

The best-laid planks

With hi-tech production at the heart of its business, Slovenian outfit Elan has carved a reputation at the forefront of ski design.

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In Begunje, a small village in rural Slovenia about 55km northeast of Ljubljana, the snow-capped peaks of the Julian Alps are visible on a clear day. Things here are quiet but amid the bucolic peace is Elan, the world's largest ski manufacturer and a company that has survived decades of change.

Visually it's a blend of past and future: the reception building's steel façade harkens back to Iron Curtain days; in the factory, remnants of bygone eras – a faded portrait of Tito, for example – can be found. But these stand in sharp contrast to the hi-tech products made by the company's 500-odd workers, many of them looking like avid skiers themselves. "It's obvious that we've been through a lot but we are also set for the future," says vice-president and COO Leon Korosec of the company, which will celebrate its 70th anniversary in 2015.

Like many persevering brands, Elan's beginnings are compelling. During the Second World War, ski jumper and carpenter Rudi Finzgar built wooden skis for Partisan resistance troops to navigate snowy terrain. In September 1945, Finzgar wanted to found a ski company. Back then, limited liability companies didn't exist in communist Yugoslavia but co-operatives did, so he had to quickly find 10 people in Ljubljana to form Elan.

Elan found its core competence early, focusing on pushing ski innovation in the 1960s (a marine division has also existed since 1949). In the 1970s the brand's international recognition and sales exploded after Swedish slalom star Ingemar Stenmark started racking up his 86 World Cup wins, all on Elan RC skis. In 1992 the company introduced the very first carving ski, revolutionising the sport.

The breakthroughs have never stopped. Elan's product range has grown to 50 different models, from ultra-light women's ski lines to customised gear for athletes such as Italian skier Massimiliano Blardone, using Amphibio and Power Spine technologies developed in-house. All the while the company strives to offer added value. "We're not a niche brand with €1,000 skis, nor a price-driven low-end brand," says Korosec. "We're exactly where the market is and we give a little more for the same price points." Sales for the entire company in 2014 are forecast to reach €70m, with 60 per cent coming from alpine sport equipment.

Seeing how skis and snowboards are made, it quickly becomes obvious why this equipment can cost so much. Cutting lathes for wood-core skis, precisely fitting steel edges, assembling and gluing inner layers, "baking" layers together, polishing, sharpening, testing: all are done by hand.

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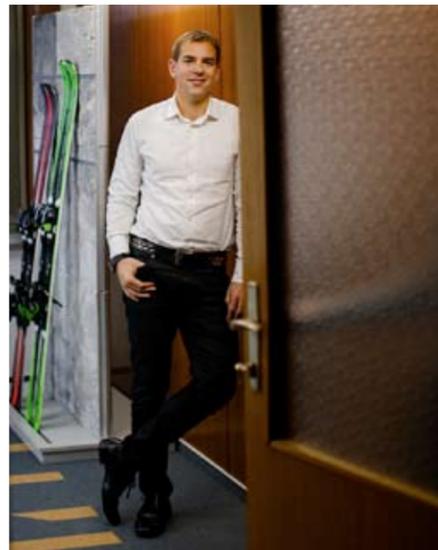
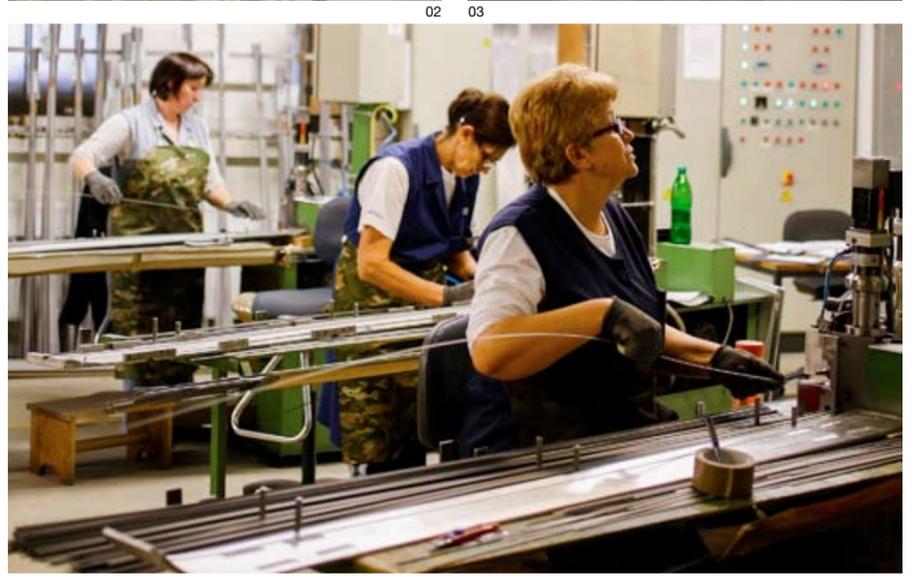
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At peak periods, 2,000 pieces a day roll through a three-shift production schedule. The company exports to nearly 50 countries, the top five markets being the US, Germany, the Czech Republic, Japan and Canada.

