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Foot forward

Singaporeans are embracing the era of the cult sandal and putting comfort before fashion. Even premium prices aren't getting in their way, finds NOELLE LOH



Cult sandals and slippers like Havaianas are easy on the feet and come in a rainbow of colours. Fans include actress Patricia Mok. --ST FILE PHOTO

Singapore has racked up many lofty achievements over the years in terms of infrastructure and economics, but Urban can reveal a little-known, down-to-earth area in which the Republic has put its best foot forward too: cult sandals.

For when it comes to wearing sandals - humble, open-toe footwear that has graced Man's feet since prehistoric times - Singapore has a track record to be proud of.

For example, hark back to the colonial-era 1930s and migrant Samsui women who, in trademark blue tunic suits and red headdresses, toiled under the hot sun.

What was on their feet? Why, strappy soles that they fashioned (rather creatively, actually) out of the rubber of old tyres.

They may not have been pretty, but they were a triumph of function over form.

Later in 1972, sandals again made their mark - this time in the form of Peranakan-inspired beaded slip-ons that completed the Singapore Girl look. Now, those were pretty.

Today, both men and women have made sandals - whatever the style - a staple in their wardrobe, wearing them on adventure trails, at the beach and even at clubs.

Sandals may have once been humble footwear, but prices these days can be anything but.

Sure, you can still buy basic slippers and sandals at the neighbourhood market for under \$5. But to step out in sandals that combine comfort and that 'cool' factor, be prepared to pay anything from \$26.90 to \$589.

Take the ones at outdoor specialist store Camper's Corner at Capitol Building, which sells criss-cross laced, polyurethane sports sandals under the Colorado-based Chaco brand.

The sandals are said to offer a middle-arch support like none other, thanks to 'BioCentric' footbed technology, and a flip-flop leisure version costs at least \$78.

A pair in its premium performance series, the ZX2 Unaweep, costs \$187.

Despite the steep prices, sales are good, says Calvin Tay, owner of Camper's Corner.

'The market for Chaco sandals has been growing steadily since we started bringing them in about 12 years ago,' he says. 'People are beginning to appreciate the importance of the appropriate fitting and support when it comes to shoes.'

While he declines to reveal exact sales figures, he says the record number of Chaco shoes that one customer owns is 25.

Functional and fancy-priced sandals can also be found at German footwear company Birkenstock, whose cult status is apparent from the mass of imitation designs in the market.

Love 'em or hate 'em, Birkenstocks are known for their chunky soles and straps with fashionable prints and cost an average of \$110 a pair.

Geraldine Lee, brand director of Birkenstock in Singapore, says the main appeal of the cork-soled sandals lies in their anatomically designed, contoured footbed that ensures comfort.

'There is nothing quite like a Birkenstock that combines comfort and quality in a wide choice of styles,' she says of the sandals.

The other clompy sandals that have gained a cult following are, of course, Crocs. When Crocs first appeared in 2002, the brightly coloured lightweight plastic shoes with holes were ridiculed by the fashion world.

But the United States-based makers used that positively, coming up with the marketing tagline 'Ugly can be beautiful'.

'The beautiful aspect of Crocs shoes is that they are soft, comfortable, lightweight, non-marking and odour resistant,' says John McCarvel, managing director of Crocs Asia.

British actor Ian McKellen seems to endorse this, having been seen almost everywhere - from last year's London premiere of the movie *The Queen* to his recent interview on Channel NewsAsia - in a fire engine-red pair.

Equally unconventional is the design of new British strapless flip-flops Dopie.

You heard right - these rubber sandals, which were launched in Europe in April, have no straps.

Instead, the brightly coloured thongs feature a rounded slot for the toe cleavage, though Dopie newbies can hook on a detachable strap to get used to walking in them.

'Customers tend to be design and fashion enthusiasts who are a bit ahead of the curve in terms of cultural trends,' says a spokesman for Spin the Bottle, Dopie's first official retailer in Singapore.

Corporate banker Valene Loh, 24, says she doesn't think most cult sandals on the market look very nice and are, for most people, a temporary fashion statement.

'I own three pairs of Birkenstock sandals, but that's because they really are very comfortable,' she says. 'I don't think they are very fashionable and would never be caught wearing them to an event.'

However weird-looking or expensive, there is no denying the star appeal of cult sandals. Urban walks readers through five of the most popular brands.

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**CROCS**

Despite being called 'goofy' by *The Washington Post* and 'hideous' by pop culture magazine *Radar*, Crocs have gained a strong following. Fans include Hollywood stars like Matt Damon, Jennifer Garner and Heather Locklear.

The sandals, known for their signature Swiss cheese-like hole-ridden surface, even made their appearance on hit television series *Grey's Anatomy*.

The secret of their appeal is their softness and comfort. The use of the material Croslite, a proprietary closed-cell resin, means the shoes are lightweight, non-marking and odour resistant, says Crocs Asia managing director John McCarvel.

The bestsellers in Singapore are the original Beach design in khaki and chocolate, and women's model Sassari in monochrome.

\$48.10 for the Prima range, which look like ballet slippers, to \$85.60 for the Islander range, a leather version of the Beach design, from Check, 04-23/24 The Heeren, and all authorised Crocs dealers, tel: 6755-2236