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SPECIAL ISSUE



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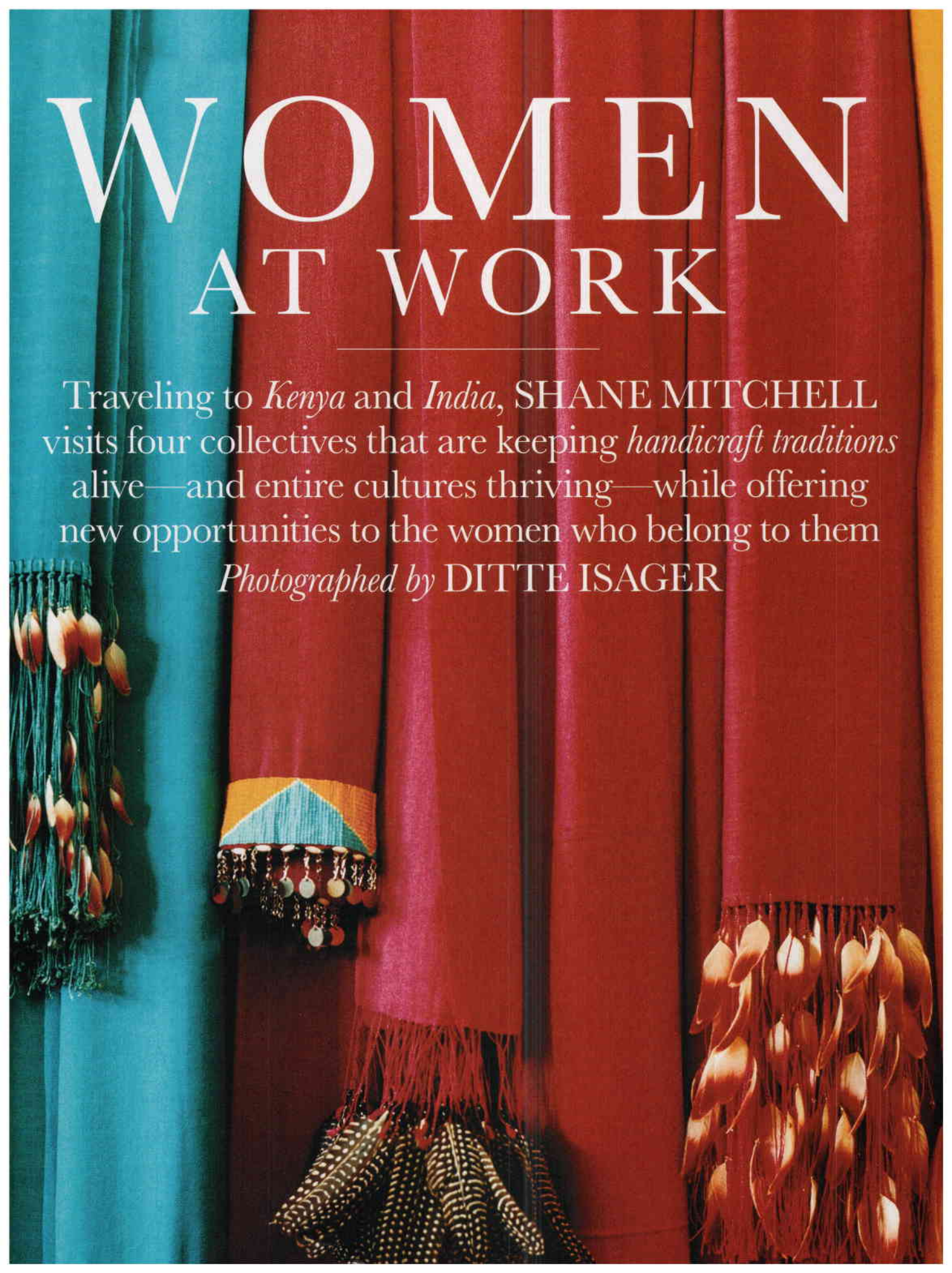


