



**What:** R'alocho  
Luxury Shoes  
**Where:** Gaborone, Botswana  
and Dalian, China  
**Start-up capital:** R7 900

“**F**rom an early age, every time I bought a pair of shoes, I wanted to tweak them somehow by adding a bow, a zipper or something that would stamp it with my own sense of style,” recalls Botswana-born Ditirwa. “I reached the point where I had the urge to create items entirely from scratch because I knew I had the ability to do it.”

After moving to China in 2013 to study medicine on a full scholarship at Dalian Medical University, her creative urge grew into a business pursuit. She began studying fashion designing, prompted by her love for fashion and bolstered by her natural talent for drawing. “I originally considered designing a clothing line, but felt I should push myself into the more challenging line of footwear,” she says.

# IF THE *shoe fits...*

Aone Ditirwa started her shoe business as a result of her love of fashion, but she soon learnt that solid entrepreneurial savvy was crucial to running her venture

BY Wilhelmina Maboja

Studying fashion design in addition to the demands of her medical studies wasn't viable, but giving up either pursuit was also unthinkable for Ditirwa. She therefore decided to continue her medical degree, but take the self-teaching route for shoe design, learning from online resources like Italian-based Alive Shoes, which allows artists to design their own footwear from sketch to final product.

Being in one of the world's largest manufacturing hubs was a golden opportunity to get R'alocho Luxury Shoes off the ground. Searching for the right factory was the first step – but was far from easy, especially when people realised she was only 20 and dismissed her ambitions as a childish whim.

"China's notorious for sub-standard products. You have to be willing to pay for good quality. I spent a lot of time sourcing a factory because the buying price of one pair of shoes was very high," Ditirwa explains.

With just under R8 000 in start-up capital that she'd scraped together from a portion of her monthly scholarship stipend, her personal savings and her parents' contribution, the cost of sourcing high-quality fabrics alone would take up a large part of her resources. She'd need far more than that if she aimed to manufacture and eventually ship her footwear in bulk. In China, the cost of manufacturing a pair of good-quality shoes starts at roughly 28 000 Chinese Yuan (about R59 300).

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"I went into my business from a fashion-loving perspective, rather than an entrepreneurial one," she admits. "I didn't know what to expect. I knew I wanted to create, but didn't think about where I'd get the capital I needed and go about running a business. It was a huge challenge." Lack of capital meant having to do much of the work herself, including directing factory shoemakers in Mandarin to produce her shoe designs and requirements. While Ditirwa was almost fluent in the language, it was still a barrier to overcome. "The language we speak from day to day isn't the same one you'd use to communicate fashion terms, so there was a lot that we couldn't understand about each other. It's very difficult and frustrating trying to express yourself fully in a language that you didn't grow up speaking," she recalls.

She then had to put the launch of her debut collection on pause until she could raise more capital.

In March 2017, she debuted the first collection of R'alocho Luxury Shoes, which features her blue gladiator leteisi block heel best-seller. Ditirwa is deeply inspired by Botswana culture, which is why her entire collection is in Sebirwa, a language spoken in the Eastern part of Botswana, where Ditirwa's family is from.

She now runs her business from China and plans to grow a solid base in her Botswana and South African market before taking on the wider continent.

Her medical mind also plays a role in her shoe designs. "When I started my business, I deliberately decided to make block heels. For a very long time, we've been told that 'beauty is pain' and that you have to suffer in high heels if you want to look good," says Ditirwa. "I found that block heels are fashionable and elegant without compromising comfort or health."

Running her business by navigating two continents isn't easy. Also, China's strict Internet restrictions block most of the common social media platforms and instant messaging platforms, which severely curtails marketing possibilities. Nevertheless, Ditirwa's determined to find other innovative ways to ensure customers reach her.

"I'm optimistic about the future because I want to get people acquainted with R'alocho," she says.