

Shoes

Continued from 11E

Like a scene out of a movie, an older Italian gentleman was sitting at his cobbler's bench slowly hammering

tiny nails into a leather shoe. Apprentices, soaking up his every move, surrounded him. I remarked that I would just love it if "my shoemaker" could be just like this one.

Little did I know that the next day when my friend Smilie took me to

meet his choice artisan, it would be the same man — Calogero Mannina, a master shoemaker for more than 54 years and a second-generation shoe designer. I saw the framed articles in magazines and newspaper clippings from around the world claiming

his talent. He was even featured in an exclusive book on elite Florentine artisans. I was sure that I was meant to have the best size 12 shoes that Italy could produce.

As we walked into his tiny workshop without an appointment, Smilie explained what I wanted. Surrounded by stacks of leather samples, nails and hammers, Mannina was ready to solve my foot problems with a shoe made of soft, beautiful Italian leather.

What color do you want? Round or pointed toe? What heel height?

As I conveyed my answers to Smilie, the Italian shoemaker's expertise put my fears to rest. He took a million notes, measured my orthotics and then sat me down on the worn bench, one end stacked high with shoeboxes and soon-to-be shoes. He began to trace my feet with a pencil onto paper, just how I remember my foot being measured as a child in the 1950s. Mannina meant business. He jotted down numbers and notes about my foot, in Italian, of course. The measuring and shoe talk was over in less than 20 minutes. Then we left the workshop and walked around to his storefront. It was a beautiful store full of shoes. Of course, those shoes were for people with normal-size feet, not my big size 12s.

Suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten to inquire how much my custom shoes would cost. As the kind, friendly craftsman handed me a form to complete with my mailing address back in the States, I started to panic. What if these shoes had "movie star" prices? After all, Mannina was pictured with lots of movie stars on the store's wall. I decided that I just would not shop for shoes for a year (or maybe more!) and surely that would offset the price of my custom shoes. When Smilie asked him the price, I already had my credit card out, ready to bite the bullet.

After Smilie told me the price, I realized that my math had been correct: No shoes for a year or so. That

How to shop for Italian custom shoes

Before you go

■ Search the Internet for the best handmade shoes in the city that you are visiting. Internet searches provide good information on the shoemakers, the shop addresses and reviews by clients. Look for the word "Translate" at the top of the website to navigate around in English and to understand the Italian website easier.

■ Carefully read through shoemakers' websites. Look for how long the craftsmen have been in business. Look to see if the craftsmen make shoes for women and men. Often, you will find they design handmade styles only for men.

■ Check the listed prices before you go. Be prepared to spend more than you normally spend on shoes in America. Remember, this is an investment in quality.

■ Visit bookstores or go online for travel books highlighting shopping in Italy. Normally, there is a section on handmade items like shoes.

■ Ask friends or your hotel staff for recommendations. Italian hotel staff are happy to point you to local merchants with good reputations.

■ Have a style in mind along with fabric, leather and color.

■ Bring along some examples from magazines or ads to show shoes styles that you like.

When you arrive

■ Ask for an English-speaking salesperson if your Italian is

limited. Many Italians, especially young Italians, know some English.

■ If you try on a sample shoe or form, stand up so that all of your weight is in the proper place while your foot is measured.

How much to pay

■ Expect to pay 800-1,200 euros for a pair of women's leather shoes (at today's exchange rate, \$1,000-\$1,500) or 1,000-1,200 euros for a pair of men's leather shoes (\$1,250-\$1,500).

Where to shop in Florence

Mannina

Mannina Workshop
Via De'Barbadori 19r
Tel: 39 055 211060

Mannina Store

Via Guicciardini 16r
50125 Firenze, Italia
www.manninafirenze.com

Other reliable shoemakers in Florence

Saskia Scarpe Su Misura
Via di S. Lucia 24r
Tel: 39 055 293291
Firenze, Italia
www.saskiascarpesumisura.com

Francesco da Firenze

Via di Santo Spirito, 62r
Tel: 39 055 212428
Firenze, Italia
www.francescodafirenze.it

Stefano Berner

Borgo San Frediano 69
Tel: 39 055 222558
Firenze, Italia
www.stefanoberner.it

worked for me because now I would have wonderful custom-made shoes that would last forever. And if I did wear them out or want another style, Mannina would have my shoe pattern and my wooden form filed right there with all the movie stars'. All I would have to do is e-mail and give him my credit card number and another pair would soon be on the way!

Mannina explained that I should expect the handcrafted shoes in about a month. This talented artisan makes only one pair of shoes each day with the great care and pride. Why would I rush this dying art?

I would be happy to wait.

Mannina and I walked out of the shop practically hand-in-hand. He wished me well, gave me a kiss on each cheek and a big hug and off I went. I received my custom-made Italian leather shoes nine weeks and one day after purchasing them. They fit like a glove. The leather wraps around my bunions with no pain and is even softer than I remembered back in Mannina's shop. I wear the shoes practically night and day. My big feet and I are very happy and stylish, too!

Yes, I made a great investment. My feet say "Grazie."