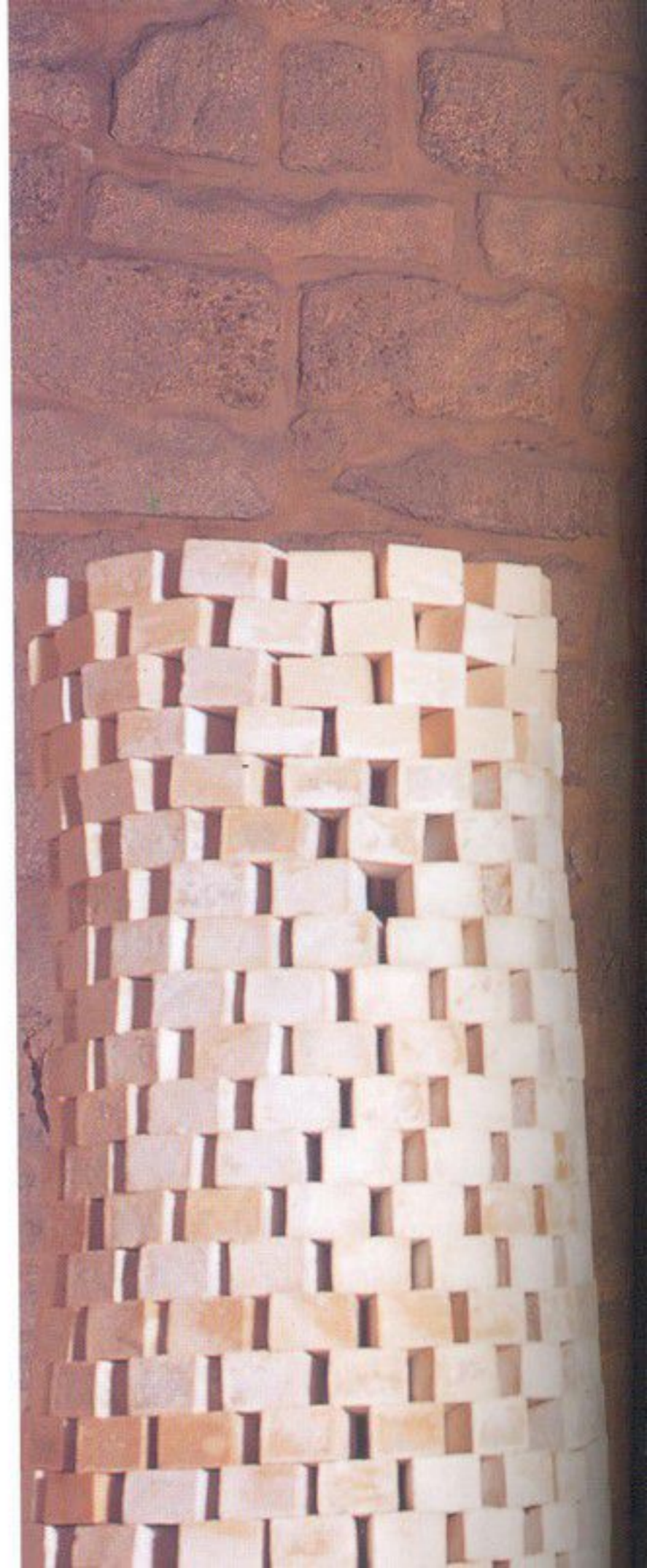


museum

# awash with history

the audi soap museum in saida



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Located in the Southern Lebanese city of Saida, the story behind The Audi Foundation and its Soap Museum is entwined with treasured family memories, as well as a passion to extol the virtues of forgotten craftsmanship. The rebirth of this precious building has led to unprecedented cultural regeneration and a resurgence of interest in the city's heritage.

