

# in the bag

Carina resident Donna Webster's life reads like a travel brochure and every woman's dream all rolled into one – she produces handbags for a living. **Belinda Glindemann reports.**



**BAG IT** Donna Webster, *left*, has designed an accessory with ties to the Far East, *right*.

DONNA Webster's resume is so varied and interesting, and her personality so bright and engaging, that your coffee goes cold listening to her life story.

She's on the verge of really big things with her unique Kimono Collections handbags. That's right, top-end handbags made from real Japanese wedding kimonos. She refers to the bags as "rare wearable art".

To understand her inspiration, you have to step back in time more than 20 years to when Donna was an 18-year-old dancer and wannabe actress based in Japan.

"That's where I fell in love with the Asian culture," she says. "Japan really mesmerises me."

Drama and the performing arts were early influences in Donna's life but she soon moved

into teaching, completing a Bachelor of Education and then her Masters back in her homeland Australia. An opportunity to return to Japan to teach arose later and she grabbed it with both hands.

That's where her life's path took an abrupt left turn, then a right, and then a U-turn at the lights. She fell into work at Noosa with a tour company, started up Dynamite Dance Productions, then went into human resources with an international hotel chain based in Borneo and then Singapore.

And then came the kimonos.

It was in 1997 when Donna found her first authentic silk wedding kimono, or 'uchikake', in a Japanese antiques shop.

"It was a very precious, precious thing," she recalls.

Donna says some Japanese brides pay up to \$10,000 just to hire a kimono for their wedding and brides are expected to change up to four times on their special day.

So she began collecting them. She had 40 kimonos in camphor laurel storage chests, each of them blessed by Shinto priests on the brides' wedding days, when she realised something special had to be done with them.

Initially she thought they'd make great wall hangings. Then she found a tailor in Thailand and went about incorporating pieces of kimono fabric into clothing. When that didn't work, the prototype kimono bag was born.

"I thought 'this has got a life, it has got energy,'" she says. "But I'm not a seamstress, I'm an ideas girl."

Two years of trying different factories in

Thailand and Australia (the only Brisbane machine able to handle the contradictory combination of heavy embroidered silk and leather was devastated by a freak hailstorm) only to come up with more headaches almost had the spark stubbed out.

However, three more trips to China and another trip from Hong Kong to Japan uncovered the dream team of craftsmen to make her own dream a reality.

Japanese artisan Tone-san painstakingly produces each bag by hand, a Queensland wood craftsman hand cuts and turns every wooden handle, and a Gympie-based company brands the handles with the Kimono Collections Classic insignia. It's a time-consuming, international logistics nightmare, but Donna wouldn't have it any other way.



Belinda

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Location The South Bank Lifestyle  
Market plays host to talented  
young things like Tyne Reiken



Donna can produce seven or eight bags from one kimono through careful cutting. They come in two styles in the Classic range, kiko and hana, and no two bags are ever alike.

"Each handbag is alluring and special in its own wonderfully individual way – just like every woman," she says.

Depending on the quality of the kimono, the bags range from \$1800 to \$2200. As an added touch, every handbag supports a charity that supports women.

And no scrap of fabric is wasted. Donna has another Japanese expert, Kumada-san, turning offcuts into small, hand-stitched teddy bears.

Donna says her first handbag sale was in November to a lawyer she sat next to on a hotel bus halfway across the world in the

very early days of Kimono Collections. He absolutely loved the prototype bag she was carrying and waited six months for them to go into production so he could buy one for his wife.

Other kimono bag owners have come from diverse parts of the world and are generally people who have bumped into Donna or others carrying their kimono bag.

"I envisage that each one-of-a-kind handbag will be coveted by daughters, nieces and collectors of rare art," she says. "They're so special, they are family heirlooms."

In a coup for Kimono Collections, last month Donna took part in Fashion Exposed Sydney – Australasia's biggest buying event for the fashion industry – with pleasing results.

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