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WOMEN AT WORK

Traveling to *Kenya* and *India*, SHANE MITCHELL visits four collectives that are keeping *handicraft traditions* alive—and entire cultures thriving—while offering new opportunities to the women who belong to them

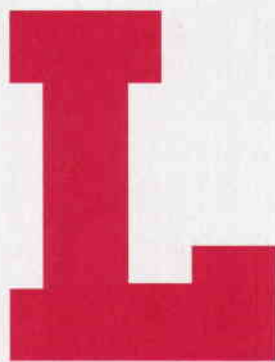
Photographed by DITTE ISAGER



Sharing a meal at Vijay Khan's workshop, in Mahmudabad, India. Opposite: Pashmina scarves adorned with feathers and African beads at Anna Trzebinski's studio, in Nairobi, Kenya.



THE NEGOTIATING KICKS IN

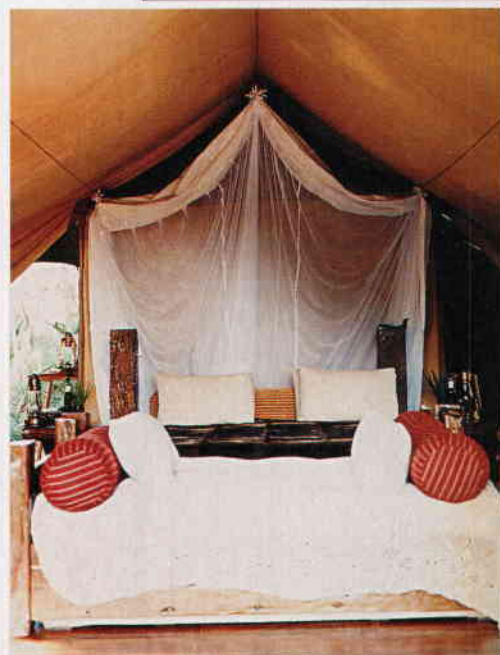


ANDING AT THE WRONG

airstrip is excusable in the chartless desert of Kenya's Northern Frontier. After banking steeply around Ol Donyo Sabachi, a sandstone peak where wild elephants roam, Rick the bush pilot drops his Cessna 210 from the dry blue sky, kicking up clouds of pink dust on the short runway. I begin to worry when no vehicle appears to be waiting for us. Climbing out of the cockpit, my friend Anna Mason, a safari guide and equine therapist, looks around at the vacant hills and decides we should probably be elsewhere. The pilot radios for directions. Sure enough, we are just shy of Sereolipi, one degree north of the equator between the trading post of Isiolo and the Ethiopian border. Our journey into the Kenyan bush will begin there, as Mason and I head off to meet a collective of Samburu tribeswomen.

I credit my fascination with handicrafts to faulty DNA: I belong to a creative gene pool but can't draw a straight line. (Imagine being the child of artist parents with a studio full of supplies, and having no clue what to do with tubes of Winsor & Newton oils.) To compensate, I collect. My taste tends to wearable trophies, and I also have been interested in supporting female artisans in Kenya, India, and elsewhere.

Think of women's collectives as a global quilting bee. In remote societies that share no obvious cultural denominators, women are gathering together and employing traditional craft skills to sustain their communities' welfare. Whenever other tasks—herding goats, fetching water, nursing babies—can be set aside, the women in these collectives create one-of-a-kind baskets, rugs, bracelets, shawls, pottery, anything that can be made by hand, for small sums that offset daily expenses such as medicine, food, clothing, and school fees. The only drawback when a family's breadwinner happens to be a woman, rather than a husband, brother, or son, is surmounting—or circumventing—hidebound conceptions about who holds the purse strings. These self-improvement initiatives have also started to afford some members certain freedoms that women in the West largely take for granted (such as choosing their own husbands).



