



A shopkeeper arranges rugs woven by women in the southwestern Tunisian oasis of Nefta, at a shop run by Shanti, a social enterprise that helps artisans from across the North African country, in the capital Tunis. — AFP photos

TUNISIAN WEAVERS TURN RAGS INTO ECO-FRIENDLY RUGS

Najet unravels an old pair of jeans, raw material for a designer carpet: traditional, eco-friendly crafts are being adapted for new markets thanks to a project born in the Tunisian desert. "I learned to weave at a young age, from my mother," said the 52-year-old from the oasis town of Nefta, 500 kilometers (310 miles) south of Tunis. Now, she is making a living from it. She is selling her Turkish-style kilim rugs via Shanti, a social enterprise that helps artisans from across the North African country reach buyers and bring vital revenue into some of its most marginalized communities.

Shanti is the brainchild of Najet's Franco-Tunisian nephew Mehdi Baccouche. "Unstitching old jumpers, tearing up old cotton garments, making rugs out of them, it's a folk art found in all Tunisian homes," he told AFP. While the skill "has been around forever", reaching buyers is a challenge, he added. Back in 2014, he had asked his aunt to weave carpets for his friends, soon moving to selling them via Facebook. Seeing the potential, two years later he created Shanti, which buys carpets and takes charge of getting them to consumers. It also employs designers who work with artisans to improve their design skills and make their products more marketable. "These are my creations, they come out of my imagination and Shanti approved them," Najet said.

'Recycle clothes'

Najet uses an eclectic array of old



A Tunisian craftswoman weaves a rug in the southwestern Tunisian oasis of Nefta.

pullovers, socks and assorted pass-me-downs from the local flea market, giving them a new life as rugs. She has little fear of running out of raw materials. Despite a lean patch, the Tunisian clothes industry still keeps 1,600 firms in business, providing 100 times that many jobs. In Nefta, a town of some 22,000 people, Shanti has also set up a haberdashery where weavers have free access to balls of wool recycled from second-hand clothes.

The association's local coordinator Fatima Alhamal, Najet's daughter, says the store makes "a huge difference". Previously, "craftswomen had to go and find materials, which they had to pay for, then earned 12-15 euros for a kilim". Now Shanti pays them 40 euros (\$43) apiece, up to a maximum of four a month each to avoid pressuring them into overwork. It then sells them in Tunisia and abroad.

The association also helps the workers improve their work spaces, for example with air conditioning—a necessity in southern Tunisia's blistering summer heat. The work has changed the social standing of the women involved. "People see them completely differently now," Fatma said. Najet says she is happy to be making a living from home. "I don't have to go out for anything, I can cook and eat here, I can work comfortably."

Eco-friendly

Baccouche said at first people teased him for getting involved in "an old ladies' craft". But the project fills a valuable niche in an area where women are disproportionately underemployed, and which has faced an ever-worsening economic crisis since before the revolt that sparked the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. "It was



A Tunisian craftswoman works in the southwestern Tunisian oasis of Nefta.

important to show that you can be an old woman who never went to school and doesn't know how to use the internet, but you can still do something and earn a living from it," he said. Yet the association also tries to avoid creating conflicts within families.

It pays the women not in cash but in post office accounts where their husbands can't see how much they are making or use it to pay household bills. Using its system of ordering in advance, Shanti runs a boutique in the capital Tunis. "L'Artisanerie" also acts as a space for coordinators who train artisans from other rural areas, making bamboo furniture, poetry and embroidery. In four years, more than 200 producers have been able to find a market for their work. Sixty work every day for L'Artisanerie.

"We're trying to show that you can

make something 100 percent Tunisian, with Tunisian materials and skills, but with a design that fits current tastes," Baccouche said. Some products, joint creations by artisans and Shanti designers, are sold to design-conscious Tunisians. Others are exported or sold to bigger firms—such as Indigo, a manufacturer for Zara, or Mango, which recently bought 164 rugs made from recycled jeans. For now, the system still relies on some support from non-profits such as Oxfam or on Danish development aid. But Baccouche has big ambitions, with Shanti expanding into sustainable agriculture and ecotourism. "We're trying to set up an entire, eco-friendly production and logistics chain," he said. — AFP



Festival goers enjoy a performance at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. — AFP photos

Coachella's return brings big business to California desert

"We've waited years for this!" exclaims Jesus Medina as he dishes out burritos to the hungry masses at Coachella, the music festival that's back on in the California desert after three years. After a COVID-induced hiatus, Coachella Valley businesses are flourishing with the return of one of music's most-touted events, a boon for the region that counts festivals as key to its economic engine. With just a little over 90,000 residents, Indio's motto is "The City of Festivals," events that make it at least \$3 million in direct revenue alone, according to municipal figures, which includes ticket-sharing dollars and transient occupancy taxes from campers.

