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The real cost of sky-high heels

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Back pain, bunions and Botox for the feet ... Rebecca Barry Hill writes on the real cost of 'super heels'



Regular high heel-wearer Gemma Copas says they give her confidence, height and a good posture. Photo / Natalie Slade

It's 11am at a Freemans Bay cafe and a woman with long, blond hair has drifted to the magazine rack while she waits for her coffee. Dressed in a slim-fitting business jacket and pencil skirt, she looks sophisticated, confident, in control. But when the barista announces her latte is ready, she shuffles to the counter in such tiny, stilted steps, her drink is practically cold by the time she gets there. That's when I notice them: her shoes.

Black suede booties, they are stylish, modest appendages - devoid of toe cleavage, a glimpse of instep or any skin really other than a peep of a blood red toenail. And yet they are exceedingly high, the heels shiny like scalpels, propelling her rear into the air like Jessica Rabbit.

"Why would you do that to yourself?" scoffs my coffee buddy. "She can hardly walk."

I pray she has a desk job in which the only walking required is this cafe excursion and a teeter to the loo, where she'll sit, rubbing her bunions and sighing with relief that she only has six hours left in the working day.

It's a shame, really. Because standing still, she looked a million dollars.

In motion, she looked comical. But when did a little thing called function ever get the way of fashion? You don't have to look far to see that the trade-off for wearing outrageous, gravity-defying shoes - the pain, the cost, the difficulty putting one foot in front of the other - is apparently worth it. By outrageous, I'm not referring to your humble 8cm numbers, the likes of which grace the covers of Jilly Cooper novels. No, the new breed of "super heels" has been genetically modified to a height of at least 13cm, some as high as 18cm, which is roughly the height of an unsharpened pencil. And while you might argue that the addition of the ubiquitous platform reduces the pitch, making them easier to walk in, they're still a bloody long way off the ground.

"They definitely have got higher," says photographer and stylist Karen Inderbitzen-Waller. "We're in the architectural era, where the shoes are becoming more and more ridiculous. They're shaped like lipsticks and buildings. Just look at the whole season of Prada and Miu Miu and all these models that fell on the catwalk. It goes to show that shoes have gone too far."

What started on Parisian runways as an extreme way to accentuate the clothes has, inevitably, filtered down to the New Zealand high street. Andrea Biani has the Jeffrey Campbell Smoosh with a 14cm heel and a 4cm platform; Wild Pair has the Siren Amaze at 15cm with a 3cm platform; Shoe Connection has the Jeffrey Campbell Freda Boot with a 16.5cm heel and a 7cm platform. All are under \$300.

Arguably the highest heel in the country not aimed at drag queens is the 18cm Hurricane Heel, by Adrian Hailwood. Since the New Zealand designer sent models down the catwalk at Fashion Week in them, he's sold 36 of the 40 pairs produced.

"Lots of young girls bought them," he says. "A few celebrities and older ladies wear them with jeans."

Shoe chain Mi Piaci were impressed, and asked Hailwood to design a collection. Inspired by the late-60s and early-70s, the range of peep-toes, chunky ankle boots and stilettos come with names like the Rockefeller and the Empire State, the latter with a heel height of 14cm.

Primarily a clothing designer, Hailwood can afford to be bold with his shoes. But he says that while they're higher than anything else in the store, they're based on lasts - the technical term for a shoe mould - that already existed.

"They wanted something more extreme and they needed to be comfortable. They have a metal shank through the heel, so they're pretty solid."

"They've gone really well," says Mi Piaci marketing manager Stella Terrell. "Not much was changed from the original

drawings. We made them slightly more practical and wearable, because Adrian's known for his outrageous runway shoes. Customers love it - it's something different and special and there's a limited number."

Our obsession with height isn't new, as anyone who made it through the 70s platform era will know. In the 1500s, the upper classes wore chopines, an early platform created in Turkey that helped to keep clothing out of the mud. It soon became a status of wealth and nobility. In France the high heel or "haut talon" caught on among wealthy fashion-conscious men and women, inspiring the term "well-heeled". The latest trend of killer heels can't be pinpointed to any one person or event but French shoe designer Christian Louboutin can take some of the credit. His court shoes, worn by a host of A-listers, are designed to elongate the leg as much as possible, starting at 13cm high.