TEXT BY HELEN ASSAF  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANSOUR DIB







Venturing South from Beirut, the relative ease of the coastal road suddenly gives way to the city of Saida, a Mediterranean port where the Phoenicians, Crusaders, Ottomans and French have all left their mark. Nestled within the city's *medina* - located between Moutran Street on one side and the pedestrian street of El-Chakrieh on the other - over the past seven years the Soap Museum has helped to fulfill the vision of The Audi Foundation, whose aim is to restore the historical value of Saida, revive the social and cultural heritage of its *medina* in which it is located, and attract tourism to the city.

Raymond Audi, the man behind The Audi Foundation, is also the head of Bank Audi, a member of the Audi Saradar Group and a dominant force on the Lebanese banking market and beyond. Through the family foundation, Audi has initiated

projects which have nurtured wealth of a very different kind that of the archaeological heritage and cultural history of the former family home and the city that surrounds it.

The Audis bought the house-come-soap-factory in the late 19th century. Originally built in the 17th century by the Hammoud family, it was just one of several residences created by Ottoman *aghas* (military officers) of Maghreb origin - whose legacy to Saida's architectural heritage also includes the 18th-century Debbané Palace.

By the 1950s, the Audis had expanded the family currency exchange business into a bank composed of several branches and so they left the family home to pursue greater fortune in Beirut. However, the soap factory continued production until the civil war forced it to close around 1990.



When the years of fighting eventually ended, the factory bore many scars. Squatters - a widespread phenomenon at the time - were eventually evicted with the help of Saida politician Bahia Hariri, but when Audi reclaimed ownership of the family property in 1996, it was in a state of utter disrepair.

While cleaning the property, the long-forgotten vaults were discovered and the original beauty of the building slowly began to appear, recounts Carole Azar, Director of the Audi Foundation. Delighted by this discovery, Audi called the archaeologist Dr Leila Badr, who assembled a team to work on the research and renovation of the property including the architects Youssef Haidar and Nada Zeini. Recalling the early days of the Audi project, Zeini - who joined the project with a formidable decade-long track record designing museums

in Paris - says, "There was a lot of trash and the level of the vaults was covered... We had to take it all off to arrive at the actual height."

