

BRAZILIAN SOLE

How a humble rubber flip-flop became a global icon



At Wallpaper*, we're already preparing our footwear for Rio 2014. Perhaps unexpectedly, we're rejecting studs completely. The games we plan on playing aren't in any stadium – they'll be taking place on Arpoador Beach and involve sand between our toes. So Havaianas beats Adidas every time.

The Brazilian brand of flip-flops – we struggle to call them thongs – lays credible claim to being the country's first and possibly only global brand. In 2011, about 210 million pairs were sold worldwide. Within Brazil, one pair was sold for every man, woman and

ABOVE, MARCELLO SERPA, PARTNER AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR AT AD AGENCY ALMAPBBDO, THE COMPANY RESPONSIBLE FOR HAVAIANAS' CHEEKY AD CAMPAIGNS

child in the country. Which, seeing as the rubber flip-flops have been around since 1962, begs the question: how? Surely everyone has enough Havaianas.

A pair of Havaianas does have some USPs: the wishbone-between-the-toe design, inspired by Japanese *zori*, the traditional straw-bottomed sandals worn by geisha, makes them comfortable and distinctive; and, while most cheap flip-flops are plastic-soled, Havaianas' aerated rubber versions are high on comfort, low on odour and longlasting. The launch-campaign ads in the 1960s sold the shoes as tough,»

'Havaianas connects Brazilians to our youth, and to the beach'

with straps that stayed in place and rubber that wouldn't smell. If anything, that should mitigate against repeat purchases, shouldn't it?

In fact, the genius of Havaianas is the genius of soft power, explains Marcello Serpa, partner and creative director at the brand's ad agency, AlmapBBDO. He says the brand's strategy - taking the essence of Brazilian style, humour and lifestyle and tying those qualities into an affectionately self-mocking global campaign - is a model for the country's cultural ambition.

'Havaianas has a huge resonance and huge affection in the memory for everybody. It connects Brazilians to our youth, and to the beach,' Serpa says.

Customisation began on the streets. The shoes originally came in black, blue or yellow soles with a white top. Kids were constantly turning the shoes over, mixing and matching, creating their own pairings.

'We started working on the campaign in 1994, and at that time Havaianas were very well known in Brazil but they were cheap and were used on building sites or for going to the beach,' Serpa says. 'It was a poor man's shoe - the least expensive thing before walking barefoot. We took it and made it glamorous and aspirational around the world.'

Parent company Alpargatas hired designers to revamp the colour schemes and started a two-tier ad campaign, pitching the new designs to both the top and the bottom of Brazil's social pyramid. 'We had one TV ad with a lot of Brazilian celebrities making fun of themselves and wearing Havaianas,' Serpa says. 'Then we used print campaigns and fashion shows to put the new Havaianas, the colourful Havaianas, on the map.'

The campaign's cheek appealed to Brazilians' sense of humour. By 2007, 850 pairs of Havaianas were sold for every 1,000 people in Brazil - international expansion was the only way to grow.

High-end fashion ads were already wooing Brazilian models, who took extra pairs to Europe and the US to hand out to friends. 'The first two or three magazine ads outside Brazil we ran in Portuguese,' Serpa says. 'There was nothing in English, and I think it was a very bold move. In Brazil, our advertising has to be local or it doesn't work. The most difficult part was, do the French, English, Germans or Australians understand what we're doing here? And we realised that, yes, people like Brazil as an expression of a way of life.'

With global sales topping \$167 million, jewellery label H Stern creating limited-edition pairs with diamonds, and Missoni customising pairs with the brand's trademark zigzags, Serpa is permitted a quiet smile. There's one final issue to resolve, however. If you're not Brazilian, it's almost impossible to samba in flip-flops. ☐