But perhaps the difference with this latest batch of super heels is that they're less about conforming, and more about challenging. There are killer heels to suit every personality. A pair of sky-high Louboutins might be more about femininity than, say, an arty pair of hooves by Noritaka Tatehana, the designer behind Lady Gaga's outlandish footwear, which aim to show the wearer is daring and has a sense of humour.

"People are becoming more expressive in their shoes," says Aja Rock, the celebrity model and singer who says she doesn't wear heels less than 14cm.

That's a good thing if you want to stand out. And it makes them a popular choice for short people, says Inderbitzen-Waller, who also points out that we wouldn't have been able to make such shoes 40 years ago.

"They're getting more technical and using better materials which improves the function and makes it new."

Like most fashion trends, this one really took off when celebrities were snapped wearing them. Victoria Beckham started a tabloid buzz when she wore Antonio Baradi's heel-less boots. We've seen Gwyneth Paltrow pose in skyscraper stilettos by Italian designer Giuseppe Zanotti while *X-Factor* judge Cheryl Cole, never seen in flats, has also helped to drive the trend. Jennifer Lopez even wrote a song about her Louboutins.

They're all very well for celebrities driven to the red carpet in a limo and who have, at the most, a 20m walk along a piece of red carpet to contend with. But how about your average Kiwi woman? Last week an office worker in ridiculously high heels fell while running across a busy central city street. And that's a flat surface. Any heels fan will tell you how hard it is to negotiate a downhill slope.

"New Zealand women are a practical bunch," says shoe designer Kathryn Wilson, whose range of heels maxes out around the 10cm mark. For her, producing a super heel simply wouldn't be commercially viable because, she says, "you'd wear it once".

"Women are still wearing the shoes they put on in the morning when they meet their friends after work and catch up with their boyfriend. They want shoes they can wear all day. It's not like New York where you get picked up and driven to a bar for the evening.

"The quality of the shoe you wear all the time is important. It could mean the difference between a good night out and going home early because your feet hurt. But if it's just that look of the fashion trend you're after, go for a cheaper brand. I wouldn't invest my money."

Mid-height heels and wedges will always be best-sellers, says Liz Upton-Savage, owner of Runway Shoes in Newmarket, which stocks luxury European brands. The shop caters to shoe fanatics of all persuasions but if you're game enough, you can opt for McCartney's classic stiletto with an 11cm heel or a mule with a 13cm wooden heel and a 3.5cm platform.

"It's not about practicality all the time," she says. "If you're in love with it, you want to have it because you want to feel good about yourself."

So how high is too high?

"You're walking a fine line as to what's over-the-top," says Aja Rock. "But I don't know what over-the-top is. Personally, I would not wear plastic see-through glittery, six-inch (15cm) heels. It depends on the materials."

As you'd expect for someone who frequents the Auckland party scene, she's an avid high heel fan - her shoe collection includes Louboutins, Guccis, and a pair of Hailwood's Rockefellers.

"I love the meaning of stiletto. It means a small dagger with a slender, tapered blade. I feel sexy and feminine when I wear them and really girly. But I'm not sure how good they are for your feet. I read a quote by Victoria Beckham where she said her bones were moving and growing because she wears her heels too much. I thought, 'oh no!' But I also love my kicks and high-top sneakers. I don't wear my heels all the time, because as a mum of two it's not practical."

It's not just stilettos that are climbing into the stratosphere but crazy platforms. Andrea Biani regularly over-stocks the Jeffrey Campbell Night Walker shoe, (on the previous page) because it always sells out.

In November, Rock attended SPQR's 20th birthday party in a pair of Jeffrey Campbell "reverse heels", with spikes all over them. "Everyone really loves them because they're quite outrageous."

They're even making it into the office. Gemma Copas (picture), 27, a receptionist and singer, owns at least six pairs and regularly wears them to work.

"Whenever I wear them people say 'Oh my God, are you on stilts?' But because of the platform at the front, they're relatively level with the ground.

"They make me feel confident and tall and give me good posture," says Copas, who is 170cm tall without her shoes on.

"I like to be tall, I guess. The men in the office love it when I'm not wearing them. They're like, finally, you're human size, not a giant looking down on us."

They're only shoes, of course. But why are we prepared to go to such great heights, even if it might mean we suffer for it? While most Kiwi women Canvas spoke to say it's just a fashion trend, British writer Polly Vernon wonders if our taste for killer heels is a form of railing against the recession. Another British writer, columnist Caitlin Moran, author of the hilarious feminist bible *How To Be A Woman*, reckons we'd be better off without them.

