

## The Bootmakers of Pastores

By

Kit Cross

It doesn't feel like we've even left Antigua. 20 minutes out of the bus plaza behind the market, I'm pulling in to the little town of Pastores. It could be something right out of a spaghetti western. Windswept streets with tumbleweeds rolling down the middle and a loooooong lonesome whistle in the background. But I digress....and I think I made up the whistle.

I came looking for boots. I'm doing this in a rather unique way. I'm meeting with Alicia Lopez, the director of an English language program for local kids. She offers free tours of the town in English as a project for her students to get in some practice. I now know a little about the church, there are beautiful hot springs here and the town was named after San Dionisio de Pastores—the patron saint of shepherds. Everyone needs a little divine protection.

And, oh by the way, they make boots....It's not like you could miss them—there are more than 50 shops in this little aldea, population 3700 or so. Each shop has one or two fabricantes and they're supported by a large network of home workers that do work around that *other* work of child minding and corn/bean farming.



It turns out though, that Lopez's English students have uncovered an extraordinary nugget of their town's history and why it's now on the map as the go-to place in Guatemala for handmade boots. This is the tale of their grandfathers and fathers. This is the story of Don Julio Acual 86, retired.

Back in the 50's Don Julio had a look around his friends and family and decided the best thing he could do to contribute to his community was to learn how to make shoes. Pastores was farming country but no one owned shoes. With a good pair of shoes comes respect. Ask the brush boys in Antigua's Parque Central. There has always been business for them because shoes—clean shoes are a sign of a respectable man.



In 1955 things were a little different from Pastores today. There was no urban sprawl, no electric lights and certainly no buses every 15 minutes to and from Antigua. So Don Julio walked the long road into town each day and home again at night for a couple of years to apprentice in the trade. Don Julio Acual became the first shoemaker in Pastores. 10 years later he started making boots.

“You had to be really careful with the women’s boots, “ he said. “Sometimes the helpers were not and the boots would be sent back from Guatemala. Women’s boots have to be perfect! The most difficult part of course is making a new design. I always hoped that people would like them and buy them.”

Pastores became known first for its cowboy boots. During the 1970’s Pantoleon Veras Sanchez 63, of Botas Veras was making upwards of 300 pairs a month.



He recalls a rather unique advertising campaign. In October each year, Pastores held a huge harvest festival. It attracted vaqueros (cowboys) from all across the country as well as musicians from as far away as El Salvador, Nicaragua and even Mexico.

“Here—take these boots and go home and tell all your friends that you got them in Pastores Guatemala,“ they said.

So the word spread and people started to come. In droves. Pastores, once a sleepy little farming community was now on the map as the place for boots.

I wondered how 50 shops can survive. Sr Sanchez laments,

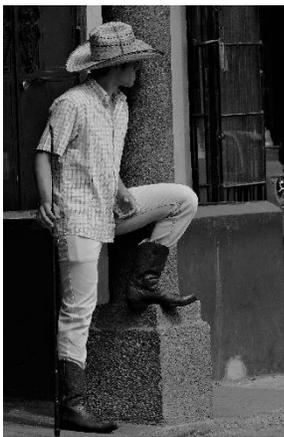
“If you were a butcher 2 years ago, now you’re a boot maker. If you were a shop keeper, now you’re a bootmaker. I don’t know if they take the time and the care we took.”

His sentiments are echoed by his contemporary, Sr Julio Alvarez at Botas El Paso (desde 1982 according to the sign)



“We use original materials,” says Sr Alvarez. “ The outside is made from cow and the lining is from pig. Nothing else. When you make a pair of boots for a very cheap price, you have to use cheap material. It’s no good”

The going price for a hand made pair of cowboy boots is between 3 and 400Q and up. At today’s rate, that’s about \$40-55 USD. You get what you pay for—if you don’t want your feet to stink, pay a little more and have hide rather than synthetic material (usually inside). You can have your feet measured one day, choose your hide colour and any embellishments and in less than a week, you have a handmade pair of boots that’ll dazzle your friends.



The traditional cowboy boots of Pastores are by no means the end of the line here. Ranger Boots for example sells these...boots favoured by Mexican musicians, rodeo goers and anyone looking for a solution to cockroaches in the corner.



This author figures you walk upstairs backwards in case you were wondering...

Boots like this will set you back a cool 1800 Q and Ranger Boots owner Pedro Garona says he's sold a few.

So fast-forward to the 21<sup>th</sup> century. Across the road from Ranger Boots is Botas Rodeo. Like many of the shops in town you can see the boots being made in time honoured tradition by hand right in the shop. Owner Rocal Alvarez sells a more contemporary style with a nod to the traditional huipile weavers of the country.



You're looking at Q280-350 for these styles and yes they can be custom made.

It's an idea that's proven very successful for Teysha Boots that does primarily an online business out of the country. Manager Hanna Hall de Arzu says they employ between 12 and 15 workers for a consistent year-round business. The company's commitment to the social welfare of its employees means they can provide a social fund (essentially benefits) to the workers on top of their wage for whatever they need—such as school supplies, medical visits etc. The higher price tag (\$250 USD and up) provides a fair wage, the benefits plus consistent work for the employees. The quality of work is exquisite and they come with the guarantee of a local (American/European) cobbler to fix anything that's not right on delivery.

As de Arzu points out, the work on main street is seasonal—with a big push at Christmas and again in the summer. Throughout January to March the work can drop off in town but Teysha's online business i can offer work when things are slow at the other shops (Teysha's employees also work in the town shops)

Their tip-of-the-hat to the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an online interactive site that allows you to choose boot style, fabric colour and specific sizing needs.

<http://www.teysha.is>

Your boots (or shoes) are created before your eyes and you can even custom order fabric woven to suit. Teysha doesn't have a 'display' shop proper but is happy to arrange tours if you're in town and you can see the boots in mid process.

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I'm walking back into town after chatting with Sr. Acual. This must have been the same path he took all those years ago back in the '50's to learn how to make shoes. Sometimes he said. coming home late at night, after a long day apprenticing in Antigua, he might see El Cadejo, a huge dog that is the stuff of Guatemalan children stories. But it's too early in the day for that. Yoselin my 16 year old student guide, my translator and my new friend is glowing. This town, these boots and this venerable shoemaker are her history. Life for all of us just got a little more interesting.