What makes a good ski? "One that's easy to use without compromising performance," says Korosec. Appearance counts, too. Elan co-operates with companies such as Porsche Design Studio for good looks to match the skis' precise geometries and calibrated flex patterns; many of the flashiest racing models come in a bright Kermit green. Since 2006 the manufacturer has won more than 35 awards, including Germany's Red Dot design award in 2007 and best brand for innovation in 2012 and 2013, awarded by German organisation Plus X. "We're very proud of this," says Rebeka Lah Notar, marketing project manager and instigator of the new *Elan* magazine, a publication outlining the company's stories and missions in six languages.

Elan has had its share of shake-ups in an industry that has seen other ski brands disappear in the past 20 years (after communist-era social ownership, the company has been under Slovenian state control in various forms since 1991 but is currently being privatised). The company has adapted to a transforming market, producing skis for other brands – Austrian retailer Intersport's house brand Technopro is just one example – and adjusting to changing consumer behaviour. "People tend to rent skis more – like Airbnb, it's about convenience," says Korosec, noting that sales to rental outlets in some regions account for up to 80 per cent of sales. At the same time, Elan is branching out to emerging ski markets such as China, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

"I think we have two really strong assets: the first is the brand itself and the second is the technical engineering competence," says Korosec. Back in the 1940s, walking through the fields where the complexes now stand, Elan founder Finzgar is claimed to have said to a friend, "There'll be a mighty Elan factory here in the year 2000; you'll see." His vision has been a lot more durable and deep than even he imagined. — (M)



Number crunching

- 1945:** Year founded; next September the company will be 70 years old
- 500-600:** Employees, depending on the time of year
- 20:** Employees in the R&D division
- 50:** Countries to which Elan exports
- 8.5:** Percentage share of world ski market
- 50+:** Ski models, ranging from ultrafast racing skis to touring versions for hiking
- 500,000:** Skis produced per year, 300,000 under the Elan brand, making it the world's biggest ski manufacturer

Peak performers

- 01 Amphibio skis**
Deliver both rocker and camber benefits and suitable for all mountain conditions.
- 02 Delight skis**
The lightest women's skis on the market.
- 03 U-flex skis and boots for children**
These skis have 25 per cent more flexibility, allowing kids to learn the sport faster.

- 01 An array of finished skis
- 02 The sandwich core of the ski
- 03 Quality control: checking the bases
- 04 Applying edges to the skis
- 05 Wooden cores are cut by lathes
- 06 Smoothing, assembling and applying glue
- 07 Vice-president and COO Leon Korosec
- 08 Finishing touches in the production process
- 09 Vintage skis
- 10 Applying and perfecting the base of the ski
- 11 Elan's shop, next to the factory
- 12 Amphibio racing skis