A STACK OF

TO HIGH GEAR AND WE FIND



Out of Africa
Clockwise from above:
Women in traditional
dress at Anna
Trzebinski's Nairobi
workshop; a daybed at
Lemarti's Camp;
butterflies on display at
Trzebinski's house; a
Masai woman at work;
Lemarti's main tent;
guest room No. 1 at
the camp; traditional
Samburu jewelry.

JEWELRY AND BAGS IN OUR LAPS



Vijay Khan, the founder of the Qilasaaz collective.



Stitches in Time

Clockwise from above: Lucknow's Chota Imambara mosque; embroidery detail at the Qilasaaz workshop; members of the collective; scarves with gold and silver stitching, produced at the workshop; a woman dons her veil.



TOUCHING DOWN FOR THE SECOND time, at the correct airstrip, we spot our contact, Chief George Ilpaliwan Lemer keto, in a pickup. The local government administrator, he invites us to ride in the truck, which belongs to Jane Newman, a retired ad executive from Britain who worked in New York. She first visited this settlement eight years ago, when a friend's Land Rover broke down during an expedition to Addis Ababa. Since then, Newman has adopted Sereolipi as her personal mission, badgering her friends and former colleagues to sponsor dormitories, libraries, and solar-powered computers for the area's primary schools. She also convinces me to visit neighboring Ndonyo Wasin, near the Matthews Range, where the locals living in mud-hut *man-yattas* (villages) produce colorful bracelets made of glass beads and recycled tire rubber.

Lemer keto climbs into the cab and Mason and I sit down on an improvised cushion under a canvas canopy in the back. Two

Samburu home guards sit on top of the baggage behind us. One clutches an AK-47, necessary protection on this frontier.

They begin a call-and-response journey song that wavers whenever we hit ruts in the unpaved road. (In Swahili, Mason politely asks them to point the gun outside the truck.) Scraping past thorn trees, we turn off the main track to bump over rocks in dry creek beds. Spotted guinea fowls and their chicks scurry out of our way. Spindly dik-diks, deer the size of newborn lambs, rest under dusty shrubs. It takes almost two hours of rough driving to reach Ndonyo Wasin.

Soon, I hear a welcome song from beyond a screen of bushes. Tightly bunched, a dozen women walk toward the twig shelter where we are resting. They wear printed orange, turquoise, and lime-green cotton *shukas* (cloth, or coats) knotted underneath layered chest plates of wire and beads, an ensemble that demands elegantly erect posture. A tarp is spread in the shade and they sit solemnly, with passive faces, as we are formally introduced. Jacob, who purchases their trade beads, translates our conversation. In a society where wealth still grazes on four hooves, Newman has been encouraging this group to

BEAD COLORS AND SHAPES



Kenyan Kaleidoscope
Clockwise from above:
A Samburu woman
creating a beaded lamp;
Julia Francombe,
founder of the
Sampiripi collective,
on the edge of the
Laikipiak Plateau;
beaded baskets at
Francombe's workshop;
an archway at the Ol
Malo ranch; Ol Malo's
pool; details of
Samburu beading work.



FOR INFANTS, RED FOR **YOUNG**

HAVE SIGNIFICANCE: GREEN



earn a little hard currency using techniques and patterns that are unique to the Samburu aesthetic. Two of the women, Peneten and Narika, nurse babies bundled close to their breasts. I am transfixed by the *sayen enkawe* (headdresses), stitched with leather and plastic buttons, on their shaved heads. The workmanship is exceptional, so I praise it. Overcoming their shyness, they unpack a pile of bracelets, rings, and neckbands.

