began manufacturing leather saddles, offers a broader range of products, including large handbags and business accessories. The Via Veneta Premium range features more flamboyant articles for women, with a focus on flair and the unconventional.

Via La Moda's attendance at the GDS show in Düsseldorf in July signalled a move to strengthen its customer base in Europe. Although an event primarily focused on footwear, it can also serve as an important route into the European market for manufacturers of leather handbags and other accessories. Via La Moda told *World Leather* that it believed its products were well suited to the event and that hopes are high for the future of the brand in Europe. It already has a loyal following in Germany which, along with China, it says is the market in which the company has its “most avid customers”.

Via La Moda believes it has an obligation to bring to the attention of its customers that the animals from which it sources its materials were once living beings. It says it feels “privileged” to have the opportunity “to extend their existence” with its skilled craftsmanship. 🌿