

# Hansa Toys: Stuffed for real

By JOHANNES L. CHUA







A toy factory is an unlikely part of a travel itinerary. But when the President of a Republic and her "apos" as guests, and Hollywood celebrities such as Oprah and Michael Jackson rave about its products, this factory has not only become a side trip, but a sought-after destination.

The kind of excitement that kids often experience (even if you are a really jaded adult) builds up especially when you enter the reception area where a life-size giraffe welcomes you. And you are nowhere near a jungle or a safari because you are inside the Clarkfield Export Zone in Pampanga.

Hansa Toys International has been in the Philippines for the past 12 years and employ more than 300 workers. It has been producing an average 3,000 animal toys a day with 4,000 variants that is being exported to 21 countries worldwide.

Part of the allure of Hansa products is the life-like quality that each animal has, that each one - from the smallest rat to a humongous elephant - is made using the actual specs of that living creature. And Filipino workers make them come "alive" with a stroke of an air brush or paint.

"We were one of the first investors here in Clark and the main factor why we are here is the artistic talent of the Filipinos," said Hans Axthelm, managing director and CEO of Hansa. "It also helped that Filipinos can speak English well."

Hans said that Hansa originated in 1972 and is based in Australia. Originally manufacturing educational toys, Hansa ventured into the production of plush toys. Since then, Hansa has been known worldwide as the leader in realistic animal plush products.

Because of this fact, Hans revealed that Hansa products are quite expensive but "reasonable considering the quality of each one." Prices range from \$5 (the rat) to a whopping \$25,000.





A life-like sleeping Polar bear in Hans' office retails at around \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Hansa products are not sold in the Philippines though. "The pricing is not geared for Filipino consumers," said Hans.

Don't fret though - each product is labeled "Made in the Philippines" and is enough recognition to the ingenuity of the Filipino worker since Hansa products grace the rooms of royalties, dignitaries, celebrities and the - what else - rich and famous.

If you want to have a collection of Hansa toys, and can globe-trot anytime of the day, visit the toy shops of Russia, Ukraine, France, England, US, Korea, Canada, Australia, Qatar, Kuwait, Spain, Italy.

"These countries are where the demand of Hansa is very high. Sometimes, we can't even supply enough. The workers sometimes even work on Sundays," said Hans who revealed that their clients are not one-time buyers but are mostly collectors.

"There's even a Hollywood actress who said that she has a room full of Hansa products," enthused Hans.

The "secret" of Hansa lies in the meticulous research and quality control that the company implements.

"We have designers and our own research and development department that make sure that each color or spot in an animal's skin is carefully and correctly reproduced," he said.

The materials of Hansa toys are 40 percent Philippine-made and 60 percent imported. The stuffing of each animal is synthetic fiber polyester - making it washable and safe to hug (and sleep with).



HANS AXTHELM, CEO of Hansa.





"We analyze each fabric and find out what's closest to the animal skin. For example, we find out how much black and white a zebra has. Then we put in under the spectrometer to find out exactly the composition. We measure the fibers, the thickness of the actual animal skin and reproduce it," he said. "I think we are the only ones in the world to do it this meticulously."

Hans revealed that the most popular among the Hansa line is the giraffe with some customers buying the life-size 18-foot animal.

The process of production is not that easy, revealed Hans. After all the specs are studied, fabrics analyzed and materials sourced, the sewing process can start.

"Each item consist of anything from 40 to 80 pieces. Each operator has to remember which piece goes where," said Hans. "This is where I count on the skill of the Filipino workers."

After this stage, the product goes to the eye-setting department. "Basically, this is where they put the eyes of the animal, and the 'life' of each item," said Hans.

Then it goes to the stuffing and finishing stage. "This is where the sculpturing happens. For the big animals, there will be a metal frame to stabilize it," he added.

The finishing department then decorates the animal, paints it with airbrush and ensures quality control. Then it is off to the container where it will travel the seas to reach the posh department stores of the world.

The recent visit of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and her grandchildren in the factory is a testament to the wide appeal of Hansa toys - that even powerful men and women rediscover the "child" in them.

"Her supposed-to-be 30-minute tour of the facilities was extended to about two hours," said Hans who described President GMA as "wonderful."

"The President was very surprised and also amazed with what we do here. Full credit must be given to her economic policies and the way she actually mixes with the people. She recognized the artistic talent that can only be found in Filipino workers," revealed Hans. "She was visibly proud."