Our visit is unhurried. We talk about husbands, milking cows, schooling for the children. Most of the women are in their late twenties, although they don't keep track of years the way I do. Only Veronica, who wears intricate braids, has been as far as Nairobi; most have barely ventured to Sereolipi. The sun drops down over the mountains, softening the harsh foliage to a tangled silhouette against the pale silver and rose sky. Mason admires a pair of tanned goatskin bags and asks the price. That's when the negotiating kicks into high gear and we find a stack of jewelry and bags in our laps. All the women clap their approval. At this point, I bring up the headdresses again and ask whether anyone would be willing to sell one. After I offer to pay whatever price is named, four ladies add theirs to the pile. Then, a woman called Priscilla surprises me. She proffers one of her own layered chest plates, requests 1,500 Kenyan shillings (the price of a goat, or about \$22), but seems willing to settle for less. However, she grabs up her headdress and resolutely jams it back on her cropped hair. Not paying attention, (Continued on page 287)

GUIDE TO WOMEN'S COLLECTIVES

☀️ WHEN TO GO

In Kenya, avoid the rainy seasons from March to May and October to December. For Uttar Pradesh, the cooler months, those between October and March, are best.

✈️ GETTING THERE

British Airways has daily connecting flights to Nairobi and New Delhi from New York. Continental has a daily nonstop flight to New Delhi from Newark. Jet Airways flies between New Delhi and Lucknow.

🚗 GETTING AROUND

East Africa safari experts **Journeys by Design** (212/568-7639; journeysbydesign.co.uk) can organize transportation,

guides, and accommodations in Kenya. Niki Beattie of **Cox & Kings** is an invaluable resource if you're planning a trip to India (800/999-1758; coxandkingsusa.com).

🏠 WHERE TO STAY

KENYA Lemarti's Camp

At this five-tent camp, hosts Anna Trzebinski and her Samburu husband, Loyapan Lemarti, arrange visits with beadworkers. *Koiija, Laikipia, Kenya*; 212/568-7639; journeysbydesign.co.uk; doubles from \$1,340, including all meals.

Oi Malo Four guest cottages and a six-bedroom villa sit on a 3,000-acre ranch. 212/568-

7639; journeysbydesign.co.uk; doubles from \$1,060, including all meals.

INDIA

Taj Residency Lucknow A

GREAT VALUE modern 110-room hotel near the Chowk street market for *chikan* embroidery. *Vipin Khand, Gomti Nagar, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh*; 866/969-1825; tajhotels.com; doubles from \$185.

📖 WHAT TO READ

The History of Beads,

by Lois Sherr Dubin, a comprehensive illustrated account.

Inside the Haveli, by Rama Mehta, explores life in the women's quarters of an aristocratic Hindu household.



EXCLUSIVE Q&A AND T+L WEB EXTRA

For an interview with the author about her travels to Kenya and India, plus information on where to find the crafts of these collectives and seven others, go to travelandleisure.com.

WOMEN, WHITE FOR PURITY

women's collectives



(Continued from page 249) I look at other work on the tarp until Mason leans over and whispers that Priscilla has become very quiet, her body shaking slightly. Facing her, I ask if it would help to pay the original amount for her necklace and she brightens. Mason and I are careful to pick something from everyone in the group, even though the skill levels vary, as there is no singling out of talent in Samburu culture.

We settle up with Jacob while the women of Ndonyo Wasin gather around, chatting and giving us gifts of little rings and single-strand necklaces. Peneten rubs her bald head and wants to see what she looks like without her *sayen enkwe*. Using my digital camera, I extol her shorn beauty. She has a lovely smile. A full moon is rising and the women disperse, striding on recycled-tire sandals into the distance. Lemerketo, Mason, and I sit on folding camp chairs as his warriors grill a freshly slaughtered goat over wood. It tastes like wild herbs. Curiously, another headdress arrives by courier. It belongs to Priscilla. Afterwards, as I lie on the ground, covered in a thin wool *shuka*, the moonlight shines on my face. I can't stop wondering why she decided to relinquish her headdress after all.

After we return to Sereolipi, Mason departs for Nanyuki and I fly to the highlands, where I will soon learn the significance of beads for the Samburu and for their cousins, the Laikipiak Masai. On a bluff facing south toward Mount Kenya, I look down at an other plain bisected by the muddy, rock-tumbled rivers that allow these tribes to sustain a way of life little changed for centuries.

