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London-born designer Deborah Nolan travels the world seeking inspiration for the items she sells in her Puglia boutique Tulsishop. Here she explains why she always buys direct from craftspeople and shares her enthusiasm for her adopted home.

SOURCE MATERIAL



1. Deborah Nolan
2. Kaftans designed by Nolan
3. Straw hat
4. Bowls sourced by Nolan on her travels
5. Colourful homeware
6. Tulsi Shop

Nestled in Marittima di Diso, a small village in southern Puglia, Deborah Nolan’s Tulsishop has the feeling of a sumptuous living room. For more than a decade its bohemian interiors and pieces sourced from Nolan’s winter trips to India, Peru and Vietnam have attracted travellers and locals alike, all of whom are drawn to her warmth, charisma and unique offering. When *Konfekt* first visits the shop, she is busy showing a group of French customers some of her favourite kaftans but before long the group is ensconced on the cane chairs chatting. Clients old and new tend to make themselves at home among the vibrant cushions. Nolan, who lives above the shop, considers the space her “living room”. Sitting at her kitchen table, she tells us why she chose to set up shop in Puglia after a life on the road. ————— κ

I arrived in Puglia in 2002 and instantly fell in love with the light. The first day I woke up here, I knew I really liked it.

Life is gentle here and I’ve always wanted to bring up my children in a quiet place. I grew up in London but after years spent travelling in Peru, India and Mexico and 15 years as a stylist in Los Angeles, I moved here to Marittima. Because I had always worked in fashion and had always collected clothing, when I came here, I thought I would just continue doing that. So I knocked down a wall in the middle of two rooms and set up shop there. It is a little side street. I never thought that anyone would find me. But they did.

It wasn’t long before I realised that Italian women liked to dress up to go to the beach. They wear kaftans; they’re quite stylish. So I geared [our collections] towards that. I went to India and started a line of my own clothing using natural dyes, handwoven fabrics and block prints on very fine cotton. Because I’ve always collected textiles from around the world, there was a touch of that too. Having opened the first shop 14 years ago, I now also own three outposts, in Capitolo, Gallipoli and Savelletri di Fasano. All sell items I’ve collected from my travels.

Bringing in things that are a little bit more unusual and not in everybody’s shops is key. I like selling beautiful items with integrity. Usually, what I sell depends on where I go that year. If I go to Ethiopia, I might bring back some wooden chairs or beads. Then, the next year, those might not be there at all.

I like to travel to places where I know there’s a strong craft culture. I go to Oaxaca every year, for example. It has the best weavers. That said, I also pick up things from Puglia: old pots, baskets and so forth.

When sourcing my items, it’s important to go off the beaten track. I’ll travel to that market that happens once a week. I never

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go to fairs and I never go to tourist places; I like to go to the source. When you do that, you meet locals and incredible people. Not many people go to the source. But I do and that’s where I find beauty and inspiration.

It’s always an adventure. The weather can be tricky. Recently I was in Vietnam and I took an old steam train with my mum to the Sapa Valley. We were halfway up the mountain when the train broke down. And the last time I was in Thailand, I was on a boat to an island when there was a monsoon.

When it comes to my own line, I don’t have a programme. I just find fabrics that I love. It’s a very organic process. But I always travel with notebooks so I can sketch little things and make lists. But that’s not structured.



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People inspire me. When I’m travelling, my whole day is out at markets or with designers. I like going to beautiful shops and seeing what they are doing for inspiration. I’m not a great tourist. Once I find great places, I tend to stick with them. Supporting indigenous crafts is extremely important to me. That’s where the real work is. But indigenous communities and their work are dying. When you use pure indigo, people will say, “Oh my God! It’s coming off on my hands.” But that’s because it’s the real deal.

Trust your instincts. As a buyer, the one thing I say is that you have to look at everything. You’ll find items and think you’ll see them again. But you never do. If I see something that’s unusual or beautiful,

I have to buy it immediately. Over the years, you gain that confidence. But I’ve made mistakes too.

My signature piece? The Valentina kaftan. I use the finest cotton and they’re made in southern India. I do a lot of plain hues and bright block colours. It suits the summer and, at the end of the day, it’s all about the summer.

When I return from travelling, I go to the sea and do some yoga to get back into the gentle rhythm of Puglia. It’s very quiet here so it’s easy to adjust. On the plane, I always bring a book, headphones, Venetian slippers and little socks. My reading glasses too.

My schedule when I’m travelling is busy but apart from that, it’s a relaxed atmosphere here. People tend to hang out in the shop, even in winter when it’s closed. The best part? When customers come in or write and tell me they’ve worn my pieces for a long time. It’s such a pleasure to collect beautiful things and sell them.
tulsishop.com



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