

**Ask the Duchess of Cambridge** to pick her longest-serving pair of shoes and, almost certainly, she'll reach for designer Penelope Chilvers's long tassel boots. In the past 14 years, the Duchess's boots have trudged the paths of Buddhist monks in Tibet, avoided grizzly encounters in Canada and side-stepped squelching situations on lawns across the UK. Amid a seemingly infinite display of politely heeled court shoes, her comfy and packable leather boots have stood fast.

Why? Their longevity can be attributed to the age-old practices of Spain's leather craftsmen – long championed by Chilvers. Since her Mayfair store opened in 2005, her collections of Spanish-made accessories have amassed celebrity followers including Rihanna, Alexa Chung and Cate Blanchett. But in Andalucia, their origins remain as dusty and humble as they were 90 years ago when José Manuel Domínguez Rite's grandfather first turned rivet to riches in the sun-baked hills of southern Spain.

While most of his time is spent designing his own range of bags, belts and equestrian leathers, twice a year Rite convenes with Chilvers in his terracotta-topped



## FROM RIVETS TO RICHES

Meet the craftsman continuing Moorish traditions of leather-working in Andalucia, whose creations have a global following

**By Robbie HODGES Photography by Flora HASTINGS**

workroom in Valverde del Camino – 55 miles west of Seville – to design capsule collections which, months later, travel back to London and into the wardrobes of Chilvers's stylish clientele.

Rite has never set foot on a jet, let alone a red carpet (where does he holiday? 'Andalucia, of course'), and his workroom remains that which his father built 'in the garden of [his] family home, with his own bare hands. Leather craft?' he says. 'It's in my blood'. His commute is a 160ft stroll through Mediterranean shrubbery, resonant with the scent of figs and the distant whinnies of unbridled horses whose new saddles lie on the floor of Rite's workroom.

If anyone can refer to their office as a living museum, Rite can. Decades-old equestrian leathers with gleaming hardware slump on the walls overlooking his worktop which, set with a full cutlery of awls, blades, embossing stamps and unidentifiable pointy instruments, is primed – 'in the same way it has been since my father started here' – for a tender cut of Spanish leather.

'You'll always find the softest deer and cattle skins

in the north, but you can't beat western Spain when it comes to sheep or goat,' says Rite, slapping a hand on a hide. Then, silently, he takes a wooden-handled chisel and starts to plane the skin, scattering ringlets of suede shavings about his worktop. Leather thinned, an iron embossing tool impresses a blueprint, which Rite slices into the skin with an awl. A series of calculated jabs with a broguing pin completes the process.

In just 45 minutes, the fleshy stretch of deer skin has been reconfigured into a whirl of arabesque loops and arches, diced and punctured with robotic precision: a showy appliqué soon to be welded to a Penelope Chilvers handbag. 'I'm a third-generation craftsman,' he says. 'But really all the knowledge and tools I use are



### HIDE AND SEEK

Clockwise from top: polishing a handbag to bring out the lustre of the leather; cutting out intricate patterns by hand; a finished bag; José Manuel Domínguez Rite in his workshop

indebted to the Moors, who taught the Spanish, and later the Americans, in the Golden Age of the Conquerors.'

In the gentle swoops of his hand-punched broguing can be found the Mudéjar-style horseshoe arches of the Alcazár Palace in nearby Seville, where bougainvillea blossom camouflages painted ceramic tiles. But beyond Andalucia, the Eastern history packed into each of Rite's handicrafts can be found across Spain where, in polished boutique windows, his accessories comprise luxury tableaux.

'Nothing compares to family wisdom passed from generation to generation,' he says, 'and as long as people with taste are looking for an escape, we'll be here to provide it.' ●