As Kenyan-born Julia Francombe and I walk toward a beading workshop called Sampiripiri (Samburu for "butterfly"), at Ol Malo, her family's farm on the edge of the Laikipia Plateau, she remarks, "En-

dangered animals get more funding than people here." An Oxford grad, Francombe started a charitable trust during a severe drought in 2000 as a way of supporting her neighbors, who were starving as their livestock died of thirst. She is blunt about how austere the lives of women can be in this environment, lacking such basics as medicine and primary education. When I bring up female circumcision, a rite of passage still practiced by the Samburu, she says, "I'm here to assist, not to change."

As we observe stragglers hurrying toward the workshop with red plaid *shukas* flying, Francombe tells me their jewelry is "like a diary." Pointing to a woman wearing a harlequin collar, she continues, "There is a language to the beads. I can tell how many suitors she has had, how long she has been married, the sex of her children. Westerners have nothing like it." Bead colors and shapes have significance: green for grass or infants, red for blood or young women, white for purity. Clued in to the visual messages of their jewelry, I can now read these women's lives. It makes me feel guilty to think that I treated their headdresses, redolent of woodsmoke and perspiration, as mere objects.

The earliest known African beads, discs fashioned from ostrich eggshells, date to 10,000 B.C. The first glass beads were apparently imported from India around 200 B.C. Subsequently, European and Arab traders bartered beads for ivory, gold, and slaves. In many African societies, beads are still highly prized for both everyday and ceremonial ornamentation. For nomads like the Samburu there is little point in decorating their households, so they concentrate on personal adornment. And, it seems, the men are just as vain about their appearance as the women. When I meet Kandari Leparsulan, a Laikipiak Masai who was given the saintly name of Boniface at missionary school, he is wearing a *ndarasha* headdress of plastic flowers. His friend Dominic has an equally flashy bead necklace with a bow-tie motif. Both work for Nairobi-based designer Anna Trzebinski, who operates Lemarti's Camp on the Uaso Nyiro River, a two-hour drive »

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DESTINATION: BAKER HOUSE 1650

This August, 10 Cane Rum and Travel + Leisure hosted an intimate summer cocktail soirée in the chic outdoor setting of the Baker House private gardens—an iconic Hampton's destination. Friends of Travel + Leisure and Hampton's tastemakers mingled while sipping on 10 Cane Rum signature cocktails including basil and strawberry mojitos, ginger cucumber crush, and mango daiquiris.



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Left to right: Ron Mulliken, Associate Publisher of T+L; Anthony Cennamo, Advertising Director of T+L; Melissa Pordy, Director of Media Investment Solutions of CCA Advertising; Richard Lefkowitz

women's collectives

south of Ol Malo, where it's verdant enough for scented acacia and fig trees to bloom. The men escort me to a gathering of warriors and unwed girls who dance for hours in the midday sun. I want to watch the spectacle, but the married women have laid out an equally attractive display of beaded baskets, walking sticks, and jewelry. They ask me questions about how to deal with wily traders from the Kikuyu tribe.

Back in Nairobi, I visit Trzebinski's studio. She adopts African motifs in her clothing line that uses materials from around the world (suede from Germany, pashmina from Nepal, Kenyan ostrich and flamingo feathers). Her second marriage, to Samburu tribesman Loyapan Lemarti, has raised eyebrows among the uptight "Happy Valley crowd," the descendants of the European whites who settled in the Great Rift Valley. She couldn't care less. Trzebinski allays my concern about Priscilla's change of heart. Standing among leather samples and art supplies, the designer insists, "It's no blunder. They find it easy to refuse unless they really want to sell. And they will always make new ones." She employs 45 women who earn between \$200 and \$400 a month on beaded piecework. They wear Western clothes, carry cell phones, and speak English. Sitting at one of the tables, I ask these big-city women to show me how to bead. One, a soft-spoken, fine-featured young woman named Kerubo, is decorating a leather bag strap with a handsome woven pattern. About five years ago, when she dropped out of secondary school, she learned beading from her mother, who also works for Trzebinski occasionally. Now she is a mother herself, with a five-year-old daughter to raise. Kerubo hands me a hole punch for piercing the cowhide and a bowl filled with purple beads. Capturing precisely 10 of these on a needle takes a ridiculous amount of time. I can barely see the holes. The others duck their heads, trying to hide broad grins at my lack of dexterity.

