



Sole Mates

Oliberté, a sustainable, Fair Trade footwear brand, gives meaning to shopping for shoes

By **Celia Shatzman**

Tal Dehtiar has always blended business with doing good. In 2004, he launched MBAs Without Borders, a nonprofit that connected entrepreneurs from around the world with craftspeople and workers in developing nations to build small businesses. But Dehtiar wanted to do more, so he founded Oliberté, a sustainable footwear brand, five years later.

“In the course of my travels, I spoke with shoemakers and other craftsmen who said it was tough to make and sell great shoes when large organizations were coming into the country and donating poorly made shoes,” says Dehtiar. “Oliberté gave these craftsmen an outlet to harness their skills while contributing to the local community in a much more tangible way than through donations.”

Oliberté began by partnering with factories and suppliers in Africa. In 2012, its factory opened in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where all of its shoes are now made. Oliberté is the first—and currently only—Fair Trade-certified footwear factory in the world, and it also participates in 1% for the Planet, donating one percent of proceeds to nonprofits dedicated to the environment.

The brand was founded on the principle of supporting workers' rights as well as creating jobs and developing the local economies in sub-Saharan Africa. “By keeping our factory and sources of production as much as possible in Africa, and often in the very region and location of our factory, we're providing a tangible economic impact through jobs that pay fair wages and offer opportunity for financial and personal advancement,” says Dehtiar. “Partnering with local suppliers gives them a means to use their high skill level for a direct economic benefit, something we wouldn't be able to do if we outsourced the production and sourcing of our shoes.”

The company now employs more than 110 people from the surrounding area, from management to pattern making and stitching. Employees earn a living wage, receive health-care and full benefits, have the opportunity to join unions, and six percent of the cost of every shoe goes directly to the workers, in addition to their pay.

The shoes are carefully crafted almost exclusively from local and sustainable materials. Even the tags, insoles and factory's machinery are locally made—reducing their carbon footprint—and every pair comes with a lifetime guarantee. “By making our shoes last longer than the average footwear, we're providing tremendous value to our customer and also mitigating our environmental impact,” says Dehtiar.

Oliberté recently expanded to include a baby footwear line as well as sneakers for men and women, and Dehtiar plans to continue growing the brand. “The most rewarding thing is the knowledge that we're truly making a difference in the lives of our employees and, through that, we're reaching like-minded consumers who believe in the brand,” Dehtiar says. “That's worth a lot more than selling a pair of shoes.” oliberte.com