"There's only 10 people in the world, tops, who should wear heels," she writes. "And six of them are drag queens."

Are killer heels empowering or disempowering? Both, says Professor Maureen Malloy, a women's studies lecturer at the University of Auckland, who has written extensively about fashion.

"They are the equivalent of foot-binding. I just think they're ridiculous but it's fashion, so people will do what they do.

"They're also very interesting because I think being taller helps. Women who wear those kinds of heels to work are probably in a situation where it doesn't hurt to be able to look men in the eye. But, in a non-sexist society we wouldn't have to wear high heels to feel sexy and powerful."

On the streets of London you wouldn't look twice if someone sauntered past in a pair of 18cm heels. In New Zealand, though, those daring to push the norms of fashion are likely to be scorned. Perhaps our deeply imbedded sense of egalitarianism means we just can't stand looking up to people.

When I told my friend Stacey I was writing this piece, she scoffed that no one in their right mind would own such silly shoes, especially in New Zealand. Two weeks later she confessed she'd spent \$950 on a pair of Hugo Boss stilettos with a sky-high heel. She'd put them on once and lasted 10 minutes.

"But they look great in my wardrobe."

Inderbitzen-Waller is a classic example of a woman who can see the absurdity of killer heels - or "liability shoes" as she calls them - but she's also a self-described "heel freak", who owns two pairs of 15cm YSL heels, a pair of high wooden stiletto platforms, a black leather pair with buckles and a brown suede pair with a tarantula on each foot. There's a time and a place, she explains. She tends to wear them to Fashion Week events "because if I can't pull them out then I can't any time".

Even breaking her toe two years ago hasn't put her off wearing them to a regular girls' night, where the dress code is a party frock and heels.

"It's an excuse not to be lazy. I do try my hardest when I'm out in the evenings but I don't wear them during the day. I'm Jekyll and Hyde when it comes to my heels. I really don't care about comfort but you do get the odd pair that are too painful to wear - and it ruins your night," says Inderbitzen-Waller. "I have a pair of Miu Miu patent slingbacks and they're a killer. They're unwearable."

From July 2010-June 2011, ACC accepted 503 claims where the words "high heels" were mentioned in the accident description. This year, Mayor Len Brown helped a model to her feet when she fell on the catwalk at New Zealand Fashion this year. She'd been wearing high spike heels.

"They are almost crippling in what they allow you to do," says Professor Malloy. "Clearly they're not functional in terms of safety."

High heels alter our entire alignment, resulting in back, leg and hip problems, sciatica, a painful condition where nerves become trapped. The higher the heel, the more the calf muscle and the Achilles tendon contract. If worn too often, this can result in permanent damage.

Podiatrist Simon Speight, of Speights Podiatry in Auckland's High St, sees a lot of "corporate feet" and says it's not the heel height that is the main cause of foot problems but the compression on the toes created by a small toe-box.

"In some senses high heels are better than your floppy streetwear shoes, because they're good and stable and solid. When the foot is unstable it gives rise to all sorts of problems, arch pain, that kind of thing. Often people only get pain at the gym, then they wear a high heel and it goes away. They're not to be rubbished. It would be cruel to suggest women give up their heels."

However, he does caution that the higher the heel, the more likely calluses are to form on the ball of the foot. This is why some women in Britain are turning to Botox injections in the feet to numb the nerves.

"I've almost rolled an ankle a couple of times," says platform fan Copas.

"If you don't do up the shoes tight enough, you can slip off the heel if you're not paying attention. My feet have suffered. My toes are crumpled together, my toenails have started falling off. I know I shouldn't be squeezing into these crazy shoes but I only wear them to work and for going out. When I'm at home I'm in Ugg boots."

"I've had a couple of near misses where my heel got stuck," says Rock. "Never wear stilettos to the polo because stilettos and grass don't mix. Or on decks with big gaps between the wood, where the heel can fall in the middle."

So what to do? Should we embrace the killer heel or toss it to the kerb, where it's likely to send us anyway?

The key to pulling off the look, says Runway Shoes' Upton-Savage, is confidence. So is fit. A shoe I find hard to walk in, you might find a breeze.

"If you try a shoe on and you have a big gap in the instep, then it's not supporting you and you need a different size or not a high shape. The fit is really important."

You might also like to bear in mind Rock's advice. "Wear the shoe, don't let the shoe wear you."

[Check out how Rebecca held up while testing out some super heels.](#)

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