ACROSS THE INDIAN OCEAN, and on the threshold of a society the diametric opposite of Kenya's nomads, I climb into the backseat of a cream-colored Birla Ambassador car where Vijay Khan sits, shielded by silk

curtains from her driver, Waseem. He closes the door and gets behind the wheel to navigate the congested streets of Lucknow, the 18th-century capital of Uttar Pradesh, in northern India. We drive out of the city across the broad Gangetic Plain, passing fields planted with wheat and lentils, drying dung heaps shaped like stupas, and faded brick temples. The dusty road is shaded by exhausted mango and eucalyptus trees waiting for the late-summer rains to revive them. At mid morning, it is already 90 degrees. A petite woman with amber eyes and expressive hands that emphasize her points, Khan self-consciously crosses out the title of rani on her calling card. She is married to Mohammad Amir Mohammad Khan, known to his family as Sulaiman, the Raja of Mahmudabad, a city in the Sitapur district. His ancestral holdings include a massive 600-year-old fortress, where the family continues to observe purdah. As practiced by both Hindus and Muslims in India, purdah requires women to remain modestly veiled in public and to maintain separate living quarters from the adult male members of their household. Unless her two sons find wives interested in adopting the custom, she may be the last rani in the family to practice the "protocol of the unseen."

Being a "purdah lady" in the 21st century, especially after attending Smith College and Cambridge, means Khan is adhering to a doctrine established 1,400 years ago while she wrestles with modern issues such as e-commerce and trunk shows in London and Manhattan. "I am deeply privileged," she says to me, as Waseem leans on the Klaxon to urge along a Brahma bull blocking the road. "I can cross worlds. Others can't." Khan has invited me to visit her embroidery collective, called Qilasaaz ("the fort and its wherewithal," in Farsi), to meet those who belong to this partitioned world. We talk about her motivation for founding Qilasaaz. "My purpose is to contribute to their life, not to give them a lecture," she explains. "They are employed with the full knowledge of their husbands, so it has not been subversive."

As we drive through rural villages, I catch tantalizing glimpses of life on the street through a slit in the curtains—a barber tending his customer, roti on the griddle in a cook stall, a stray dog dodging

a rickshaw bike loaded with bundles. We arrive at the weathered fort's main gate, big enough for elephants to enter. (They once did.) Inside the main courtyard, pink and butter-yellow plastered brick walls are punctuated by scalloped windows and wooden balconies. At the entrance to the women's quarters, Waseem shuts off the engine as attendants draw a folding *qanaat* (protective shield) around the car. Khan's maid Shameem signals that we can enter a hallway unobserved. Less grand than the public rooms where Sulaiman Khan greets guests, the women's side of the house has its own central courtyard, flanked by white-washed columns and inner gardens.

In a shaded chamber with heavy green doors left open to catch any slight breeze, the Qilasaaz ladies are seated on a white canvas-covered floor, bent over their stitching. Like the women of Ndonyo Wasin, they also wear vibrant colors: shell pink, parrot green, lavender. Their hair is drawn back in thick braids. Shoes are piled at the entrance. Noise from a political rally in the streets scarcely penetrates, although somewhere bells chime the passing hours distinctly. Part of Khan's mission is to preserve a Lucknowi embroidery technique called *chikan*. Plopping down against a bolster, I take a closer look at their threadwork. As someone who accidentally sewed a Girl Scout sampler to her uniform, I am envious of the adroit, miniature patterns. Circles, whorls, raised knots, running stitches, piercings, shadow fish, curled flowers, and silver leaves grace the exquisite clothing. Even the seams are hand-stitched. Qilasaaz uses tissue-thin *khadi* (homespun cotton), silk, chiffon, and broadcloth made from pulped bark, which Khan sources from hand-weavers and dyers who know she is interested in sustaining their crafts as well. A ruby red crepe de chine jacket with gold edging hangs on a dressmaker's dummy. Samana and Bibi unfurl an intricately embroidered sari. They teach me the Urdu words for each type of stitch: *phanda* (raised knots), *jaali* (pierced), and *hath-kati* (drawn-thread work). Samana, who has a solemn face and graying hair, supervises Qilasaaz when Khan is away. She makes notes on a new sleeve style for some beach tunics I want sewn from brightly striped cottons.

