

The Truth About Leather

Ginger Burr * Total Image Consultants

Have you ever opened your closet, looked at your shoes and handbags and thought, “Wow, I have so many dead cows in here.” Unless you are already vegan it is highly unlikely that this thought has ever crossed your mind. Leather is one of those things in our life we take for granted without question. It’s just what shoes are made out of, right? For me, it was an epiphany when one day I looked at my shoes and instead of seeing something benign I saw an animal’s hide.

The truth is that yes, most people wear leather due to a history of conditioning, but the other truth is that we do not have to. I have found that even people who wouldn’t dream of buying fur wear leather. I know because I did that for more years than I care to recall. It never entered my mind to think of them as one and the same, but, they are—in both cases the animal dies a brutal death just so we can use their skin or skin with the fur still attached. But, both fur and leather are absolutely unnecessary in our lives today.

We do not *need* to wear leather any more than we *need* to wear fur. I know, this came as a shock to me, too, eleven years ago when I went vegan. The good news is that in those years, buying non-leather shoes that are comfortable and fashionable has grown by leaps and bounds—more about that in a bit.

What is also important to realize is that leather sneaks into many areas of our lives. Here are some of the ways it shows up:

- Shoes
- Handbags
- Belts
- Wallets
- Jackets
- Pants
- Gloves
- Sneakers
- Sofas and chairs
- Car seats
- Details on dresses or blouses
- Leather cords for necklaces
- Watch bands
- Dog collars

It never ceases to amaze me the unexpected places leather appears. Even corsets can be made from leather!

This begs the question, what is wrong with leather?

Leather often comes from cows, but it can also be made from pigs, goats, lamb, sheep, deer, ponies, alligators, snakes, ostriches, kangaroos, eels and even dogs and cats (which is really no worse than the rest, we just assign a different feeling to dogs and cats in our world).

Before you even get to the actual production of the leather, let's look at the origin of the raw materials. Raising animals for consumption (whether food, shoes or anything else) is incredibly energy intensive. You will often hear proponents of leather say that leather is natural, biodegradable and more environmental friendly than synthetic options, but this is not as true as they want you to believe. Far from it. Animal agriculture requires massive amounts of land to produce their feed and graze them, as well as the water required to keep them alive and energy to transport their feed. You even have to think about where all the animal poop goes. One cow can produce over 100 lbs of manure in one day! It is no wonder that in areas where animals are intensively raised, there is a problem with water pollution. Just imagine what happens to manure lagoons in times of heavy rain!

When you add to that the staggering amount of animal suffering that is endured to raise these animals, the stakes get higher. Animals who are raised on factory farms, account for one portion of leather production. These animals live a life of misery in overcrowded conditions often standing in their own feces. They endure procedures like tail docking, de-horning, branding, castration without anesthesia and the indignities of brutal artificial insemination and, in the case of dairy cows (who, yes, are killed for their meat and hide) their babies are torn away from them within a day of their birth. These animals' lives are a living hell and that's before they get to the slaughterhouse.

Animals are generally transported to the slaughterhouse in overly packed trucks with no heat or air conditioning, allowing them no room to move. More than a few arrive dead or maimed from being trampled in the pack or dehydrated from lack of food and water. If it helps you to see this with your own eyes, there are plenty of undercover videos and articles about this on the internet. But, does it really take seeing it to know that these terrified animals live a life that is brutal and die a death we wouldn't wish upon our worst enemy (some animals being boiled alive or dismembered before they are fully unconscious or dead)?

Smaller 'family' farms are no better. While the animals might be treated marginally better while alive, they are still captive and at the mercy of the people raising them and they still die a dreadful death well before their natural lifespan would predict. As some would say, this is the ultimate betrayal.

The question I kept asking myself once I learned of all this was did I want to wear this kind of brutality on my feet?

