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**High**-**LOW** heels



Camileon's Grazia is a perfectly simple pump with a pointed toe—and a heel that can be 3 ¼" or 1 ½" depending on the wearer's preference, around \$345 at [www.camileonheels.com](http://www.camileonheels.com) or [www.zappos.com](http://www.zappos.com) Photo: Camileon Heels

**Camileon Heels are the footwear equivalent of having your cake and eating it, too.**



t's got to be the coolest advance in footwear technology since the spy phone concealed in the heel and sole of secret agent Maxwell Smart's right shoe.

Maybe even cooler than that, if you remember what a production it was to make a call on Smart's shoe phone. He had to take off the shoe, rotate the heel, rip off the sole to access the mouthpiece, dial the rotary dial—not easy to do without somebody noticing, especially for Smart, typically all thumbs and even more so in a life-or-death emergency.

The Camileon Heel, by contrast, is at once easier and more discreet: It takes a second or two—*tug, tuck, click*—to turn its slim, elegant high heel into a still-sleek but far more walkable low heel. The process is significantly less complicated than tying a shoelace. You don't even have to take the shoes off.

They don't wobble or wiggle: I walked around my dining room in a pair to be sure. Even in the high position, they're more comfortable than you'd expect heels that high to be. (Their inventors are hoping it'll take a while for aspiring copycats to figure out why.)

The idea came to New Jersey radiologist David Handel in a taxi in 1989. He was riding down Fifth Avenue in New York, observing the stream of elegantly dressed women on the sidewalk—elegantly dressed until you got to their feet. Many had accessorized their sleek, chic ensembles with the ultimate in unsleek: bulbous white athletic shoes.

At the time, Handel's young son was obsessed with Transformers, toy cars that turn into robots. And so the thought came to him: If they can design a car that turns into a robot, why not a high heel that turns into a low heel?

He fiddled with the problem off and on for years, came up with a workable design, filed his first patent in the early '90s—and then, distracted by his growing medical practice, let the patent lapse. Three years ago, he heard from a business student in Amsterdam who'd discovered his design on the Internet and developed a business plan around it. Did Handel want to be involved? He did—but then his design turned out not to work as well in practice as it had in theory.

Back to high heel R&D.

His sister, Lauren Handel, now CEO of Camileon Heels, suspects that what he needed all along was a co-conspirator who actually wore high heels and understood them from the inside. He found that—along with a skill set that ranges from clinical psychology to marketing—in her. Two and a half years, a few generations of prototypes, and hundreds of thousands of dollars later, they're finally selling shoes from their own website [[www.CamileonHeels.com](http://www.CamileonHeels.com)] and through Zappo's [[www.Zappos.com](http://www.Zappos.com)], the giant on-line shoe retailer. (Both sites offer free shipping both ways, so customers can try the shoes risk-free, and return them if they choose without paying postage.)



**Camileon Heels CEO Lauren Handel with one of her high-heel-to-low slingbacks, around \$345 at [www.camileonheels.com](http://www.camileonheels.com) or [www.zappos.com](http://www.zappos.com)** Photo: Patricia McLaughlin

**“G**o sell shoes” was Senator Chuck Hagel’s recent advice to Senate colleagues who weren’t up to making tough decisions on U.S. Iraq policy--as if shoe sales were the ultimate no-brainer. The Handels haven’t found it so.

Lauren Handel says the last two years made her a believer in Murphy’s Law—“If something can go wrong, it will.”—and the last few months of getting the product to market persuaded her of O’Toole’s Corollary, to wit: “Murphy was an optimist.”

They quickly discovered that the patented Camileon heel solved only half the problem of the convertible shoe. Lauren Handel says it can’t fall off because it’s attached with four screws—instead of the usual daub of glue. It can’t break because its core is a stainless steel rod instead of a piece of plastic. It can’t wobble or collapse because that rod locks in place in the high heel position—and locks under the sole in low position.

But that’s only the heel. When they showed it to shoemakers, one after

another told them you couldn't make one shoe that would work with two different heel heights. A shoe made for the high heel would stick its toe up in the low position. A shoe made for the low heel would gap at the sides in the high position.

Lauren Handel refused to believe them. For one thing, at one of these shoemaker meetings she happened to be wearing a pair of stretch boots. Eureka, she thought: Adding stretch could make a shoe work with either heel. Especially if they used flexible soles and exceptionally soft leather.

And it did work, once they developed a new last—the form a shoe is made on—that was designed to fit an American woman's foot, and to split the difference between the angle of the arch in the two heel positions. (To research shoe lasts, Lauren Handel polled shoe salesmen to find out which high-end shoes were returned to the store least often, and copied the keepers.) And once they moved production from China to Italy. And once they solved a zillion more problems of one sort or another.

Now, she says, women—or, anyway, women who can afford the \$315 to \$360 prices of the first generation of Camileon Heels—don't have to trade fashion for function. Don't have to pack 10 pairs of shoes for a business trip. Don't have to choose between being able to walk to the restaurant and looking dressy once they get there. And don't have to end up shoeless on the dance floor by the end of the evening because the dancing shoes they bought for the wedding hurt too much to dance in.