The benefit to businesses from food stores to hotels to gas stations took that figure soaring even higher—until the pandemic stymied live performance and put Coachella on indefinite hiatus. "We had everything ready in 2020, but the pandemic canceled everything," Medina told AFP in Spanish. His business "Cena Vegana" sold more than a thousand burritos on Friday, during Coachella's opening day. "It doesn't stop, the lines are endless—this is a great opportunity for us."

Coachella draws in more than 125,000 people daily over the course of two three-day weekends. Thousands of people occu-

py hotels in neighboring areas including Palm Springs, the resort area bordered by the San Jacinto mountains and known for its palm trees, golf courses and spas. Business has been "quiet for years, a couple years, but we're full and it's busy," said Char Pershind, manager of the Zoso Hotel. Nearly all of the 162 rooms at Zoso are booked by people attending and working at the festival, and virtually everything is sold out for the event's second weekend.

In 2019, the last time Coachella attendees descended on the valley, Pershind worked at a different hotel, and says this year many more people are in town for the shows. "People have been cooped up for so long... they want to get out and enjoy the air," she said. "I know they come for the music but they come for a lot more."

'Reminder I was here'

For Mitchell Car, who works at a bustling vintage clothing and accessories shop, Coachella is a golden opportunity to expand sales. "Lots of times people come and they don't have their outfits," Car told AFP. This year, the festival's giving 1970s vibes with bell-bottom silhouettes of yore, along with bursts of neon and glitter adding sheen to the Empire Polo Club grounds where the stages spring up each year. "They're always

searching: what's hip? What's unique?" said Car, whose primary clientele come from New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. "I had the photographer for Harry Styles in the store the other day."

Food choices abound on the festival grounds, where Santiago Restrepo is dishing up traditional Venezuelan arepas to hungry concert-goers. "At first it was a bit difficult for us, because it's the first time we've used this sales model," he told AFP. "But when people started arriving in the middle of the afternoon we were ready." "After 4:00 pm, we didn't stop for a second until 1:00 am." A few feet away, Coachella partiers are lined up to snag souvenirs celebrating the festival's return. In the official store, it took people an hour-and-a-half to reach the front of the line where some 20 people doled out merch, the most expensive item ringing up at \$150 for a 2022 sweatshirt. "Some people spent thousands of dollars," said one vendor who wished to remain anonymous. Charlie Dawson, who flew in from New York, told AFP he just wants "something, whatever—a reminder I was here." It's his seventh Coachella: "I was looking forward to coming back." — AFP

L'Imperatrice brings French pop back to Coachella

Two years after the pandemic stymied their debut at the famed Coachella stage, French disco pop band L'Imperatrice is having their California moment. "It's a cherry on top," said vocalist Flore Benguigui, speaking in English to AFP. "I think it's magic." The six-person funk-inflected pop and nu-disco group formed in Paris in 2012 — has finally made their way to the Coachella stage as part of a tour promoting their second album, "Taku Tsubo."

"The world is different from, like 20 years ago... I think people are more open to different languages. People are maybe a bit more curious," said keyboardist Charles de Boisseguin. "French-maybe it's also a bit mysterious," he added. The band—whose additional members include Hagni Gwon (keyboards), David Gaugue (bass), Achille Trocellier (electric guitar) and Tom Daveau (drums) — has several EPs under its belt but had only released one full-length album

when the pandemic struck. The shutdown gave L'Imperatrice peace and quiet to put together their second major record. "We worked quite efficiently," said Benguigui, explaining how they built their own studio, preparing for their reemergence and eventual tour.

'Tears of joy'

Sporting a neon pink bob and a purple-fuchsia ensemble from designer Pierre Cardin, Benguigui said the return to performance post-coronavirus restrictions has been electric. "We could really feel the energy; some people actually cried tears of joy... They were really welcoming, and relieved to finally see live music," she said. "Every concert is different, and we were so happy to be here at Coachella," Benguigui said.

On the Gobi stage, one of seven at the festival in the Empire Polo Club in the desert city of Indio, hundreds of people turned out for the French act. Decked out in red and mustard yellow outfits emblazoned with hearts, L'Imperatrice had their audience dancing nonstop throughout their 40-minute set. The group will play Coachella's second string of dates next week, as they continue on their tour of the United States. — AFP



French band L'Imperatrice performs onstage at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. — AFP photos



(From left) Members of French pop band L'Imperatrice Hagni Gwon, Charles de Boisseguin, Flore Benguigui, Tom Daveau, Achille Trocellier and David Gaugue pose for AFP at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California.