I stopped eating meat when I was 25 years old and for years I thought of the leather industry as a by-product of the meat industry—it was the leftover portion of the animal. It was the obvious justification for wearing leather. But, in truth, there is nothing 'left over' about the skin of the animal. Leather is the most lucrative part of animal product accounting for about 10% of its value thereby directly supporting the meat industry. In fact, no other part of the body is as profitable as the skin. And, as if that's not enough, not all leather comes as a result of the meat industry. There is a large percentage of animals raised purely for their skins. This is especially true in the exotic animal industry.

Remember, this is all before we even get to the actual manufacturing of the leather itself. The first thing to realize is that leather is nothing more than treated skin. Without massive numbers of chemicals this skin would decompose and putrify while you're wearing it. Instead we turn it into a toxic chemical factory including chromium salts, formaldehyde, cyanide, lead and hundreds more toxins. That 'new' leather smell that people love so much is basically a chemical soup combined with dead flesh. Sorry, it's just so unbelievable that we've been conditioned to think this is something beautiful!

A large percentage of leather is manufactured in India (and yes, a lot of it comes from 'sacred' cows) and the workers have a high incidence of a variety of cancers as well as horrible accidents from working with these toxic chemicals not to mention the degree of water pollution (leather is a water-intensive product) in surrounding areas. This article speaks to the horrors of the factory workers:

<http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-11-13/bangladesh-leather-industrys-workers-exposed-to-toxic-chemicals>

As you can see, the leather industry is a brutal industry. What kind of beauty can from the energy of a terrified animal? While the stores are full of beautiful designs, the backstory is far from beautiful. But because we can't actually see the suffering or blood and guts nor does the end product scar our feet from the toxic chemicals, it is so easy to dismiss or even consciously overlook what goes into making these seemingly beautiful items.

Sadly, the leather industry will have you believe you cannot find anything nearly as lovely unless it is made from leather. But, the truth is far from that.

If this is not the first time you have heard all of this, what is keeping you from making cruelty-free choices? Perhaps it is one of these three pervasive misconceptions about vegan shoes?

1. They are all cheaply made from plastic.
2. They are bad for the environment.

3. They are uncomfortable.

Sure, some of the cheaper brands, in particular, are made out of materials like PVC which does not biodegrade and is not environmentally friendly, but that doesn't mean they all are. Many vegan brands use recycled materials. Olsen Haus (www.olsenhaus.com) uses recycled television screens and Bourgeois Boheme (www.bboheme.com) makes their shoes from cotton-backed microfiber PU (polyurethane). Matt and Nat handbags (www.mattandnat.com) are made from recycled nylons, cardboard, rubber and cork and their lining is made from 100% recycled plastic bottles. Even the plastic 'Melissa' shoes (www.melissashoes.com) are made from hypo-allergenic, recyclable, and extremely flexible PVC and recycle 99.9% of factory water and waste as well as rework overstock into the next season's styles.

As for the level of comfort, just as you would need to try several different brands of leather shoes to find those that feel good, the same is true for vegan shoes. Why hold vegan shoes to a different standard? In addition to the brands above, try www.neuaurashoes.com, www.novacas.com, www.wills-vegan-shoes.com or www.beyondskin.co.uk. The list goes on and on. Some you have to order directly from their websites or vegan websites like www.alternativeoutfitters.com, www.mooshoes.com or www.veganchic.com and they often have generous return or exchange policies (even the UK companies when shipping to the US). And, some are available at the larger general shoes sites with free shipping and free returns like Zappos and OnlineShoes.

You can also find traditional leather brands that make a lot of shoes from manmade materials. Brands such as Bandolino and Anne Klein are two that do this a lot as well as Naturalizer and Madden Girl by Steve Madden.

Once you make a commitment to finding leather alternatives you will be amazed at what appears, especially if you view it as an adventure rather than an experience in deprivation. This information is just to whet your interest in taking the plunge. Once you do, you won't be able to go back and each time you make a cruelty-free choice you give a message to the world (and shoe makers!) that that's what you want. What could feel better than that...except maybe a beautiful pair of vegan shoes!