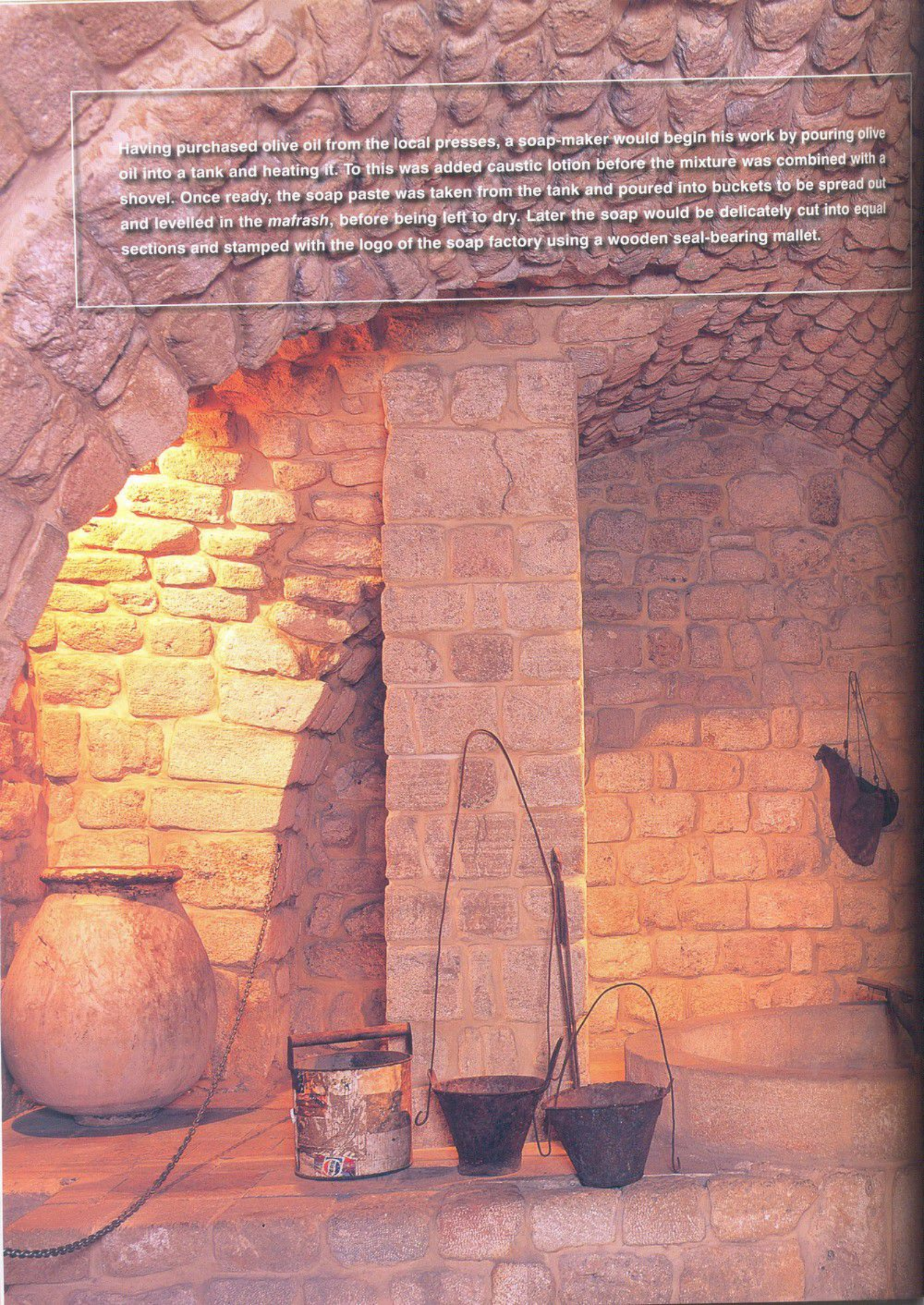
Another expert, Yasmine Makaron, was appointed to undertake a historical study of the building. During her investigations, she discovered that part of the factory dated back to the 13th century. Subsequent excavations yielded

Previous pages: The traditional way of drying soap was to stack blocks in towers. A single worker could make up to 17 towers a day. These 'silent