

Sole survivor

Romans-sur-Isère was the capital of the French shoe industry for more than 100 years. **JON BRYANT** visits a town reviving an age-old tradition



Just off the main square in Romans-sur-Isère, there's an enormous, concrete shoe in the middle of the pavement.

Children climb on it and it's not ideally placed for the blind, but it's a reminder of a time when almost every citizen in the town was involved in the manufacture of shoes: softening leather, tanning hides, carving soles or rolling silk laces. Romans was the undisputed capital of the French shoe industry. Today, you have to walk down a narrow lane in the old medieval quarter, ask for directions and peer through a steamed-up window to see what remains of the town's heritage – the last cobbler in town.

When I arrive, Armel Besançon is laying out squares of coloured leather on the worktop. It reminds me of a scene from the story of *The Elves and the Shoemaker* except that Besançon has no little men who come out at midnight, just a full-size fellow craftsman, Lionel Cron, who is putting the finishing touches to a pair of shiny, black brogues.

"This one is calf, the grey one is elephant skin and then there's crocodile, shark, stingray, spotted dog-fish and this light pink one is salmon skin." I had no idea you could make shoes from salmon skin. "It's very soft and so comfortable and hard-wearing," he tells me.

"Obviously we buy the exotic leathers through official channels via Paris."

Lining the walls of the two-tiered workshop are wooden models of individuals' feet with carvings and tiny notes in pencil covering them.

"When I see a client's foot, I have to know how it works 'on the inside' not just what it looks like. Besides making a mould, I analyse the foot itself and we design a shoe to fit."

We walk through to the fitting room at the back of the shop. "Most customers have two or three appointments to work out the exact fitting. Women are probably more subject to fashion changes but people can have whatever style they like. Handmade, bespoke shoes are an investment. If they are well made, it's like a Mercedes, they last longer," says Cron, "and people's feet are rarely totally symmetrical."

LEFT: A wooden shoe mould TOP RIGHT: Saint Barnard church RIGHT: Roman's Place Jacquemart and its giant shoe





It may be the last shoemaker's in Romans but Mego-Workshop, Besançon's company, is actually an imposter. It opened just three years ago and could really have gone anywhere. "The original idea came to me when I was a student as I have very big feet and it was hard to find shoes to fit me," says Besançon. "I studied under a Japanese bootmaker when I was working as an engineer in Japan, ended up buying a machine and started to make shoes at home. When I returned to France, I did an AFPA adult education course in shoemaking in Romans-sur-Isère and decided to open my workshop here.

"Because of the town's history, the older generation in Romans 'understand'

People came from all over France, not just to buy shoes but to watch the factory workers making the footwear

shoes and could give me a lot of advice and help me with supplies. Also, the rent for a workshop is considerably cheaper here than it would be in a large city.

"Being a shoemaker is very interesting as you work on many different levels: it's part-technical, part-artistic, there's a medical dimension and a strong social side, listening to clients' problems and wishes. Some of our shoes can take three months to make but for us, there is the *noblesse de travail*."

He reckons about half his clientèle are local, a quarter come from Paris and a quarter from the rest of France.

Prices for a basic pair of shoes start at around €500 and, for a special pair, handcrafted using an exotic leather, they can easily top €4,000.

Romans, however, made its money not from small, bespoke cobblers but from the mass manufacture of shoes and the fact that its fast flowing river could drive large-scale machinery.

In 1157, the village was given the right to hold markets and fairs and was well placed to be a point of exchange between



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Musée International de la Chaussure; Besançon and his workshop; Place Jules Nadi; Inside the shoe museum; Place Jacquemart



Northern Europe which brought wood, cloth and minerals down

the Rhône and Isère rivers, and the Mediterranean, which sent back salt, wheat, wool and wine.

In the mid-18th century Romans was the centre for silk milling, tanning and the manufacture of cotton textiles and also celebrated for its production of playing cards.

Much of the industry disappeared following the French Revolution with only the tanning continuing in any important way. Then in 1854, everything changed. François-Barthélémy Guillaume opened a mechanised shoe factory and by the turn of the century, 6,000 workers were making shoes in Romans. Manufacture moved from the centre of town to fill huge out-of-town factories.

The leather tanneries expanded to match the demand; World War I soldiers needed leather boots and in World War II the factories were commandeered to make boots for the German army (despite Romans itself being a centre for the French Resistance).

The manufacturer Fenestrier opened a shoe plant and was followed by Charles Jourdan. Both are still well-known brands and in 1948, Romans could boast 200 shoe factories and workshops. People came from all over France, not just to buy shoes but to watch the factory workers and the long rolls of leather rapidly turning into footwear.

However, the golden age of Romans shoemaking did not last and by 1980, it



was all but gone – just two factories remained and the town was entering a crisis. The solution? Discount shoes from factory stores. Romans was always the ‘working’ town compared with the more bourgeois Valence nearby and people expect to find bargains there.

Five minutes walk from Mego-Workshop is Marques Avenue, a shopping centre of factory outlets in the old military barracks that claims to offer at least a third off high street prices. On Saturdays, it’s awash with oversized carrier bags and grizzling toddlers, all drifting round endless racks of laced-up boots, backless sandals and high heels.

Shoe obsession

There are still over 30 shoe shops in Romans as well as factory outlets for Levis, Nike, Mango, Marlborough, Petit Bateau and ladies’ underwear from Princess Tam Tam. The joy for any true shoe-obsessed aficionado are the nearby factory outlets for France’s best-known designer brands such as Yann Bastien, Laure Bassal and Tchilinguirian.

Best of all perhaps for fancy footwear is the large factory shop of Robert Clergerie (the French Manolo Blahnik), which stocks J. Fenestrier for men and has women fighting over heels they couldn’t possibly wear and buying every size in every colour. When I looked through the windows of Clergerie’s factory shop, it was packed with stockinged feet, stepping into a selection of loafers, stilettos and high heeled suede sandals. Clergerie has also donated a large number of his shoes to the town’s elegant Musée

International de la Chaussure which occupies a 17th century convent near the centre. The museum is unexpectedly high-tech and modern and retraces the history of tanning, tawing and shoemaking in Romans. It has display cases full of the most extraordinary shoes.

Among its seriously exotic displays are some made from kingfisher feathers; ones covered in pearls and precious stones; tiny, baby shoes for Napoleon’s son; musketeers’ thigh-length boots and a pair of 18th-century leather boots made for a Chinese woman with bound feet. It guides the visitor through a tour of shoe fashions, including the importance of heels (red heels in the case of Louis XIV) to denote one’s social status. And for fans of Leonardo diCaprio and Kate Winslet, it even has the shoes they wore in the film *Titanic*.

The government has tried hard to furnish new industries on Romans. It has become one of France’s nuclear energy centres and is a major centre for polyurethane manufacture for military use but at heart it is still the shoe capital of France. Robert Clergerie bought back the company in 2005 that he had left three years earlier and has just launched a course for young shoe designers.

On the bespoke side, Mego-Workshop has been joined on the Côte Jacquemart by a workshop making stunning, hand-made knives. The hope is for both places to create a focus for high-quality, bespoke goods such as knives, jewellery, shoes and pottery. Whether the bargain hunters from Marques Avenue will ever venture over there is another matter. 📍