

Queens of Crochet

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The art of spinning a yarn has revived around the globe like never before. This is no truer than for Mpumalanga community-based project, Ukuthunga Handmade. Their knots of love are weaving into the fabric of people's lives in South Africa and abroad.

i *Interesting fact*

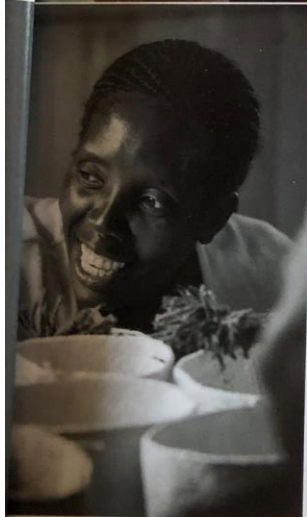
Here's the thing: Crochet is cool. So cool in fact, that the resurgence of learning and passing on this ancient skill is evident – not only in the number of courses and workshops available, but, judging by its prevalence on international catwalks, the likes

of Valentino, Oscar de la Renta and Carolina Herrera certainly seem to think so too.

And have you heard of "yarn bombing"? Check out US-based crochet artist London Kaye's work.

Interestingly, the origins of crochet are tricky to trace. The earliest known records date back to 1824, but evidence suggests that women, in particular, have been sharing crochet patterns since well before then. Having gained popularity in Europe in the 19th century, theories include that this craft evolved long before this from traditional practices in Iran, South America and China.

Born of the humble offer to teach people to crochet,



Leah Mavimbela

Ukuthunga Handmade exudes virtue. From plant baskets, storage solutions and rugs to shopping bags and doorstops are some of the beautiful artisanal products created by the hands of these women. Items in their baby range include blankets and soft toys like African animals and teddies.

"We are in a frighteningly exciting place. The organisation is evolving in a way we never imagined. Each day brings new opportunity and hope as we continue to grow," says co-founder Tana van Schalkwyk. From thread to thread, the original group of five has bloomed in the last two years to around 80 women from the Msholozhi, Backdoor, Sabie and Mphakeni communities.

Spontaneous praise and thanksgiving, through song and dance, impregnates the air in the small and simple, yet heart-warming shelter where these women live out their newly found gift. In addition to engendering an entrepreneurial spirit, this self-sufficient initiative offers a sense of purpose and hope and is flexible in how it operates. It affords the opportunity to come and go as you please, based on whether employment is secured elsewhere, be it permanent, seasonal or contract.

In-progress pieces are also often taken home for completion.

The best part: You don't have to know how to crochet. A rigorous training programme and quality control process ensure only the best quality (and exquisite) handcrafted pieces are sold. Purchasing something from Ukuthunga is acquiring a one-of-a-kind artwork. Not to mention its good cause.

Former teacher Leah Mavimbela has returned to her calling as chief of crochet training. She also leads innovation – some of her pioneering work includes the giraffe, warthog, hippo, lion and llama soft toys. "I feel that I belong. We are a community with dignity and hope that puts food on the table. The work we do has far surpassed expectation. Our vision is to generate a R1 000 supplement income for each person. The golden number to achieve financial impetus would be securing a single order of 1 000 pieces," says Leah.

The PARK's SHOPS are proud to support this local talent like Ukuthunga. We are constantly on the look out to support more local initiatives.



For more information, e-mail Natalie Ingram, Brand Manager at THE PARK's SHOP Natalie.Ingram@tourvestdestinationretail.com

Interesting facts

Did you know that by hook or by crook?

- Crochet saved lives. Many Irish relied on earnings from the crochet pieces they created during the potato famine. There were even schools formed to teach crochet to the people so they could save up the money necessary to emigrate to America.
- Corner to corner is an awesome new crochet technique. Hats off to its inventor, because it's an amazing way to crochet blankets. Corner to corner, also known as c2c, is worked diagonally, as you create "pixels" with clusters of stitches.
- There is such a thing as crochet boobs. There's been recent hype over Knitted Knockers, a charity that provides special handmade breast prostheses for women who have undergone mastectomies or other breast procedures.
- The largest ever crochet blanket measures about 120 000 square feet. This Guinness World Record for largest crochet blanket is held by Subashri Natarajan of India. She had the help of over 1 000 people to combine hundreds of 40 x 40-inch sections to create the massive piece. After the record was confirmed, much of the piece was donated to charities.