sentries' would stand for 40 days before being dismantled, the soaps rotated and then rebuilt for another 40 days.

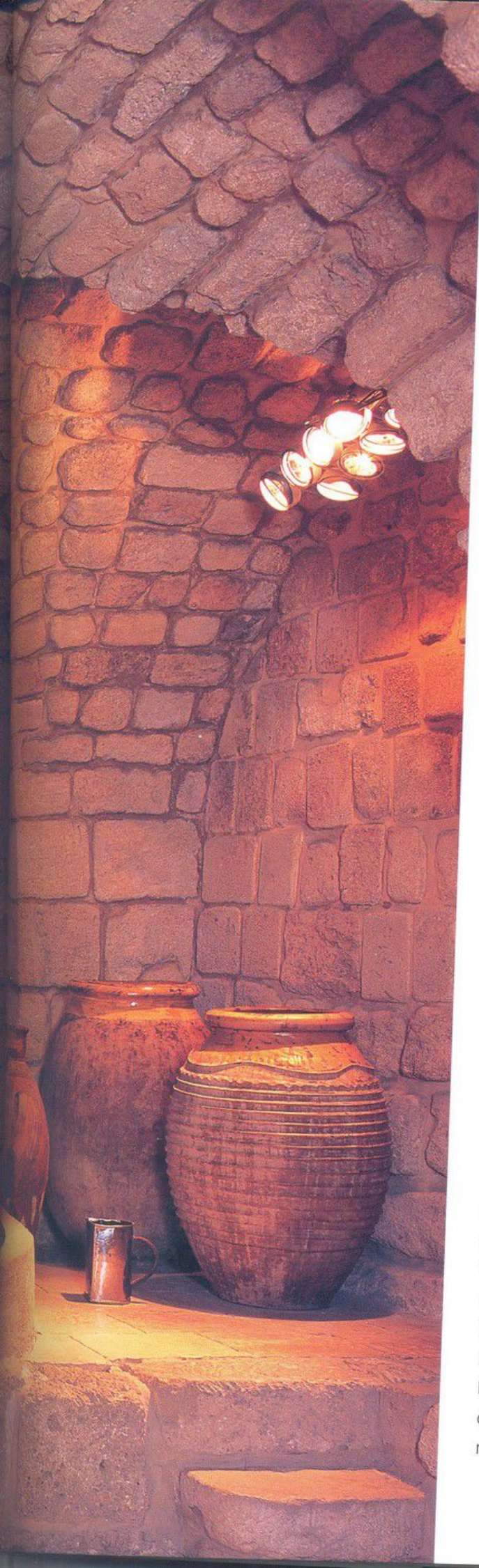
Facing page: Wooden clogs (*qibqabs*) originally came from Venice and were adopted in *hammams* to isolate one's feet from the heated marble floor. Ladies *qibqabs* were often encrusted with ivory, nacre and pewter; the heels could be as high as 20 cm.