The workshop breaks for lunch in a side veranda as the soaring heat whitens the sky. Seated on a raised platform, the

women unpack steel tiffin boxes of curry, chapati, and rice. Gesturing to the quarters, Khan tells me, "This space is bigger than their houses. Qilasaaz gives them regular work, and some sense of independence." Khan emphasizes that all proceeds go directly to the younger members. "They can spend their wages however they wish, buy gold or pay school fees, but I also encourage saving," she adds. One of the unintended consequences is that the younger women seem to be having fewer children as their families recognize the earning potential of their skills.

Khan's mother, Rama Mehta, was a noted diplomat and author of *Inside the Haveli*, a fictionalized account set within the women's quarters of an aristocratic Hindu household. The novel emphasizes community and respect for elders rather than what Westerners would perceive as oppression. (A lecture series on women's issues at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study was named for Mehta by her friends John Kenneth and Catherine Galbraith.) While we eat chickpea *pakorras*, Khan expresses nostalgia for an era when the Mahmudabad *qila* swarmed with aunts, grandmothers, in-laws, and cousins. "There's nobody left," she acknowledges, "to tell me off."

Toward the end of our day, when I show the Qilasaaz women photos from Ndonyo Wasin and Ol Malo, Khan translates their shock. Despite its Bollywood image, India remains a deeply conservative country when it comes to deportment and dress. Still, seeing photos of women from another continent in unusual dress clearly fascinates the sheltered group.

Unfinished tasks are folded away, and three women draw veils across their faces while others cover their heads. Suddenly, the riot of color is subdued, but not the women's sense of humor. While two tie *imam zamin* safety charms (rupee coins knotted inside a strip of fabric) to Khan's peach-colored sleeve, I admire the decorative henna swirls on the palms of several recent brides. Despite the language barrier, I discover common ties as they prepare to depart. Pantomiming, I want to know where else temporary *mehendi* tattoos are drawn. Pointing to my upper arms, hands, and feet, the group nods yes each time. At the risk of being provocative, I point to my derriere. It takes a split second for the absurdity to sink in. Then they crack up, laughing uproariously. +

BUYER'S GUIDE

The New Costa Rica **COVER**

Stewart+Brown \$169 (stewartbrown.com); **PAGE 6 Organic** \$202 (Saks Fifth Avenue; 877/551-7257; saksfifthavenue.com); **PAGE 227 Stewart+Brown** \$172 (see above); **Green Toe** \$60 (503/236-3999; thegreenloop.com).

Stylish Traveler: Fashion

PAGE 77 Covet (Evolve Boutique, Atlanta; 404/474-3244; covetthis.com); **Organic** (see above); **Stewart+Brown** hat, scarf (see above); **El Naturalista** (202/333-5570; elnaturalista.com); **Nahui Ollin** (732/222-7500; nahuiollin.com); **Again NYC** bag, clutch (Setchi Ecoboutique, Washington, D.C.; shopsetchi.com; againnyc.com); **iWood** (503/236-3999; thegreenloop.com).

Stylish Traveler: Shopping

PAGE 80 Nau jacket \$258, gloves \$45, hat \$35 (select Nau stores; 877/454-5628; nau.com).

Stylish Traveler: Spotlight

PAGE 82 John Hardy \$695 (sustainableadvertising.org).

Stylish Traveler: Icon

PAGE 84 Patagonia (Patagonia stores; 800/638-6464; patagonia.com).

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