



The Pembe Club: Making A Difference

YASMINE HAJI recently launched the Pembe Club, a fashion jewellery brand with a social message. Named after the Swahili word meaning ivory or tusk, the jewellery line seeks to raise awareness about the threat of extinction of African elephants.

Nearly 30,000 African elephants are killed every year for their ivory and Tanzania has emerged as an epicentre for poaching. In June, the Tanzanian government announced that it has lost 60% of its elephant population in the last five years – from 109,051 elephants in 2009 to 43,330 elephants in 2014. The story is the same in East and Central Africa.

Haji witnessed the shocking facts first-hand when she recently spent one week at the Selous Reserve in Tanzania and returned to London without seeing a single elephant! Having spent her initial years in Tanzania, Haji recalled the endless elephant herds she had seen as a child. Haji was devastated and decided to do something about the decline not just through personal contribution, but by encouraging others across the globe to get involved.

Haji decided to use her expertise in jewellery and fashion to launch the Pembe Club, a jewellery brand that offers consumers an option to replace ivory as well as spread awareness about the poaching of elephants.

The line, which is reminiscent of African elements, will directly contribute a percentage of each sale to organisations involved with the conservation of elephants. Yasmine Haji tells **SOLITAIRE** about her special project.



Why did you launch the Pembe Club?

My aim and purpose of founding the Pembe Club is to raise funds and awareness for the plight of the African elephant, through the sale of jewellery. I have personally been on the ground and have seen the work that the organisations are doing in Tanzania and I would really like to support them. One organisation in particular, has received death threats and has been evicted from the country three times—they risk their life for this cause on a daily basis and I have the highest respect and admiration for them. I know they could do even more if they were better funded.

The issue is so close to my heart (and home), it felt like an injustice to just sit at my desk and write a cheque. I felt I should put more effort into it and also, try to tap into a much bigger 'pool' of resources. The idea is that through the sale of my jewellery, I would reach out to others who are also touched by the cause and get involved. Collectively, we can make a difference.

Tell us about the jewellery.

The jewellery comprises hand-carved and cast designs inspired by the magnificence of tusk, tooth and horn that is being plundered from our wildlife on a daily basis, in the hope that by replicating these shapes, we are also slowly replacing them and changing the fortunes of one of the most magnificent, yet threatened creatures on Earth, the African elephant.

To be authentic, I felt the jewellery had to be as African as possible. So, I decided to use wild seeds, recycled glass, ostrich egg shells and hand-made wooden beads – all of which are personally sourced to benefit local artisans and villagers in Africa. I have also used my old East African antique coin collection and my Ethiopian Coptic crosses that I have been collecting since I was a teen, which are cast and dipped in gold and silver.

Each collection is named after a Tanzanian Game Park or Reserve including the Selous, Grumeti, Mikumi, Serengeti, Mkomazi, Udzungwa and Katavi collection.

The jewellery clearly evokes the spirit of the continent. I am trying to stir up compassion in people. This is not just about adornment, but about making a difference through a purchase. A percentage of each Pembe Club sale goes directly to selected organisations and conservation schemes such as Tusk, Wild Aid and the PAMS Foundation.

You recently launched the brand at International Jewellery London (IJL) 2015. How was the response?

Though everyone complained that IJL was quiet this year, we had a fair amount of visitors. Everyone who visited our booth was very encouraging and supportive. We were not inundated with sales, but I have no doubt that the exposure we got was great. I hope we were able to instigate people to think about the elephants and about donating to the organisations mentioned in our brochure.

You come from a family of jewellers. Have you designed the pieces yourself?

Yes, I am the third generation that is into jewellery, but I would not call myself a jeweller, rather a designer as I do not physically make, but just design and assemble the pieces together. The irony is that in my grandfather and father's time, there was such an abundance of elephants that they had to be culled. The family department store used to sell ivory and the cable address (the equivalent of today's email) was 'ivory'. Today, things are very different...

Will this be a global brand?

I need to reach out globally, because the end market or final destinations of the ivory are international, not local. I would really like to have a presence in Asia, especially China and Hong Kong as these are the main markets for ivory.

Tell us about your retail plans for the brand.

We have just launched in September and will soon be available on Jewelstreet.com among some other great brands. Currently, we have four retailers in and around London. We will also have our own e-shop shortly. I would love to see Pembe Club in retail stores around the world and also in safari lodges in Africa. ■