



THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE BIRKENSTORIES

BIRKENSTORIES – a Mix of Planned Coincidences, Research, and Curiosity

For some time now, we have been introducing extraordinary people from around the world who love our sandals in our award-winning portrait series "BIRKENSTORIES". People kept asking us how we come across these stories and how they originate. Our filmmaker Armin Block, the mastermind behind the BIRKENSTORIES, has all the answers. Armin explains how he unearths the stories and the people featured in them.

How Can You Find What You're Looking For if You Don't Know Exactly What it Is?

Block: Reading the newspapers is a good place to start. In an article in *Die Welt*, for instance, I read about the truly unique entrepreneur Thomas Waas and his company Unicat, the global market leader in the expedition vehicles sector. And in the photos accompanying the piece, the long-haired entrepreneur was clearly wearing BIRKENSTOCKS. I picked up the phone and found myself talking to a friendly and likable Bavarian. One thing he said really stuck in my mind – a sentiment that no ad agency could top: "When I was a child, I was always barefoot. One day I wasn't a child anymore, and I started wearing BIRKENSTOCKS."

His story was so fascinating that we even made a great film about him last October (available at <http://www.birkenstock.com/de/magazine/thomas-waas>).

But how do you find other stories, those that aren't in the papers? Take Lita, the female farmer from Borneo, who we featured in a previous issue of the magazine.

One of my oldest friends is the aid worker Karl Jäger, who is currently working in Borneo or – to be precise – in the small town of Putussibau. Together with his wife, Jutta, he is helping local farmers with their work. When they came back to Germany for a visit, I told Jutta about my Birkenstories project and she told me about Lita, a farmer who grows papayas and chocolate on the edge of the jungle in Putussibau – and the fact that she always brings Lita BIRKENSTOCKS from Germany, because they are cheaper here than in Jakarta. This was how I heard about Lita. We did an interview and found out all about her fascinating life, which is quite unlike anything we were familiar with. In short, I stumbled on this story through friends.

It's Always Good to Talk

Talking to people is always a good idea. The more the better. I have an extensive network of friends and dependable acquaintances, all of whom know what I do for a living – which helps. Last year, for example, I received a WhatsApp message from a friend asking me if I would be interested in an 83-year-old jazz pianist from Los Angeles who happens to have an impressive collection of classic cars and who still rides through California on his 1956 Norton racing bike. I was told that the man was called John Zainer and that he has been wearing

one of his pairs of BIRKENSTOCK sandals for the past 19 years. He also repairs these sandals himself – using the cork from old wine corks. Of course I was interested! And excited!

The funny thing was that John visits relatives in Germany once a year and – when I received the WhatsApp message – he was just nine kilometers away. Therefore, we met for the first time in September 2016, in the small town of Niedereschach. I was extremely impressed by John – a man who seems incredibly fit and who spoke to me in near-flawless German. No wonder: John loves Germany – and his German wife, with whom he has been very happily married for almost 60 years. In July 2017, we and our camera team eventually visited John at his house in Los Angeles and filmed an especially charming Birkenstory about him. So as you can see: it's good to talk.

A Detective's Instinct Comes in Handy

There are other methods, however, such as having a think. One day, I had the idea of searching for men who wear BIRKENSTOCKS with a suit. How do you go about it? Having searched unsuccessfully in German, I decided to repeat the process in English: I entered the words "BIRKENSTOCK" and "suit" and went straight to Google Images. I couldn't see anything interesting, just a series of seemingly professional shots that weren't what I was looking for. But then one photo caught my eye: it was of a bearded man in a gray suit sitting on a staircase; he was wearing BIRKENSTOCKS. The Zürich model.

I clicked on the photo and was directed to an article from a daily newspaper based in Knoxville, a city in the US state of Tennessee. I found myself reading about an attorney by the name of Mike Whalen, who apparently always wore BIRKENSTOCKS – even in court.

I contacted Mike in fall 2016, and he sent me an extremely humorous response. In July 2017,





we visited him (taking the camera with us) and encountered an exceptionally witty, engaging, and upstanding character. Mike explained that the people in the courtroom would often whisper about him: “Here comes that guy in Jesus sandals,” is what he often hears when he enters. “But I’m not Jesus,” laughs Mike.

BIRKENSTOCK and Harley-Davidson

Google searches are one of my favorite methods. I have already entered pretty much any combination of words you can think of – and some you can’t. Mostly without any luck. I was successful, however, with the pairings “Birkenstock” and “Harley-Davidson” and “Birkenstock” and “song.” But first things first.

At some point, I came up with the idea of looking for BIRKENSTOCK wearers in the

Harley-Davidson scene. When I entered these search terms into Google Images, I found a picture of a very distinctive Harley near the bottom of the page. This was followed by further photos showing a long-haired, bearded man sitting on a souped-up Harley-Davidson. And wearing BIRKENSTOCKS.

I did a little research. The man who uploaded the photos was also the person visible on them: Bernd-Michael Land, a 63-year-old electronic musician and sound artist from near Frankfurt. I called him, and we had a long chat. He laughed, for example, as he explained that a BIRKENSTOCK once shot up onto the roof of his house due to the extreme kickback when starting his Harley. He also told us many other interesting things – which eventually led to us paying him a visit, with the film team, in April.

“Jeff Wears BIRKENSTOCKS?”

A Song and the Story behind it

A musical friend drew my attention to a song in which the word “BIRKENSTOCK” appears in the lyrics. I found the topic a lot more interesting than the song itself. So I entered two more search terms into Google – “BIRKENSTOCK” and “song” – and came across a site called lyrics.com. Here, I found no less than 29 songs in which the word “BIRKENSTOCK” appears in one way or another.

A song by the US punk rock band NOFX called *Jeff Wears Birkenstocks?* piqued my interest: a song about a man called Jeff who apparently wears BIRKENSTOCKS. Why would one of the world’s most famous punk rock bands write a song about someone



called Jeff who wears BIRKENSTOCKS? Who is this Jeff? Does he really exist? I started digging and, lo and behold, he is indeed real. His name is Jeff Abarta. He is 49 years of age and works at the Epitaph record label in Los Angeles.

The BIRKENSTORY and all previous stories can be found on our website at www.birkenstock.com in the "Journal" section. //



ARMIN BLOCK

Armin Block spent 25 years in the TV business, working for presenters such as Günther Jauch, Hape Kerkeling, and Reinhold Beckmann, as well as for

shows such as Stern TV and countless entertainment formats. He joined Birkenstock last year and has been on the lookout for interesting stories and fascinating people connected with our sandals ever since. His search has given rise to the films known as "BIRKENSTORIES."

Send Us Your Birkenstories

Birkenstories are the tales and portraits of people in BIRKENSTOCKS all over the world, whether a taxi driver in New Delhi, an American Nobel laureate, a papaya farmer from the jungle of Borneo, or an eccentric German manufacturer of expedition vehicles. They focus on characters who are unique – some in a big way, some in a little way. And they have all been committed wearers of BIRKENSTOCKS for years.

Do you know any fascinating BIRKENSTOCK wearers whose story is just waiting to be told? Whoever it is, be it someone you know personally, a random discovery while on vacation, or anyone else anywhere else, we look forward to receiving all your suggestions.

Please send them to:

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