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Banana Boat – African Crafts

Magazine Issues June - July 2015 by Michelle Sutton - May 27, 2015

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Banana Boat – African Crafts

By Michelle Sutton

It's a rare occasion that I am able to walk past one of the three **Banana Boat shops** and not get drawn in by the beautifully styled window displays. I generally find myself wandering around the shop which is a treasure trove of African crafts, taking notice of items that I didn't see the last time and often leaving with a new treasure of my own. Banana Boat is no ordinary *craft shop*. Behind the scenes is an extensive network of crafters, entrepreneurs and women's groups who thrive off the fair trade principles that Banana Boats so proudly upholds.

The driving force behind Banana Boat is a woman named Suni. When Suni began 19 years ago, there were very few Ugandan crafts in the marketplace, most products derived from Kenya which is still the case in the local craft markets. Suni had a vision for getting Ugandan crafts onto her shelves and began working with some of Banana Boats first suppliers in 1996. Today she has built up a network of over 200 suppliers that she works very closely with in developing new products and designs. Using their technical and crafting skills, Suni helps them with design and product ideas while teaching them to pay close attention to finishing and quality control. The result is the beautifully handcrafted products that you see on the shelves at the Banana Boat shops.

As a customer, I equate Banana Boat with great products, but for its suppliers, the significance of the company is so much more. Banana Boat provides work opportunities which allow suppliers to have a sustainable source of income. Suppliers are



New Tour Operator



helped by advances when needed and interest free loans for materials and investments. They are paid on delivery of the product rather than on consignment as most other shops offer. The relationships that Banana Boat has built with its suppliers are strong and most of them are crafting solely for Banana Boat as they struggle to keep up with the demand.

In 2006 Banana Boat started a new initiative called Paper Craft. Paper Craft was set forth to provide sustainable incomes for disadvantaged Ugandans, mostly women through the production of handmade paper and paper products. Many of the people that Paper Craft employs find it exceedingly difficult to find employment or a source of income to cater for their households. Using natural raw materials, such as elephant grass, pineapple tops, banana fibre and recycled paper, paper is hand crafted and then used to make various products. Depending on the material used, each paper product has a uniquely different look. Elephant grass has an olive greenish color, whereas pineapple top paper is very textured with a gold hue. The Paper Craft workshop is in a small house in the village and it's here that the cutting, blending and boiling happens, all a part of the process for making paper. The company has evolved and now has new product ranges as well, including handmade soap and recycled glass beads.



Behind the Banana Boat enterprise is an administrative team headed up by Suni's husband Ralph. Together they ensure that the concepts and ideas from which Banana Boat was born are upheld on a daily basis. Providing attractive shopping environments with quality, innovative products and smiling staff for Banana Boat customers and sustainable livelihoods, fair trade opportunities and supportive product development for Banana Boat suppliers. All around, it's a win win for everyone involved.

Banana Boat has three locations in Kampala:

Tribal Arts and Crafts 23 Cooper Road, Kisementi. Tel: (041) 4232885

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Paper Craft is a prime example of how Banana Boat works with various groups in the development of products and the support provided for building sustainable livelihoods. You can find out more about Paper Craft and their products on their website – www.papercraftafrica.com

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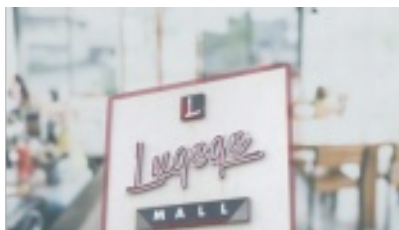
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