

“Bosnia is a hidden little gem,” says Orhan Nikšić. The former senior economist at the World Bank is giving a potted tour of his home country, shuttling between the city of Mostar, with its famous, destroyed and then reconstructed Ottoman-era bridge, and the capital of Sarajevo. There’s a stop-off in the medieval hillside village of Počitelj, where a 14th-century fortress towers over the Neretva river and cobbled alleyways are strewn with fresh mint and fallen pomegranates. Another stop takes in Konjic, encircled by the Prenj and Visočica mountain ranges, where Nikšić grew up.



Zanat craftsman at work on a Piano table designed by Milanese studio Palomba Serafini Associati © Zanat archive

His entourage includes a line-up of internationally renowned designers – among them former Memphis Milano member Michele de Lucchi, Yves Behar, founder of San Francisco studio [Fuseproject](#), and Muji collaborator Naoto Fukasawa. All have designed products for [Zanat](#), the brand that Nikšić and his brother, Adem, developed from the woodcarving workshop their great-grandfather started more than a century ago. The gathering is a celebration of the 10-year anniversary of its relaunch and the journey from “primitive village craft” to global design brand.

Heritage craftsmanship isn't generally top of mind at the mention of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nor, for that matter, is tourism. Direct flights from London to Sarajevo aren't exactly plentiful (save for the odd Ryanair hop). But visitor numbers are up: by almost 32 per cent from 2023 to 2024.



The Bosnian town of Čapljina by the Neretva river © Alamy

“The war that we had in the '90s has left really deep marks,” says Nikšić. “But the spirit of Bosnia is still alive. The idea [with Zanat, the Bosnian word for “craft”] was to somehow reveal this. We wanted to impart a deeper understanding of Bosnia’s traditional culture.”

In Sarajevo, the country’s rich artisanal heritage is embedded in the very structure of the city, with the hillside *mahalas* (rambling residential districts) centred around the bazaar of Baščaršija. It was developed in the 15th century, when the city was newly part of the Ottoman Empire. Buildings such as Gazi Husrev-Bey Mosque were encircled in a warren of wooden-fronted artisan workshops – from makers of knives, jewellery and textiles to masters of calligraphy. Sarači Street gets its name from the leatherworkers that set up shop there; Kazandžiluk from its cacophony of coppersmiths, hand-hammering traditional Bosnian coffee sets with intricate embossed patterns.



Zanat Nakit jewellery tray by Monica Förster, £400. [BUY](#)



Zanat maple Grad bookend by Jasna Mujkić



Zanat maple Grana salt and pepper set by Naoto Fukasawa, £170. [BUY](#)



Tako Studio Keramike ceramic Zen Kyusu tea set, BAM140, POA. [BUY](#)

[Sulejman Hrgić](#) is one of the area's remaining coppersmiths – and, aged 40, also one of its youngest. At his shop-studio on Kovači Street, he creates souvenirs for passers-by and also works to commission, in aluminium, silver, copper and more. Past requests include a heraldic plaque for the US Embassy and a pickguard for a Fender Stratocaster.

“I live a legit Sarajevo life – old Bašćaršija-style. Here, we still drink coffee together,” says Hrgić of his artisan neighbours. “And I love it. But there is no point making stuff that can be made by machine; you need to invent stuff.”



The Zanat factory in Konjic © Zanat archive



A Zanat craftsman at work © Zanat archive

The Homo Faber Guide (an online platform dedicated to artisans) proposes a Sarajevo craft tour titled “[The Guardians of Ancient Crafts](#)”. It spans the studios of Hrgić, where he also offers hands-on workshops; [Hazim Numanagić](#), one of Bosnia’s most celebrated calligraphers; and the city’s sole milliner, [Janko Hlpka](#), whose cigarette-smoke-filled workshop seems frozen in time.

“It’s on its last breath,” says Sarajevo-based Tatjana Kovačević-Vidović of her chosen craft: ceramics. With only four traditional pottery workshops remaining – down from 100 in 1900, according to a 2022 study conducted by Newcastle University alongside the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina – “I want to try to make ceramics alive again,” says the founder of [TAKO Studio Keramike](#). “I have a modern approach – somewhat minimalist and also fun.”

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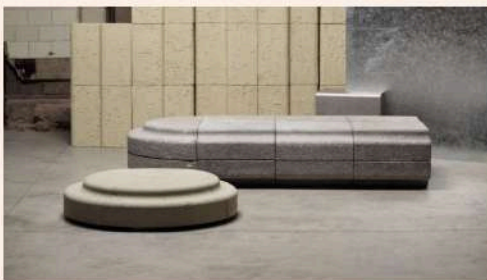
Such start-ups are bubbling up despite a lack of government assistance. “Many things in Bosnia happen thanks to the enthusiasm and persistence of individuals,” says Nikšić, who returned more than a decade ago after living in Washington, DC and Jerusalem. “We don’t have the greatest system to support us but we try to do our best.”

He describes Konjic, a 35-mile drive south-west of Sarajevo, as “a small town where generations of craftsmen have carved wood with skill and poetry”. Here, Zanat continues to create traditional pieces, gouged with geometric yet floral motifs –examples made by Nikšić’s grandfather are held in the collection of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Its USP, however, is contemporary interpretations such as the gently undulating Touch dining table designed by [Studioilse](#) and the shapely Meduza table lamp by Sebastian Herkner. The new anniversary collection of objects includes a jewellery tray by [Monica Förster](#), a bowl by Swedish architecture firm Wingårdhs and a pair of minimal salt and pepper shakers by Fukasawa.

All of Zanat's wares are made with local Bosnian wood – from oak and ash to walnut and cherry – which is dried and milled on site. While the factory floor buzzes with the sound of electrical saws and CNC machines, the carving studio upstairs still thrums with the analogue audio of hammer on chisel, and master craftsman Ibro Bubalo passes on his skills to the next generation, including his daughter Jasmina.

“Beauty and knowledge are fragile things that must be continually cared for and reimagined,” says Nikšić, who has turned the family's workshop into a museum to the craft that is now enshrined on Unesco's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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Zmijanje embroidery, a specific type of blue-on-white cross-stitch used to decorate women's clothing and household linens, is also on the list. But while Aleksandra Ivanković has spearheaded a project to “collect, digitalise and safeguard the patterns and motifs”, finding, say, a set of embroidered-in-Bosnia napkins isn't easy. Few craft initiatives have an international presence. Zanat and a clutch of other furniture brands – including Artisan, born of traditional

woodshop Čostović in Tešanj – are highlighting “what is possible”, adds Nikšić.

One success story was started not in Bosnia, but in Austria, where in 1993 artist Lucia Lienhard-Giesinger and a group of Bosnian women started the [Bosna Quilt Workshop](#) as a temporary employment project in a refugee shelter in Vorarlberg. Today they collaborate on their “textile art across borders” and have created more than 3,000 quilts. Each is designed by Lienhard-Giesinger on the shores of Lake Constance and stitched by the Drina river, in Goražde.



At work on a Nera bowl by Monica Förster at the Zanat factory © Zanat archive

“The war really affected the confidence of Bosnians,” says Nikšić. “But now when people in the factory see the pieces they’ve worked on being valued and appreciated [at events such as Milan Design Week], it really does have a positive impact. Quite often young designers ask me for advice on starting their own brand – and that really makes me happy.”

Victoria Woodcock travelled to Bosnia as a guest of Zanat, zanat.org

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