

MADE TO LAST

Bosnian craftsmanship meets worldclass Scandinavian design

We're almost alone on the roads heading south out of Sarajevo. The route goes through tunnels, along winding roads that hug the sides of mountains - it resembles Cortina and the Alps in northern Italy.

"Alta Badia is one of my favourite places to go skiing," says Orhan Nikic laughing.



Orhan Nikic, to the right founder of Zanat, checks the wood quality.

The impressive Prejil mountain range rises majestically around the Neretva river, around which the city of Konjic has grown. The brown colours stand out clearly against the blue sky, and during the car journey from Sarajevo, Orhan starts to tell a story that stretches right across generations and families.

"Everything started almost by chance. Wood carving has been a popular hobby for generations. It began back in the Middle Ages, before 1463, when the Ottoman Empire invaded the country from the east, so there have been many influences."

The car journey continues. We're driving along a deep mountain ravine when Orhan tells us how, when Bosnia was ruled by Austria-Hungary, a few enthusiasts were given the opportunity to study

their art in more detail and develop their woodcarving skills. They also learnt carpentry, which opened the door to furniture making.

"That's our own forest, by the way," says Orhan pointing to the mountain just before we enter the factory site.

Konjic has often found itself in the midst of history. Just outside the city is Josip Broz Tito's bunker, known as Armijaska Ratna Komanda D-O, kept a secret from the inhabitants of former Yugoslavia until 2001. The political and military leadership would gather here in the event of war or crisis. Thankfully, the threat of nuclear weapons is no longer present. Furniture making, entrepreneurial spirit, and sustainability characterise Konjic, where Zanat plays a leading role. But Orhan is charmingly modest when he describes the company.

"Wood carving has strong support from all of Konjic, and all of Bosnia. This is a requirement to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's not Muslim or Christian art - it has come from different ethnic backgrounds, and that makes me proud. It means a lot, especially for young people who see that you can do something creative and meaningful."

Inside the factory is the first room where employees work, to finish carving the wood before the surface is painted or finished. Skilled hands work methodically to cut, hammer, and plane various patterns and shapes.

- "It takes a long time to become an expert. Some things can be picked up quickly, but others can take as long as

three years. But you have to have artistic ability too," Orhan points out.

How do you maintain a high level of expertise among your staff without sacrificing the requirements of your products?

"In part, we invest in employee training, with different certificates according to their skills. We also have very clear quality goals, which allows us to expand. But this has also posed a challenge - how should we train people, and who should we employ? We've entered into partnership with a local faculty to open an academy. This has made the process more rigorous, and we can train people on site at the factory."

Orhan takes a break to speak with some of his employees, who are treating the surface of a table - he is unhappy that a knot remains. Knowledge and passion runs in Orhan's blood.

"My family opened one of the first stores in 1919, by my grandfather's oldest brother Salih. In 1927 his health deteriorated and my grandfather, Adem, took over the company. He was an entrepreneur who exported a lot together with his brother Meho, and until 1939, when another war broke out, the company was well regarded.

After 1945, private companies were banned under the new socialist regime and an attempt was made to start state production, which went bankrupt after a few years. Finally, Orhan's father, Mukarem,



Nera Bowl, Monica Firnster Design Studio



Zanat pledges to work with Universal Sustainability facilitating sustainable socioeconomic development. The company creates jobs for craftsman and university graduates, offers continuous training to all employees, and pays better-than-average wages.

Orhan studied in the US in the 1990s, before working at the World Bank in Sarajevo and then in Jerusalem for a Palestinian relief organisation, but he often discussed the company with his family.

"When the concept of Zanat was born, the idea was that we would make modern designer furniture but still incorporate the craft and the technique. Some see carving as a texture, others as a pattern. We're attached to the craft, not to a folkloric motif. The motifs have always evolved. Another idea behind the business, aside from preserving the craft and cultural heritage by creating a unique brand, was to create more jobs in Bosnia by actually making the whole process more labour intensive, at a time when things are increasingly being produced by robots. In Bosnia, unemployment is very high, but labour costs are low compared with Sweden, for example. In this way we can add value to wood



Touch Bench by Ilse Crawford

carving and still be competitive.”

Why Scandinavian design?

“One of the big reasons why we approached Scandinavian designers was that we thought it would be possible to connect our woodcarving with furniture. Scandinavian design is democratic because it made pieces widely available – but today that’s not the case. Large scale means losing individuality – for me individuality is when people can find fulfillment through hard work and involvement. When we first approached Bosnian designers, they were skeptical – but not the Scandinavians, ironically. We managed to break down taboos.”

Zanat stands out, and Orhan believes this is the recipe behind the success.

– “There are a number of factors, but an important element is that it stands

out and has its own identity in a world that is becoming increasingly familiar wherever you look. It’s not quirky but universally appealing, because the designers understand taste, and people are getting tired of mass-produced things. These pieces communicate how they were made and that is what appeals.”

The course has been set for the future. “We want Zanat to be an important employer in Bosnia, to be an exemplary business model in terms of sustainability and CSR, and to be a globally recognised brand in the area of interior design. And we’re already on the way – we’ll shortly be hiring five more coworkers.”

They’re certain to succeed

Bosnian design industry might be small but the entrepreneurial producer Zanat is punching well above its weight. They collaborate with a-list designers such as Ilse Crawford, Gert Wingårdh, Monica Förster and Harri Koskinen.

