

Meet the craftsmen of *Bourj Hammoud*

For those who haven't had a chance to explore this Armenian enclave, Lebanon Traveler has done it for you guided by designer Angelique Sabounjian



In the 1920's, a Lebanese entrepreneur called Hammoud built a tower on the eastern banks of the Beirut River. In those days the area was mostly swamps and marsh-land but that didn't deter him from his dream. His two-storey building hovered over the smaller homes below, made up of mostly Armenian refugees. What Hammoud and his neighbors couldn't have known at the time was that the area they called home would become one of the most densely populated districts in the Middle East and a virtual Mecca for craftsmanship –Bourj Hammoud (meaning the tower of Hammoud).

Even now, the municipality of Bourj Hammoud, originally founded by survivors of the Armenian Genocide in 1915, evokes a sense of mystery and intrigue. Over 80 percent of business owners are Armenian and around 77 percent of businesses are artisanal or

involve skilled labor. Venturing into its narrow alleyways is like walking into a cocoon. Those who know it well can attest to the fact that it is the center for creativity, where things are made by hand and where almost anything can be found. Jewelers, hat and bag makers, coppersmiths, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, ceramicists, weavers, and embroiderers are all jam-packed within 2.5 square kilometers. And, rumor has it that the glamorous world of Lebanese fashion can be traced back to these non-descript ateliers, where artisans quietly go about their work, unseen and uncelebrated.



In 2009, Angelique Sabounjian, a handbag and leather goods designer, set up shop in the community, next to a branch of her family's jewelry display and

packaging business. "It enabled me to explore and locate several vendors that I now want to share with those who are in the design sector," she said. During the 2013 Beirut Design Week, she gave guided tours, allowing participants to discover accessory suppliers, manufacturers and tanneries with the aim of introducing the different products and services they each provide.

We began our tour with Sabounjian at Pailiani Design, shoemakers for three generations. Shoemaking is a very popular craft in the Armenian community and according to Hrag Pailian, most Italians would be hard-pressed to distinguish Lebanese craftsmanship from their own. Pailian was in fact the former intern of the renowned Italian designer Guiseppe Zanotti and made one-of-a-kind handmade shoes for the likes of Hollywood celebrities during his stint in Italy. He chose to return to Lebanon and expand the family business, employing the same shoemakers his father did, twenty-six years ago. Sadly he described his future as being bleak due to the aging population of workers that are not replaced by a fresh crop of youngsters who frankly, find the work difficult.

Our second stop was the Embroidery Center for The Armenian Relief Cross in Lebanon (ARCL), founded in 1976 to meet the growing needs of economically deprived community members, by enabling young women to acquire a skill in sewing and embroidery. It also revives and preserves traditional Armenian embroidery and ensures regular income to ARCL's social and educational programs. The ladies working at the charming boutique were busy completing a table runner adorned with Marash embroidery, named after its city of origin. "Most Armenian women, regardless of their habitat, were

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usually familiar with the art of making various kinds of fine needlework,” said Sabounjian. “The center supports homemakers by providing steady work and conducts classes in an effort to pass on the art.” With the burden of preserving thirty centuries of rich culture, the ladies lamented over the loss of enthusiasm from the younger generation, but assured us that although it might look complicated, once learned, the work is enjoyable and very rewarding.

Next, we passed by the Tchakerian Brothers’ tannery to see where our fancy leather purses are dyed. Once the site of more than thirty factories along the Beirut River, Bourj Hammoud is left with just one tannery. We spotted the hides at H & V and Arti Moda, two of the bigger ateliers that produce handbags and accessories from A to Z, mostly for wholesale clients and several big-name designers. Although their client list is confidential, those who are in the know won’t deny seeing the famous faces of homegrown designers that trust and employ Bourj Hammoud’s artisans. “The amount of skill that’s available is unbelievable,” said Sabounjian.

After passing countless jewelers, dressmakers and backgammon makers, we wove our way towards a beautiful pink building that said “Badguèr”, the brainchild of the head of architecture and urban planning for Bourj Hammoud’s municipality, Arpiné Mangassarian.

The two-storey house is a promotional center for Armenian artisans as well as a restaurant serving traditional fare made by local housewives. It seemed that all of what we had encountered during the day was housed in Badguèr, from needlework and rugs to jewelry and art. Mangassarian’s motivation for creating the center was to give value to the people behind the craft, and open windows to the outside world in order to engage the masses.

