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Ojai

Valley Guide

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Jennie Moray's



Alicia Doyle speaks with one woman who is preserving the art of the handmade.

Jennifer Moray is recognized for her bespoke collections of Ecuadorian handmade Panama hats, hand-shaped wool hats, leather and straw handbags, and many other accessory inspirations that are reimagined with her discerning eye for quality finishes, clean design and refined simplicity.

As the founder of Ninakuru — an Ojai-based eco-luxe accessories

Hat Trick

brand — her private collections are curated for a select group of high-end boutiques in California and South America, attracting a sophisticated and mindful clientele who recognize and appreciate skilled craftsmanship, and the associated artistic value and luxury it represents.

However, Jennifer emphasizes the true purpose of Ninakuru is investing in people and understanding the symbiotic relationship between designer, artisan and customer, to create value.

“I recognize success can only be realized by valuing the potential, creativity and skills of the people who surround me and the masterful artisans who invest their time and talent in my imagination,” said the American-

Ecuadorian entrepreneur and style maker.

“We recognize and honor our shared talents — we collaborate and create holistically beautiful handcrafted one-of-a-kind pieces,” she said. “And most importantly, we derive strength, motivation and purpose not only for one another but through one another.”

Jennifer’s academic and professional background includes dual degrees in international business and marketing followed by 20 years of experience in these fields — 14 of which were

based in Ecuador where she honed her professional skills in global trade and indulged in her creative passions. Most of all, Jennifer considers herself a visionary and entrepreneur, with the ability to see opportunity, potential and beauty in all that surrounds her.

For instance, Jennifer named her first Ninakuru collection of Panama hats and straw bags after the enchanting Galapagos Islands, having been impacted by “the awe of raw natural beauty” of the islands, which became a theme to several of her collections.

“Some of the Galapagos Islands are lush and beautiful, and some are raw and quite desolate,” said Jennifer, adding that the essence of this untouched splendor — the animals,

the water, the energy of the sun — “is exhilarating.”

“Combine it all, and let the natural processes flow around you and allow them to envelop you ... inspires me to start with something simple and raw and create something exquisite and wonderful,” she said. “Seeing the potential of raw materials — and most importantly the intrinsic value and talent of the artisans I work with — goes to show you can find beauty in everything. One just needs to open their eyes.”

Jennifer is the daughter of an Ecuadorian mother, who Jennifer praises as “a talented and meticulous dressmaker, treasure hunter, and lover of all things beautiful.” Her American father, who is a biochemist by profession, is “a gifted artist, painter, teacher and lover of photography.”

Jennifer’s early exposure to her parents’ “creative and artistic souls” ignited her lifelong passion for art and design that sparked the fire for Ninakuru, which she launched in 2014. Translated from Quechua, the language of the Incan people, Ninakuru means firefly.

“Ninakuru is a wonderfully fitting name for the company, representing that true beauty radiates from within, and each of us has an inner glow worthy of being noticed,” Jennifer said.

Ninakuru was developed to help preserve the livelihood of artisans in developing countries who rely on their trade to support the economic and educational development of their families.

“Each purchase of a Ninakuru handmade product helps us actively engage in supporting artisans obtain fair prices for their goods and helps promote their sustainability, while helping us raise awareness for the need of higher ethical and environmental standards in international trade,” Jennifer explained.

Jennifer Moray and the talented indigenous weavers in Ecuador. Photo: Edwin L. Spacke



100% ethically produced with sustainably harvested materials, sales of Ninakuru products help indigenous artisans support and promote the educational development of their children. Photo: Edwin L. Spackey




She noted that few artisans are able to obtain the financial resources to purchase materials needed to produce a higher-quality product, which would secure a better profit margin for their goods.

"This is where we come in," she said. "We look for the most talented artisans, contract them to create our designs, provide them with quality materials, then I finish all our hats in our Ojai workshop, ensuring each hat is one-of-a-kind. Adding high-quality finishes polishes and differentiates the products, allowing us to place them in international markets where better prices can be obtained."

Jennifer travels to Ecuador biannually, spending several weeks working side by side with her artisans throughout the entire design and creation process, hand-selecting each raw material, ensuring a quality product is produced and delivered.

"By adding top-quality finishes sourced globally, we can obtain a fair sell price, enabling us to pay the artisans prices representative of their work," she said.

"In this way, we help provide a sustainable living for our craftsmen and, by doing so, they are better able to sustain their families."

While Ninakuru was created to help people create a better life for themselves and their families, it's not lost on Jennifer that the consumer is just as important as the person who makes the product. 

A sample of Ninakuru's 2020 line of Panama and wool hats. 100% handmade from fiber to finish, with love and passion woven into every thread.

Photo: Jennifer Moray



Dove



"Ninakuru products are fun and inspire people every day," she said. "Wearing a Ninakuru hat, bag or accessory will upgrade your look. You will get noticed. You will get compliments."

Ultimately, Ninakuru is Jennifer's way of creating a livelihood for herself that unites her educational background and professional experience with her creative passions and desire to give back to those in need and preserve the art of handmade.

To learn more, visit www.ninakuru.com, email cservice@ninakuru.com or call 805-886-6884. Jennifer's hats are also available at deKor & Co., 105 S. Montgomery St. in Ojai; or on the second floor at the Porch Gallery, 310 E. Matilija St. in Ojai.