

ADAM LEVANT

For the Man
of the Middle East



THE BIGGEST RUG IN THE WORLD

IT SOUNDS LIKE THE TITLE OF A CHILDHOOD BOOK, THE TYPE FILLED WITH PAGES OF HIGH SPIRITED ADVENTURES. BUT, ALTHOUGH IT ISN'T A BOOK, THE STORY BEHIND THIS GARGANTUAN CARPET IS CERTAINLY PACKED WITH ADVENTURE... AND IT IS FOR SALE.



'Samovar' is a luxurious rug and antiques boutique on Beirut's chic Park Avenue. The quiet arrival in December 2011 was followed by the actual opening in April of this year. It was during the inauguration of the boutique, which presented 'Renaissance' a world of interiors by Randa Kuzbari and 'Rug Star', a collection of rugs by German designer Jürgen Dahlmanns, that proprietor Mr. Saraj Hindi revealed he was in possession of the biggest rug in the world.

The Hindi family are no strangers to rugs and carpets. According to Saraj Hindi, his grandfather was a collector of rugs and carpets. But it was his father who, in 1929, was among the first to trade in carpets and rugs,

when he established his first shop in the port area of Beirut. The business was a success and in, or around, 1953 a royal request was received, as Saraj explains.

'The late King Abdul Aziz of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia requested the company supply handmade carpets and rugs for both the Mecca and Medina mosques. After that, requests came in to supply carpets for palaces and other important buildings.'

Mr Hindi's father passed away in 1968, leaving Saraj and his brother in charge of the business. Just prior to the official start of Lebanon's Civil War, the brothers wisely decided to transport the business to Kuwait. It

was a lucrative move. The store, now named The Persian Exhibition Centre, slowly expanded to become the largest carpet shop in Kuwait. Today it is still in business.

'By 1988 we knew that there was a rug being worked on in Iran, which was reputed to be the largest one in the world. We wanted to purchase it but we were told it was a special order for a VIP,' Saraj says. 'A few years later we were contacted again. This time the rug was for sale and they wanted us to view it in Iran.'

Viewing the rug came with monetary conditions...to the tune of \$50,000. 'The rug was so big that its owners would have to demolish

a workshop wall in order to remove the carpet from the premises and have it transported to a location big enough to fit the rug when unrolled,' Saraj says. The Hindi family agreed to pay the fee only on the condition that, once rolled out, the carpet met the exact specifications and quality that had been described. 'We made a contract to that effect. Once we saw the rug we were satisfied and made the purchase.'

Clearly this is a huge rug. Its dimensions, gargantuan at 32.2 m long by 29.68 m wide, posed a problem. How was the rug to be transported from Nain, near Isfahan Iran, to Kuwait without paying the costly export fees on carpet exports, imposed at that time by the Iranian government? Smuggling, which Saraj says was rife at that time, was one possibility. But the size of this particular rug put paid to the idea. 'It wasn't something we wanted to do. So we waited,' Saraj explains.

'All good things come to those who wait'... well for the Hindi family at least. In 1992, after three years, the Iranian government lifted the restriction of carpet exports. The biggest rug in the world was now able to make an historical journey to Kuwait and to the Hindi family business.

The rug's measurements were duly checked by the Guinness Book of Records in November 2010. Clearly, the size alone makes this rug special. But there are other factors, which contribute to this too. The rug was worked on over a 15 year period - 1973 to 1988 - and its warp and weft contains 1200kg of cotton. Add to this 3600kg of the finest quality wool and 800kg of pure natural silk. It took 125 people in shifts of 30 people to work on it, which included wool dyers, helpers and designers.

The rug weighs in at a hefty 3000kg. Deft mathematicians will be quick to realize the aforementioned figures come to more than this.



'When the rug is being manufactured, the pile is made longer than it is on the actual finished product. The pile is cut back and made even. The 3000kg is the actual weight of the rug after wastage is removed,' Saraj explains

The rug's cream coloured background, with hues of blues, beiges and brown, are set off by a circular, four medallion design theme, with a central, diamond shape medallion. But why was this epic and beautiful rug woven in the first place. Speculation abounds.

'We heard that it was intended for Saudi Arabia but, due to the Iraq-Iran War, Arab Gulf countries later cut off relations with Iran. So the buyer no longer wanted to take it. To order such a carpet, something had to be paid and perhaps the owners didn't want to break with them [buyers] since they [would-be recipients] had made a down payment. The Iranian carpet manufacturer tried in vain to contact them. According to the manufacturer, a final letter was sent stating that the carpet would be sold with the payment forfeited. There was no response. We were the first to ask

about the rug and the first to take it,' Saraj explains.

Saraj brushes aside reports that the biggest carpet or rug is actually is the one located in Sheik Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi. 'That carpet is made from many rugs that have a continuation of design. Iranians were flown in to sew it altogether to form one large rug. This means that it was not woven on one loom. The rug we own was woven on one loom, which is now defunct as it is far too big to be used again,' he says.

The rug is now rolled and stored in The Persian Carpet Exhibition and is for sale. 'We have been promoting it since 2010,' says Saraj, who, with the help of 30 workers and a crane, transports the rug to a sports centre each year, in order to display it for prospective buyers.

'We want to sell it, as it is money that is not moving, although it is an investment as it is constantly increasing in value. We are attached to it. But if we do sell it, at least I can say "I once owned the biggest rug in the world".'