In this article, Penny Leese gives her assessment of new footwear developments in the outdoor arena, based on the new models and styles exhibitors had on display at the European OutDoor event in Friedichshafen in July.

Lightweight, sporty and accessible

The OutDoor event combines sport, fashion and fun and there were plenty of new products to see this time, as well as lots of thought and innovation. One theme at the fair was how to protect the environment and have fun. Protecting the environment doesn’t just mean using organic cotton or minimal glue and natural jute, as The North Face and Patagonia have done in their shoes. Many major sporting brands are now members of the European Outdoor Group, providing money and resources to protect the European outdoors so that we can all enjoy it in years to come.

The new ‘eco’ shoe collection by The North Face is called Heritage, a totally new concept for summer 2008. The shoes reflect an environmentally conscious image and look very natural, with canvas uppers and linings made from bamboo fibre. The insole is made from natural foam developed from a Japanese potato usually used for household furnishings, the midsole is moulded compressed foam and the sole is 40% recycled rubber. The leather in the shoes is chrome-free. The packing is 100% post consumer and there is no extra paper inside. The soles are tack free and the styles are, as much as possible, also hang-tag free.

For its casual low-cut hiker styles, Patagonia is using leather from one of the increasing number of tanneries worldwide with ISO 14001 accreditation. There are plenty of materials that are recycled in this collection, too, including the EVA, and the rubber sole is natural latex from the hevea tree. The same company’s new fashion sandals have real latex, and the rubber sole is natural latex from the hevea tree. The new women’s ballerinas are two shoes in one, with a stitch-and-turn soft inner ballerina shoe, which is attached (and can be detached) with a press-stud to the outer casing, so the shoes are dual purpose, outdoors and indoors.

In fact, novel constructions like this are creating extremely comfortable shoes. Adama, made in Israel by Source, created some interesting new footwear based on the idea of a combination of moccasin and sandals. The upper is attached to the sole with a series of interlocking loops and a cord inside (tied at the back), creating the look of a sandal with the comfort of the moccasin, and the knobbly driving type outsole extending through the nubuck leather upper and outer sole. The patent-pending construction is also low material-intensive as it does not require lasting machines.

Hybrid looks mean that the OutDoor fair is not just for hard-core enthusiasts. Montrail’s leather street shoes, with a rugged rubber toe cap and grippy Gryptonite sole, can be worn for light backpacking in the day and are cool enough to wear in town in the evening.

The Considered line by ACG has moved on from having a real veg-tanned leather look. Now there are environment-friendly synthetics, with more performance than before, making these shoes more an active product than a lifestyle one.

Lightweight, trail-running and water sports

Weight-reduction has made outdoor sports more accessible to all, especially women. The newest shoes have every single component re-thought to reduce weight. Trail-running was the most talked about sport at the fair; it is now mainstream, and much trendier than Nordic walking since it has a fresher and younger image. Trail-running shoes are not just joggers with a more rugged sole, they are very light, and often colourful too; the new Montrail Streak trail-runner is only 330 grammes per half pair, but it keeps up the company’s reputation for comfort by having a roomier toe-box for all-day use.

Light weight is what won GoLite an OutDoor award at the event. This new US brand, which also specialises in trail-running shoes, seems to be turning all received knowledge upside down: the hardest part of the shoe is against the foot, while the softest part...
Trail-running was the most talked about sport at the European OutDoor event in July.
is against the ground. The shoes have giant lugs but are still incredibly light, as each lug offers independent suspension, meaning that the foot remains stable since the sole takes the shocks from the rocks, so no more twisted ankles. They look very different, too, all extraneous upper material is removed to make them as light as possible, so they have big thick mouldings up the side, coming from the sole-edge. GoLite uses dedicated lasts for men and women and expensive material; there is a real carbon-fibre plate, not just an optic like many shoe companies have.

Montrail has put sports sandal straps onto a moulded bottom to create a floatable sandal that will stay on the foot, even in rigorous water sports like white-water rafting. The webbing is 50% PET, and the footbed is 20% recycled EVA, while the outsole is 15% recycled rubber. The face of sports sandals has changed dramatically since Mark Thatcher launched the original groundbreaking Teva sandal. Now the emphasis is on lighter weight and more foot protection, but maintaining the ergonomic foot shape. Toe bumpers are the rule rather than the exception, ideal for foot protection when paddling a canoe on your knees for example.

From ACG, there is a water shoe with a basketball-boot look, extremely light, with dry drainage and sticky rubber sole. The women’s version looks like a ballerina shoe, perfectly combining fashion with function. The Helly Hansen water sports shoes are designed to let the water in and out – mesh uppers and draining on the side and sole are ideal for a sailing brand. They are perfect for canyoning, or anything in boats, and very visible too in bright safety colours.

Trezeta also addressed the question of dry feet. Its ‘Dry on Move’ technology has a chimney effect, drawing the moisture up from the foot and pushing it upwards out of the shoe. There are channels in the sole and a reinforced footbed, which line up. Trezeta is confident enough to offer a three-year guarantee for waterproofness and comfort.

Fitting and comfort

Fitting and comfort are paramount in outdoor footwear. With its ‘Blister Free’ promise, Salewa understands that consumers are used to instant comfort from trainers for everyday use and
refuse to ‘break in’ boots. Comfort also depends on the right last, so The North Face has introduced 19 new lasts for spring-summer 2008. The lasts are sports specific and gender specific; nine of them are exclusively women’s. Forget this unisex look; today’s consumers want products that fit!

Seamless soft shell looks, as at Salomon a year ago, have been picked up by almost every manufacturer. These are ergonomically comfortable shoes with minimal seaming, the only protection coming at toe and heel with some moulded rubber-look overlays. These shoes are comfortable because they don’t rub the feet, and they look great in the popular vivid colours.

But we still want to look good, too, and, thanks to so many women now entering the arena, outdoor products are no longer boring brown leather walking-boots. There was an ocean of brilliant blues, yellows and green in the trail-running and water-sports footwear to match the technical clothing on offer.

Mountain-boots are going high-tech too. The North Face’s Dhaulagiri (named after one of the Himalayan peaks) has multiple new technologies. There is an X-frame ankle support for lateral stability, a Vibram sole, an EVA midsole, which has special pillars to fit lugs for appropriate cushioning and an elastomer plug that fits onto the pillars for ultimate cushioning. There is also a heel cradle; the idea is that the shoe prevents any stone bruising from uneven surfaces underneath. The outsole is designed with bigger lugs on the side, where most traction is needed, and rounder ones in the middle part for cushioning. The insole is also specialised. It has been developed specially with extra cushioning at the heel and forepart but still with support in the medial arch. At the same time the heel is protected as the insole here is not just harder, but also curved to fit the heel cup. The company has given this special insole the name ‘Northotic’.

Two years ago, the same company came out with BoaFit technology for quick lacing systems on boots, then sports shoes. The BoaFit was still on show at the fair from several vendors. But the North Face also has a new lacing, where a simple slider mechanism on the side attached to the lace loop has a ratchet effect that can tighten up the laces after they are tied.