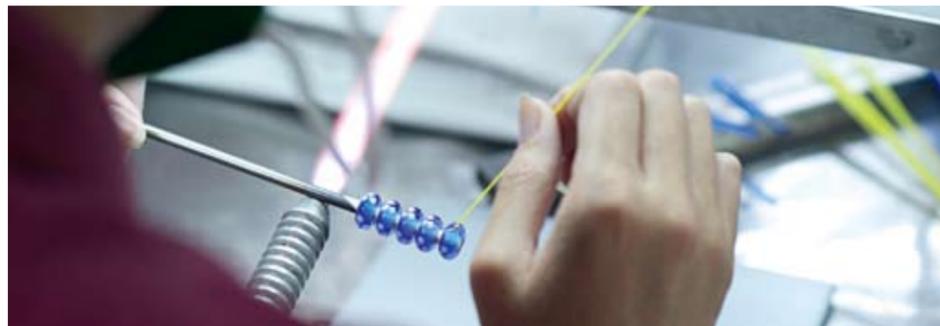


# PANDORA'S CHARM

From Copenhagen to Bangkok, *High Life Shop!*'s Nikki Dodds follows the creative journey of a piece of Pandora jewellery and even tries her hand at making a charm. Once you've finished reading how she got on, turn to page 12 to win a Pandora bracelet worth over £1,200 or one of the five runners-up prizes worth up to £133 each!



**From top:** Nikki has a go at making a charm while Paun, the Pandora expert, looks on; a Pandora glass-blower/charm-maker shows how it's done; each Murano bead is individually sculpted and decorated with hot glass and a steady hand; a Pandora worker solders on the gold heart and letters needed to create the I Love You charm, page 29/ £42.50

After driving down a long and dusty Bangkok road for 20 minutes, with only stray dogs, makeshift cafes and street-food stands for company, I finally spot the sign for our final destination Gemopolis and experience a mixture of both relief and amusement. Relief that all of the aforementioned dogs have managed to escape with their furry little lives, and amusement that Thailand's jewellery enclave is *actually* called Gemopolis and it's not simply the affectionate nickname I had originally thought. Plus, it sits just down the road from Gemtown. Brilliant.

## GEMOPOLIS

We drive on through high security gates and past various checkpoints until we've been rendered safe enough to enter an area packed with jewels and gemstones galore. That's when Gemopolis opens itself up like a theme park. The streets are cobbled and clean, ping pong tables and miniature golf courses sit in the grounds of huge factories, each individually guarded by security teams who smile and point us in the direction of our jewellery factory of choice – Pandora.

I'm spending the day in Gemopolis, with Pandora, as I have been invited to see first-hand how their gorgeously intricate bracelets, charms, earrings and rings make it from design to completion. As we arrive at the air-conditioned factory (huge relief on what is a scorching Thai day) we are greeted by Aom and Ning who work for Pandora's visitor's centre and will be my guides to the world of Pandora. After exchanging 'hellos' I am excitedly told that after the factory tour I am going to be able to have a go at making my own charm. I nod enthusiastically and tell them that it all sounds great but as I look through the adjacent window into the charm-making/glass-blowing department all I see are blow torches, safety goggles and highly-trained hands close to open flames and immediately start to fret about what I am letting myself in for.

## FROM CONCEPT TO CREATION

Aom and Ning giggle as I express my concern, tell me I have nothing to worry about and then quickly whisk me off to the Development and Design area to see where Pandora jewellery begins its life. It's in this small room that five CAD (computer aided design) workers input and tweak the design into a 3D form. The designs are regularly sent over from Copenhagen, Denmark where Pandora's main designers Lisbeth Enø Larsen and Lone Frandsen are based, and the process of taking their ideas from simply a sketch into a solid resin master model begins.

Lisbeth and Lone, alongside Mads Trolle and Lee Antony Gray, are responsible for all of Pandora's designs and have worked for the company for 14 and 20 years respectively. When I catch up with them at their Copenhagen office they tell me that when they started working for Pandora there were only 10 people in the company (there are now over 4,500) and up until a few years ago they were making these first resin masters by hand. 'What's great about the work going on in Thailand is that the 3D process and the technology allows us to be much more intricate with our designs', says Lisbeth. 'We can see in 3D form how the piece we have designed looks and if it's going to work as, say, a charm.' This technology is not only making it easier for the designers but the speed of which a piece of jewellery can be made is allowing Pandora to grow exponentially as a business. In the last 12 months they have turned in a profit of £75m, not bad for a company that in 1982 was simply selling imported jewellery from a small basement shop on the outskirts of Copenhagen.

## ONLY THE BEST

Back in Bangkok, and after being walked through the various technologies, we move to the gemstone department to see the work that goes into making sure the precious stones used in Pandora pieces are flawless. Teams of trained gem inspectors are sitting at tables that glisten with diamonds, pearls, rubies and every other sparkly stone you could possibly

imagine. As they lift each one, weigh and inspect it for clarity, colour and size all I can think is that their eyesight must be amazing, as each day this department manually inspects 500,000 gemstones, however, only 200,000 make it through the inspection, the rest go back to the supplier.

As we make our way down to the glass-blowing/charm-making floor through the rubber-moulding, wax-casting and silver and gold casting rooms and past the cutting, cleaning and polishing rooms what strikes me is the sheer amount of effort that goes into every part of the Pandora process. Absolutely everything is done by hand, there are no machines to help with the minutiae and, as I am about to find out, the skill involved at every step is incredible.

## MAKING A CHARM

Before I know it I am being led over to a table in the charm-making room, which is lined with blowtorches, and am handed a pair of safety goggles with a smile from Paun, the Pandora employee whose workstation I am about to take over. I initially panic and insist that she shows me how it's done before I have a go and, of course, she picks up a piece of Murano glass and effortlessly twists and turns it while holding the flame at an appropriate length and angle. In approximately three minutes she has created a perfectly shaped circular bead. She finishes with a flourish, looks at me, grins and hands me the torch. What starts off well quickly turns sour as I don't twist the glass quickly enough and it melts into a big blob on her bench. My second attempt is better but this could be due to the fact that Paun has decided she needs to take matters into her own hands and grabs my arms and does the rotating for me. It's still difficult but as I heat and move the glass a circular shape starts to form, it's not perfect but everyone seems very impressed with my first attempt, although, the giggles tell me that they might just be being polite.

## AFFORDABLE LUXURY

I thank Paun for her help and leave feeling pretty proud of myself and my wonky charm, but the best part of my tour is yet to come. As I am being shown around the goldsmiths' room, on the way to the exit, I notice that someone is putting the final touches to the I Love You charm, which is sold on board (page 29/ £42.50). I race over to his workstation and spend a few excited minutes watching him solder on each individual letter and heart.

After spending a day with Pandora it's easy to see how they have become the 3rd largest jewellery brand in the world, beaten only by Tiffany and Cartier. Affordable luxury is their motto but after seeing the skill and dedication their employees put into each part of the process it becomes apparent that what makes them stand apart from their competitors is sheer craftsmanship. Oh, yes, and very good eyesight. **Go Shop!**



**From left:** Bracelet with clips and heart charm (featuring all available charms); leather bracelet with flip-flop charm, £49.50; bracelet with clips and heart charm, £99; I love you charm, £42.50; ladies' essential charms (set of three), £59. All available on page 29.

SCARLET PAGE