

## Istalifi Pottery

Istalif sits nestled in the foothills of the Hindu Kush, around an hour's drive north of Kabul.

The whole district of Istalif has a population of around 25,000 people, made up mostly of Tajiks. Growing fruit and vegetables has been one of the main industries in Istalif for hundreds of years. On the slopes above the town, villagers still have small vegetable plots and orchards of pomegranate, mulberry, peach and apple trees.

The main village of Istalif was traditionally divided into eleven neighborhoods, each one known for a particular craft, such as pottery, leather-work, or weaving. Although the boundaries of these areas has mostly part broken down, different families still make sataranji (a local type of woven rug), patoos (wool-woven shawls), and pustins (sheepskin jackets) within their homes. Weaving continues to be an important local industry and many homes still have looms that stretch across their courtyards for the production of carpets and rugs during the warmer months.

The Kolalan, or pottery neighbourhood, is still a distinct area north of the bazaar, located next to the Ishan Sahib shrine. Today, 60 potters families reside here and continue a pottery tradition that has changed little over the last four hundred years – the secrets of the glazes and firing techniques have been handed down from father to son for generations. The whole family is involved in the production process; the family head is usually the master potter “Ustad” while his sons are his apprentices, Shagerd. The women of the family are involved in the incised patterns and designs that create the distinct decoration of Istalifi pottery.

This popularity of Istalif as a destination for travellers stretches back centuries. Zahir Uddin Muhammed Babur (AD 1483-1530), descendant of Timur and Genghiz Khan and founder of the Mughal Empire, wrote that ‘there are few places known to equal Istalif.’ After capturing Kabul in 1504, he travelled widely in Afghanistan and beyond, but always held a special affection for this place of peace and tranquility - a place where ‘when the tress blossom, no place in the world equals it’. Istalif was a pastoral idyll for a man who was no stranger to hardship while on campaign- he describes with great affection the abundance of ‘verdant, pleasant small garden plots’



where 'the water is so pure and cold, there is no need for iced water'. It was here that he bought a garden, called the Bagh-i-Kalan, and spent days resting, drinking and feasting. A keen nature-lover, Babur took great delight in the 'huge plane trees that give magnificent shade...oak groves home to the only oaks in the mountains to the west of Kabul...a large grove of Judas trees- the only ones in the province'.

Like many men before and since, Babur found relief from worldly affairs in the simple pleasures of gardening; he constructed elaborate benches to create better views of his Judas trees, installed a platform on a hill surrounded with willow trees, and constructed a grape garden. No stranger to getting his own way however, he ruled his garden with the same iron fist he ruled an empire: "A one-mile stream used to run higgledy-piggledy until I ordered it to be straightened. Now it is a beautiful place."

The ancient techniques of Istalifi pottery have changed little over the years, despite decades of conflict. A mixture of clays are collected in the mountains above Istalif and brought to the workshops by donkey. A fluffy plant fibre called gul-e loch, similar to thistle down, is added to the clay to make it more workable. All these elements are mixed together by the potters through a process of sieving, dampening, and kneading, known as 'pugging', with their feet for 2-4 hours.

The next step is the shaping of the clay on kick wheels. Traditionally, the potters make a variety of bowls and plates, although they have branched out in to candlesticks, mugs, and other ceramic pieces. A family usually works together; the eldest potter on the wheel, his younger brothers preparing the clay. In such a way, they can produce as many as fifty bowls an hour.

Three different glazes are applied to their pots before firing. The most popular, sundur, is a beautiful, but also highly toxic lead glaze. Recently, through work with the Turquoise Mountain and other international organizations, the potters have come to realise the danger of using lead. In the past, the potters used a safer alkaline glaze called ishkar, made from the ash of a mountain bush found north of the Hindu Kush. Mixed with copper this produces a beautiful turquoise glaze for which Istalif has long been famous.



The potters fire their pots in traditional wood-burning kilns made with bricks and clay. The kilns are fired for between five and seven hours, requiring over a thousand pounds of wood. The potters pack as many pots as they can into the kiln both to save money and to better hold the heat. The pots are stacked upside down in the kiln separated using small tripod stilts which have traditionally left small unglazed scars on the bowls. Today new technologies, such as unleaded glazes, new stacking methods and gas kilns are helping to improve the quality of the pottery and adapt for the modern market.

