



SILVER LINING

JUSTINE KELLY travels far off the beaten Colombian track to an historic town where a lost jewellery art is the lifeblood

Luis Benthon holds an intricate silver ring to the single 60-watt light globe in his cement home-cum-workshop and squints to make out any imperfections. His disheveled appearance resembles a mechanic more than a fine artisan.

Benthon and his two sons, Jhon and Jose, are a typical Africo-Euro-Indigenous-Caribe-Momposino family of filigranas (silver or goldsmiths) in Santa Cruz de Mompox (or Mompox) – a legendary Colombian river town of whitewash buildings.

The UNESCO Heritage-listed town is located on an inland island, 125 kilometres from the Caribbean Sea. The town sits in a depression, which may account for the eerily silent lightning strikes that are constant in the evening skies. Settled in 1537 by missionaries, who blended their beliefs with the superstitions of local Quimbaya (also Kimbaya) tribes including pacts with the devil, Mompox was one of the richest towns in Latin America and the first to gain its independence from Spain when the slaves sided with Simon Bolivar in 1810.

In the last century, as the river ceased to be a transport route, Mompox lost its status and wealth. It became isolated from the rest of Colombia, so today the only way to reach the townships and island is by rickety ferry. It's still a place where old ladies sit outside of crumbling mansions fanning themselves, while farmers bring in their local produce on donkeys to sell door-to-door. In fact, Noble Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez set some of his stories in this very town.

Luis Benthon recalls his grandfather having a ranch and being a white man with blue eyes, but he is not sure of his family's origins. He began to learn the art of filigrana from his wife's family.

As the evening lightning flashes through the window, his son Jhon is cleaning the antique equipment that is marked 'Made in Spain' which, in fact, hasn't been made anywhere for 80 years. He tells me he wouldn't be anything else, except maybe a professional football player.

An object such as an elaborate silver ring can take up to three days' work and begins its life as a raw nugget, smelted by fire produced by a gas pedal pump. The filigranas use sheer strength and body weight to bludgeon the white-hot silver through the measuring holes in an iron frame until it becomes a wire of an exact size, usually a millimetre or less depending on the design. An elaborate ring may require half a dozen different sizes of wire, which are produced individually to exact measurements, differing in thickness by only fractions of a millimetre – which is reheated and twisted into shapes and filed into sizes.

Every ounce of dust is swept up, weighed and kept in a safe – every speck is precious. The next step is to place the dozens of pieces

into the wire frame and smoulder the metal so that every point gleams.

Each filigrana works independently on contracts with buyers and within the Benthon family each member makes their own specialty pieces. Jhon, for example, makes four or five different styles of rings, while Jose makes mostly bracelets and earrings. Most designs are standard, but if you have a specific or personal design, you can draw it up and give the filigranas a few days to make it.

Not everyone likes the fastidious work. Their neighbour, fifty-something Jose Pupo, was losing his eyesight in his 30s when he quit. He admits he never really had the patience for finicky work, which is evident from the rusting equipment in his backyard.

Another drawback for the silver workers is that filigrana pieces are sold by weight rather than how much time and skill is put into making them. In Mompox, you can get a stunning piece for about \$30, which will be sold in Cartagena (around 200 kilometres north-east) for hundreds.

I put this injustice to Jhon, who shrugs it away. "It's a hard life but we are happy with the way things have always been."

That's Mompox for you, preserved in time and tradition. ●

ABOUT FILIGRANA

Around 70 per cent of the Mompox population is self-employed as a filigrana, working out of their living rooms or courtyards. The art of filigrana dates back to ancient

Arabia and was brought to Spain by the Moors and then by the Spanish to Mompox, where the Quimbaya Indians were already making complex amulets from silver. A handful

of towns in Ecuador and India still use the technique, but not to the quality and originality of Mompox. Designs are distinct, thanks to afro-indigenous influences here.



IT'S A PLACE WHERE OLD LADIES SIT OUTSIDE OF CRUMBLING MANSIONS FANNING THEMSELVES

