

# Pilgrims bring boom times for Iraqi gem traders



A man browses for rings at a jeweller's in the main market of Iraq's holy city of Najaf

## Najaf

**Every time** Mohammed al-Ghoraifi visits Najaf he returns with another precious stone on his finger. Like for many pilgrims visiting the Iraqi Shiite holy city, buying a gemstone ring is part and parcel of the experience.

Ghoraifi, sporting two weighty rings on the right hand and a third on the left on his latest visit, said they formed only a modest part of his collection.

The collection may have cost him a small fortune, but "the stones have enormous value, whatever the cost", said the 60-year-old pilgrim from Bahrain, wearing a white robe and bedouin scarf.

Ghoraifi's passion for gemstone rings from Najaf, set with agate stones, rubies or turquoise, is shared by most of the pilgrims, primarily from

Iran, who visit the city to pray at Imam Ali's shrine.

Customers come from "Saudi Arabia, Iran, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Lebanon..." said shopkeeper Fayez Abu Ghoneim, 45.

In a city where several family businesses are renowned for the size and cut of their gemstones, pilgrims amble into Abu Ghoneim's shop right after visiting the mausoleum of Prophet Mohamed's son-in-law.

"Many of them buy a ring or a rosary as a souvenir of their pilgrimage for family or friends back home," said Abu Ghoneim.

## Competition from abroad

In Najaf's main market, strategically located facing the golden gate of the mausoleum, the Shiite religious calendar controls the life of gemstone

traders like Abu Ghoneim.

Major religious ceremonies for which millions pour into Najaf are boom times, especially as prices shoot up with the increase in demand, sending the most prized rings into the thousands of dollars price bracket.

But not all pilgrims are ready to fork out large sums.

Issa Mussa, a trader in his 70s, said business had declined because the market was being flooded with cheap imports from Turkey, China, Thailand and Iran.

"Now I've turned into a ring salesman whereas I used to be a jeweller," said Mussa.

As for Ali Anwar, he is proud to carry on the artisanal tradition of Najaf, which comes at a price.

"Turkish or Thai jewellery is sold by the gram, whereas a Najaf ring is sold individually,

for between 40,000 and 50,000 dinars," or about \$35 to \$40 (29 to 33 euros), not including the price of the stone, he said.

Some clients bring in their foreign-manufactured rings for the stones to be recut in Najaf's workshops.

Imported rings are sold by the armful, at a little over \$10 apiece, during major religious holidays such as the Shiite holy month of Muharram or the annual commemoration of Arbaeen.

Customers and window shoppers pack the alleyways of the market, a maze of shops built in the yellow stone of the Karbala region and with the names printed in blue mosaic.

The market with its Islamic-inspired architecture plays host in the off-season mostly to Najaf's religious scholars and their students, both

local and non-Iraqi, who are estimated to number 25,000.

Many of them wear one or several rings, most often on the right hand -- a sign of being a Shiite Muslim imitating Imam Ali.

## For health and good luck

For pilgrims, the purchase of a Najaf ring is seen by many as the final rite.

As Sheikh Jassem al-Mandalawi, 42, explained to *AFP*, certain rocks bring "pardon, such as onyx from Yemen, while emerald is a portent of success".

A ring with a red agate stone or a sapphire can sell for 100,000 dinars or more, he said.

The "must-have" item is the Najaf quartz, a stone that looks like glass but is solid as rock, and which is found in the desert that encircles the

city, explained Mohammed al-Shamarati, 30, a trader in precious stones.

Fadel Abu Abdullah, 50, said the stones he sells also have therapeutic powers.

"Yellow sapphire, for example, is good for the heart rate and can also treat jaundice in newborns," he said, while other stones can keep "bad fortune and evil spirits" at bay.

Shamarati said young single women bought his rings to help them find a husband.

For Abu Abbas, a 40-year-old from a remote area outside Najaf, a ring engraved with a verse from the Koran or one of the 99 names of Allah (God) can also protect the wearer.

"I often travel through desert areas and could be attacked with guns at any time," he said, as he scoured the shops for the right stone. (*AFP*)

## An ancient Chinese fishing community washes ashore

A general view of boats from the Tanka community moored on a river in Datang, in southern China's Guangdong province.



## Datang

**A**long southern China's snaking rivers, an ancient fishing community that once lived and worked exclusively on the water has been finding its way to land.

Wooden fishing boats, wispy nets and bamboo steering poles are typical of the traditions of the "Tanka" -- the term for generations of rural Chinese who have eked out an aquatic existence.

They are not an ethnic minority, but rather so named for their unique customs and egg-shaped vessels (Tanka, or "danjia," is homophonous to the Chinese word for egg).

In Guangdong province's Datang town, home to the country's largest surviving Tanka population, this way of life risks evaporating as younger Tanka seek more prosperous opportunities on dry

land.

Chen Yongfu, a 45-year-old Datang native, grew up on a fishing boat but now works at a restaurant in town.

"I moved out from the boat long ago, after I graduated from school," Chen said. "I went to work in bigger towns and never returned to this kind of fishing boat life."

He recalled that even weddings used to be held on the boats, jammed with tables and guests, creating "a pretty lively scene."

"Now," Chen said, "there is no wedding culture for the Tanka anymore as all the younger generations moved onto land to live just like everyone else."

Yet despite government incentives for relocating into homes on land, some older Tanka are holding fast to their ancestral occupation.

Lin Ziqiang, 43, and his wife, surnamed Chen, take their boat out to fish at sunrise every day, coming back to the shore next to a towering bridge at around 1pm.

Later in the early evening, the couple sells their fresh catch at the market by the Beijiang River, making between 3,000 and 4,000 yuan (\$460 and \$610) a month.

It is the only occupation Lin and Chen have ever known. They met in the Tanka boats as children, and Lin's father still joins them sometimes on the water.

Their own children's lives will be different: one 22-year-old son is working in the city, while their 19-year-old is studying at university.

The community today is a collision of these two cultures -- the older fishers and the younger Tanka taking to land.