

In the 1930s, the most esteemed tailors of Naples began deconstructing the traditional English suit jacket. The *spalla camicia*, or shirt shoulder – created by removing the lining, canvas and pads – resulted in a garment that, while remaining smart, looked and felt better suited to *la dolce vita* than *l'ufficio*. Today, the phrase Neapolitan tailoring denotes the kind of unstructured, light, comfortable suiting that helps the denizens of warmer climates exude the casual élan of a gentleman at leisure. The fascination that captivated those pioneering artisans in prewar Naples is now gripping contemporary men's shoemakers. Menswear brands and shoemakers across the globe are creating lighter, less rigid and more comfortable iterations of classic shoe styles.

"Men are looking for a more relaxed fit and feel for their business and dress shoes," says James Ducker, co-founder and director of London bespoke shoe service Carréducker. Softer natural vegetable-tanned leathers, suedes and

nubucks [Northington boots, £3,300, pictured below left]; unstructured designs without lining; and a softer look and feel are increasingly popular among the company's bespoke clients. "We have one customer who likes a padded ankle on his Derby and Oxford shoes, trainer style," adds Ducker. "Another has a quilted kidskin lining in his laced Oxford boots to cushion his ankles. Some clients opt for fabric quarters on their boots, which automatically gives them a softer look and feel, and we also use leather shanks rather than metal ones to give more flex in the arch and a softer foot strike on the ground."

This shift is something that David Gandy, model and owner of the brand David Preston, feels has been a long time coming. "In the wake of major trends for trainers and less formal work clothing, we saw that men wanted a more versatile, comfortable and modern-style shoe – one that trod the middle ground between traditional brogues and Oxfords and trainers."

David Preston's Lowry, Oxford and Derby shoes (Derby pictured overleaf, £360) are devoid of internal stiffeners and

Clockwise from top right: Santoni calfskin monkstraps, £627. Berluti Venezia-leather Alessandro Spada shoes, £1,010. Bontoni calfskin Bellantonio Oxfords, £1,170. Loro Piana water-repellent suede Summer Walk shoes, £495. Carréducker bespoke nubuck Northington desert boots, £3,300. JM Weston calfskin Oxfords, £510. Selection of rugs from Amara.com and John Lewis



Classic men's shoes are walking to a new, less regimented beat as softer finishes and gently deconstructed styles become the word on the street, says Nick Scott. Photography by Omer Knaz

easy does it



linings, while Santoni's unlined, unstructured double-buckle monkstraps (£627, pictured on previous page) in woven calfskin, which come in light brown, blue-green and black, are a more flamboyant option for less formal occasions. Gaziano & Girling's Boscastles (£1,390, pictured right) also take an unlined approach, and increasing numbers of requests for less structured shoes in the brand's bespoke division have inspired it to launch a broader softer shoe range for the summer.

Florentine shoemaker Stefano Bemer omits the linings from some of its standard loafers and Derbys (£985), and puts an emphasis on using the softest leather possible in order to emulate an unstructured effect (as in its suede Olga design, £1,250, centre in main picture). Other brands becoming more adventurous in their use of softer materials include French makers JM Weston, which launched a new Oxford collection in January with a more minimalistic, comfortable design in soft calfskin (£510, pictured on previous page) and suede (£500) and crepe rubber soles instead of leather, and Berluti, whose latest version of the Alessandro Spada (£1,010, pictured on previous page) incorporates the lines of its predecessors, using the company's Venezia leather with a rubber sole.

Bontoni – a third-generation shoemaker based in Italy's Marche region – takes the concept of softening its materials to a molecular level. "We place the hides into a special drying drum for a considerable number of hours," explains co-founder Franco Gazzani. "After the leather has been removed from the dryer, we stretch each piece by hand in order to obtain the proper consistency throughout. The end result is a material that preserves the durability and strength of the original box calf, yet has the bonus of being far more supple, lightweight and comfortable." A prime example is the

brand's Bellantonio (£1,170, pictured on previous page), a lace-up Oxford in antiqued cognac.

It's not just traditional formal shoe styles that are being made more yielding. Crockett & Jones' Hayle (£335, top right in main picture) is an unlined chukka boot, which comes in both ocean blue and camel suede. "By removing the linings, tweaking the patterns and offering a slightly thinner leather or rubber sole, we're able to retain the durability but also increase breathability and flexibility," says Crockett & Jones' James Fox. John Lobb also makes a chukka boot (£1,040) whose unlined interior creates lightness and nimbleness that's unusual in a Goodyear-welted shoe (its Goodyear William monkstraps – £850, bottom right in main picture – are fine-tuned too). According to the 150-year-old London cordwainer, an unlined vamp makes the supple suede of the upper hug closer to the foot, mirroring a barefoot sensation.

