

LUXURY



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Dive into spring style



BEIRUT

ANOTHER DOOR OPENS

Bombs, revolutions and explosions won't dent the ambition and optimism of Lebanese jeweller Nada Ghazal

By ANNABEL DAVIDSON Photographs by TEREZA CERVENOVA

The Lebanese jeweller Nada Ghazal can't hear the doorbell ringing at her London townhouse despite it being loud and clear. When she realises, and after opening the door to her visitor, she excuses herself for a moment then returns with a fresh battery in her hearing aid – one you'd never know existed under her enviably chic chin-length black bob. Physically, she is a mix of Audrey Hepburn and Béatrice Dalle's Betty Blue, with a soft, lightly accented voice and a demureness that makes other women (me) feel oafish. Mentally, she's formidable.

'The doctors think my hearing was affected during the invasion of Beirut in the 1980s,' Ghazal says, barefoot and fuchsia-lipped in a dramatic black dress. The '80s may seem far enough back for the invasion to be no more than a memory now, but it's just one of an astonishing series of events in Beirut – invasions, uprisings and devastating accidents – that Ghazal has endured and bounced back from, the most recent being the explosion at the Port of Beirut on 4 August 2020, which destroyed her headquarters and her home and killed 218 people.

Still, Beirut remains Ghazal's constant inspiration. A recent collection, My Muse, is a homage to the city at its most beautiful, reflecting on the domes and arches of its architecture, the blossoms that paint its streets pink in the spring, the decorated ceilings of its mosques. All set in hand-brushed gold, the rings are organic and undulating in shape, and pendants are soft puddles of gold sprinkled with gemstones, while bright enamel in pinks, greens and blues adorns surfaces. It's a love letter to a city she still adores despite everything.

'Our office is just 900 metres from the port,' she says of that August day three and a half years ago. 'It's one space, comprising the office, the showroom and the workshop. Usually, I leave the office at 6pm, but this day I was delayed because of some paperwork. If I hadn't been delayed, I would have been at the port itself exactly at the time of the explosion, on my way home.'

The fact that Ghazal and her 18 colleagues survived unscathed seems miraculous, but when she shows footage from office security cameras at the time of the blast, it's barely believable. There she is, crouching in front of a huge iron safe withdrawing extra cash, before standing up a moment before the impact of the blast reaches her. 'If I hadn't stood up, the safe door would have crushed me.' Entire walls of glass and metal twist, pop and shatter all around, and huge pieces of jewellery-making machinery are tossed in the air like toys. The explosion, caused by a fire at a warehouse storing more than 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate, has been called the largest non-nuclear explosion ever, and was felt not only across Lebanon, but in neighbouring countries. But why was she withdrawing cash? 'We Lebanese, in a time of panic, grab cash and passports. I had heard a warplane and just thought I should be prepared.' Warplanes in Lebanese airspace aren't uncommon, but the noise was still unsettling.

Ghazal's first thought was, naturally, to reach her husband, Elias, and three children, Antoun (turning 15), Malak (13) and Kayan (turning 11). When phone signals were back up, half an hour after the blast, she reached her husband and told him her building had been bombed. His reply was incredulous: it was *his* building that had been bombed. Rumours were rampant – there had been an assassination, a bomb had been dropped –

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and no one had realised at that point that the disaster had been a deadly, but accidental, blast at Warehouse 12.

Ghazal rushed home to find her children also miraculously unharmed, despite camera footage from her house showing them all sitting on a sofa in a room that literally implodes around them. The family would head straight to her mother's house in the mountains, where a photograph was taken of a multitude of little cousins hunkering down on cushions as their temporary bed.

'The next day, a dozen of us met back at the office and began to try and clean,' Ghazal remembers. It seems extraordinary that people would even attempt to enter blasted buildings so soon, but the Lebanese are accustomed to getting back on their feet in the most trying of circumstances. 'We had only moved into the space in 2018,' Ghazal says. 'I was meant to open a new flagship store in downtown Beirut in November 2019, but in October that year, we had a revolution against the government, and I decided not to go ahead with it.' So the new headquarters joined the workshop, with the office, showroom and atelier in the same space.

Despite the extraordinary difficulties in rebuilding, Ghazal and her team did manage to get the workshop and office up and running again. 'You can't get money out of your bank account because the banks are nearly bankrupt,' she says. Everything has to be paid for in cash. 'The country ran out of glass, so for months we

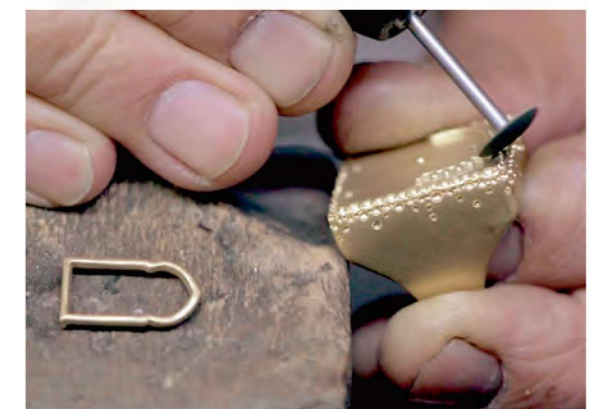
just had plastic for windows. I kept paying all my staff. They are my priority. My chef d'atelier, who is 58 and has been working since he was 15 years old, has lost everything – he has no savings or insurance, just the salary we pay him. Everything in his bank account has gone.' But Ghazal is determined to continue having everything made by hand in Beirut, and growing her business and her team there.

'I can't open a flagship store in Beirut now, though,' she says sadly. 'Every time I invest money in Lebanon, something happens. But it's our 20th year of business now, and I want to have a shop.'

Beirut's loss is London's gain, however, with a Nada Ghazal flagship store set to open here this year. 'We chose London for many reasons,' she says. 'It's a great



FAR LEFT Nada Ghazal at her London townhouse. FROM BELOW Gold and gemstone rings. Inside the Beirut workshop. Gold, champagne diamond and blue diamond necklace (nadaghazal.com)



place for the children to grow up. And I feel London is not only a bridge between Lebanon and the US, but also between Lebanon and the Middle East, where many of our clients are.'

What can we expect from this first UK store? 'I want it to involve different experiences. I want to bring out Lebanese hospitality. We'll have our own special tea, our own special desserts. I want people to feel that they're being hosted, to sit down and relax.'

It will also show her latest collection, Doors of Opportunity. Inspired by a vibrantly painted garden door that she discovered by chance one day while house hunting in London, it's a collection replete with doors, locks and gates, all symbolic of new beginnings and the power of transformation. Butterflies picked out in gemstones flit inside the doorway of a pendant, and tiny gemstone keyholes adorn voluminous brushed-gold rings. The classic Lebanese archway forms hoop earrings and rings, while a door knocker in the form of a heart adorns the Knock for Love ring.

It's a life-affirming, spirit-lifting, feel-good collection that embodies who its designer is – a woman who despite suffering through seemingly insurmountable obstacles, believes in the power of positivity. No matter what befalls her beloved Beirut, it will be rebuilt and will continue to inspire her. Meanwhile, London welcomes her. ●