In the documentary film “Bravehearts of Bourj Hammoud” Soniya Kirpalani describes this unknown side of Beirut as a vital component of the Lebanese cultural makeup, answering such questions as how a country living between war and global recession still have the inherent ability to be creative and how an emerging creative community can bridge their nation’s glorious past with their challenging future.



According to Kirpalani and her associate Sarah Thelwall, a strategist and consultant in the creative industries since 2001, “both designers and suppliers have been hit by the global recession and by the instability in the region. This has caused them to downsize their production and in some cases limit their sales to Lebanon rather than international clients,” said Thelwall. What they suggest and what Sabounjian has taken to heart is to create a formal design and manufacturing district with the aim of promoting the area as a production base for both local and international designers. This in turn would lead to the formation of a school to teach future artisans and ensure the preservation of the labor force. Most of all it would give craftsman the sense of value that they so desperately need and deserve after years of service.

Tours such as the one we were fortunate enough to take are bound to open the area up to potential markets and so will the varied perceptions of new visitors who see Bourj Hammoud for what it is - a potentially viable and valuable resource. Jason Steel, the current director of the Elie Saab Fashion Design Program at LAU, has fallen in love with “this vibrant and exciting place where artisans and ateliers produce beautiful work when not being pushed to work for rock bottom prices.” Steel has visited a number of amazing ateliers hidden in anonymous buildings and is already working on strategies to link new designers with industry to develop stronger markets in fashion, textiles, accessories and of course jewelry design - all of which are essential to regional growth. “Given the chance I would happily live in the dynamic and fabulous BH!”





BOURJ HAMMOUD TOUR CONTACT LIST

TOUR

Arti Moda

Metallic accessories for shoes, bags, belts and fashion wear
Harboyan Trade Center Block B, Dora Highway
+961 1 255540

Haddad Accessories

Metallic accessories for shoes, bags and belts
Block 1, Harboyan Center, Tiro Street +961 3 217733

Youssef Assaker

Jewelry polish and plating
Ground Floor, Harboyan Trade Center +961 1 242885

Tchakerian Tannery

Skin, hide and leather for bags, footwear, clothing and furniture +961 1 261516

Salem International Tannery

Skin, hide and leather for bags, footwear and clothing
Ground Floor, Moucarri Center +961 1 264287

RPM Accessories

Shoe manufacturing atelier
+961 3 984528

Armenian Relief Cross Artisanat

Der Melkonian Street
+961 1 240586

Accessories House

Metal accessories for leather goods
Street 71, Sector 4
+961 1 241285

Boutons Mihran

Ribbons and accessories for clothing and couture
Municipality road, facing Arine Center +961 256586

Tissue Mike

Textile merchant
Sofia Hagopian Street
+961 1 242821

Ets. Hovig

Leather and all kinds of shoe and bag accessories
Arax Street 67, Sector 4 Building 23, Ground Floor
+961 1 247252

Vartan Hakimian

Design and manufacture of accessories and leather goods
+961 3462975

Pailian

Shoe making atelier
+961 1 252339

Golden Articles

Metal accessories for shoes and bags
Sector 5, 60th street, Building no. 21 +961 1 262010

Yorgui Shoe M.A.C.

Machines & accessories for footwear and leather goods
Arax Street +961 1 259480

Magasin Magar Karayan

Sewing machines, spare parts and repair
Marash Street +961 1 258569

V.S.B.

Leather cutting molds for shoes and bags +961 1 266928

Ets. OKA

Leather accessories atelier
Arax Street + 961 1 267935

OUTSIDE THE TOUR PREMISES

Mardini Establishment

Leather supplier
Bourj Hammoud
+961 1 487 728

H & V

Handbags & leather goods atelier +961 1 269 412

Leather Touch

Handbag & leather accessories atelier
Sedd El Baouchrieh, Industrial City
+961 3 833 407

Maison Harout

Shoe, handbag and clothing accessories
Dora Highway, Rainbow Building +961 1 268 124

RESTAURANTS IN BOURJ HAMMOUD

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Facing Life Center Church
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Varouj

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Badguèr

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Basterma Mano

Municipality Street
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