Maison Corthay has launched an unstructured slip-on, the Cannes (£835 in blue suede, pictured above, £850 in patinated calf), which has the semi-formal appeal of, say, the Gucci Horsebit loafer, but a foot-feel more akin to Tod's Gommino driving moccasins. "The Cannes is a true hybrid," says founder Pierre Corthay. "It positions itself between the most supple loafers that you would wear on the beach and the solidly constructed loafers designed for

Clockwise from left: Crockett & Jones suede Hayle boots, £335. John Lobb leather William monkstraps, £850. Maison Corthay suede Cannes slip-ons, £835. David Preston suede Newton Derbys, £360. Gaziano & Girling suede Boscastle shoes, £1,390. Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello leather Richelieu sneakers, £510. Ermenegildo Zegna flexible-leather Il Moccassino loafers, £495. Bottega Veneta calfskin and caiman lace-ups, £1,005. Stefano Bemer suede Olga shoe, £1,250

more formal attire." Its Blake stitching allows for suppleness and comfort, and it can easily be bent double so that the toe touches the heel – then springs back into its natural shape.

The latest half-lined loafer (£380) in tan or dark-green suede by Stemar – a handmade shoe brand in Vigevano, Italy – is another great option based on the same principle, as is the eternally elegant Santoni Carlos (£415) in soft burnt-orange calfskin. An innovative new offering from Ermenegildo Zegna, meanwhile, is Il Moccassino (£495, far left in main picture). Its sacchetto construction involves hand-stitching the lining and insole together before sewing to the upper. This, together with a special approach to the sole leather (it is treated in solution in rotating drums in order to break down its fibres) and the addition of contoured natural cork footbeds, grants a surprising degree of extra comfort and flexibility.

Loro Piana's hand-constructed Summer Walk shoe in unlined suede (£495, pictured on previous page) is an elegantly informal take on the loafer, while Saint Laurent's black leather sneakers (£510, bottom left in main picture) with zip-up front and laces are crafted from soft, supple leather better suited to the cocktail lounge than the five-a-side pitch. Another striking example is Bottega Veneta's lace-ups (£690), made using the Italian house's trademark intrecciato method, interweaving calf to create a chequered effect (there's also a permutation with a caiman saddle, £1,005, top in main picture).

Whether this "softly softly" approach to shoemaking will one day have the same associations of insouciance par excellence

as Neapolitan tailoring remains to be seen. For now, though, the appeal is growing. In Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, *sprezzatura* is defined as "a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it". Innate elegance may come from within, but beautiful footwear that can barely be felt on the feet is surely a step in the right direction. ♦

SOFT PEDDLERS

Berluti, 43 Conduit St, London W1 (020-7437 1740; berluti.com). **Bontoni**, +393-3549 5282; bontoni.com. **Bottega Veneta**, 14 Old Bond St, London W1 (020-7629 5598; bottegabeneta.com). **Carréducker**, studio at Gieves & Hawkes, 1 Savile Row, London W1 (020-7813 0093; carreducker.com). **Crockett & Jones**, 92 Jermyn St, London SW1 (020-7839 5239; crockettandjones.com). **David Preston**, davidpreston shoes.com. **Ermenegildo Zegna**, 37-38 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7518 2700; zegna.co.uk). **Gaziano & Girling**, 39 Savile Row, London W1 (020-7439 8717; gazianogirling.com). **JM Weston**, 60 Jermyn St, London SW1 (020-7629 9494; jmweston.com). **John Lobb**, 88 Jermyn St, London SW1 (020-7930 8089; johnlobb.com). **Loro Piana**, 153 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7499 9300; loropiana.com). **Maison Corthay**, 24A Motcomb St, London SW1 (020-7235 5481; corthay.com). **Saint Laurent**, 32-33 Old Bond St, London W1 (020-7493 1800; ysl.com). **Santoni**, Via Monte Napoleone 6, 20121 Milan (+3902-7628 0508; santonishoes.com). **Selfridges**, 400 Oxford St, London W1 (0800-123 400; selfridges.com). **Stefano Bemer**, Via di San Niccolò 2, Florence 50125 (+39055-046 0476; stefanobemer.com). **Stemar**, stemarkshoes.com and see Selfridges.