Above: The Audi Soap Museum stocks a variety of waters and syrups in its shop, *Matbakh*.

Having purchased olive oil from the local presses, a soap-maker would begin his work by pouring olive oil into a tank and heating it. To this was added caustic lotion before the mixture was combined with a shovel. Once ready, the soap paste was taken from the tank and poured into buckets to be spread out and levelled in the *mafrash*, before being left to dry. Later the soap would be delicately cut into equal sections and stamped with the logo of the soap factory using a wooden seal-bearing mallet.



Above the boiler, one can find the vat and lixiviation basins, referred to as *mizba'* in Saida, *takhamir* in Aleppo and *tighar* in Tripoli. The museum display also features jars and goatskins, which were used for the stocking and transportation of oil.

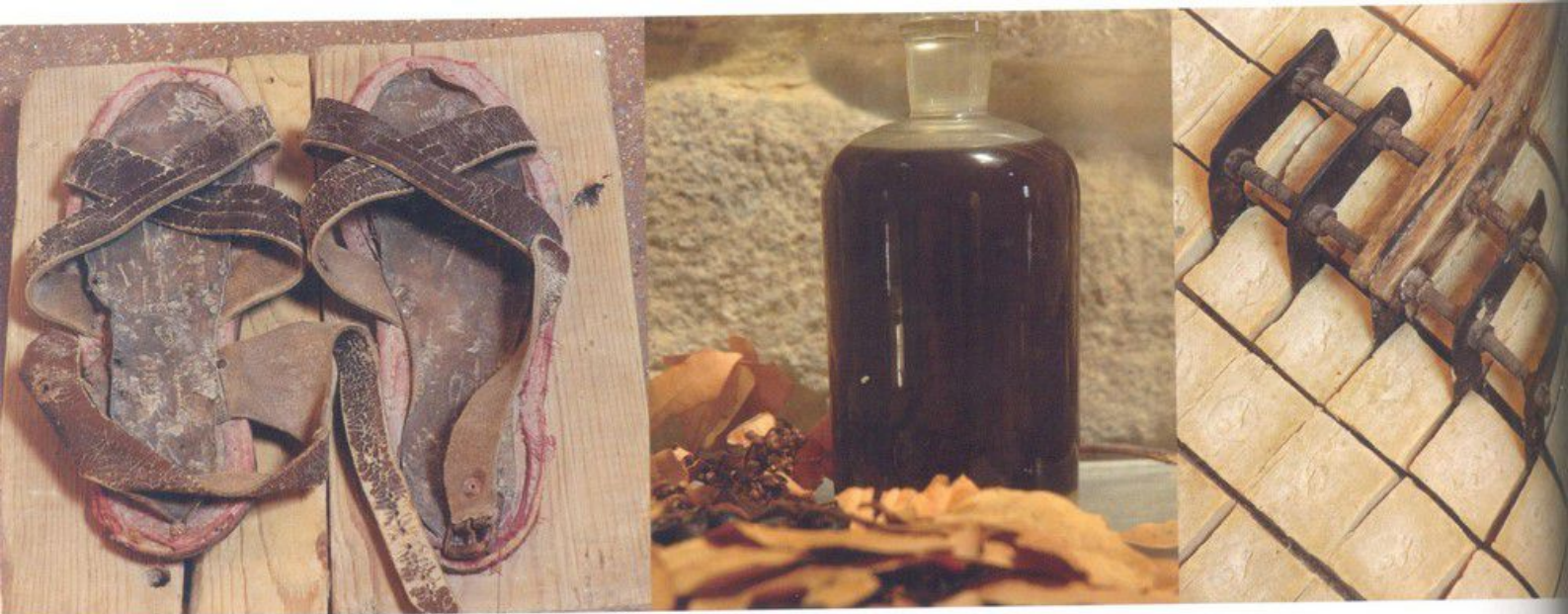


artefacts that now form part of the Soap Museum's collection. Fragments of pottery were reconstituted into the bowls they once were, while an assortment of pipe heads, dating from the 17th to 19th centuries, led the team to assume that the site had previously been home to a café, where customers would indulge in the fashionable pastime of pipe-smoking.

Raymond Audi's generosity, foresight and open-mindedness played a significant role in the project's success. "Without him we could not have achieved it," says Zeini. "He is a man with a vision and that's what makes the difference. He lets you do your work, gives you the means and knows how to motivate," adds Haidar. "He gave us *carte blanche* and had the confidence in us to let us work," says Zeini.

However, the restoration of the property was far from plain-sailing; Haidar fondly refers to it as an adventure. "There were not enough qualified craftsmen available so we had to teach them and learn ourselves as we worked alongside them," he says.

Since it opened in November 2000, the Soap Museum has used clear yet intelligent language on the explanatory signage around its displays, giving it a truly world-class edge (the Soap Museum is a member of the International Council of Museums, ICOM). However, the museum's progressive approach was not welcomed by all the local residents. "At the beginning, they were very cautious and didn't believe it was the right thing," Zeini says, referring to some Saidawis' response to the ground-breaking renovation. "Slowly, they began to understand and take an interest. In the end, it became a very good relationship thanks to the trust and confidence that had built up between the workers and the museum's neighbours."



The Soap Museum takes the visitor on a journey through the soap-making process; a regional tradition that stretches back centuries.

The Soap Museum takes the visitor on a journey through the soap-making process; a regional tradition that stretches back centuries. In the case of olive oil soap, four locations carved out an impressive reputation" namely Aleppo in Syria, Nablus in Palestine, as well as Tripoli and Saida along the Lebanese coast. The museum sets the history of soap within this wide geographical context and highlights the stages of manufacturing alongside the wealth of creativity that the process commanded. Examples of the tools and equipment are exhibited in a display which charts the soap-making process, in addition to the actual boiler, vats and basins used in the Audi factory to prepare the caustic lotion and mix it with the olive oil.

The author of the ethnological study of soap for the museum, Nour Majdalani Hakim, writes that soap and *hammams* are 'intimately linked'. For this reason, the museum has a section devoted to artefacts which illustrate the rituals associated with this pivotal aspect of social life. Items include *messuaq* (twigs commonly used to clean teeth), *qibqabs* (clogs that were worn in *hammams* to protect the feet from the hot marble floors and to avoid slipping), and copper chests for soaps and sponges - proof that the noble art of bathing was held in high esteem.

Before leaving the museum, visitors have the chance to enjoy the on-site café dubbed the *Matbakh* (kitchen), and the gift shop aptly named *Hammam* (bath). Echoing the refined taste that resonates throughout the museum, the café offers typical Lebanese refreshments and an opportunity to watch a film about the history of the soap-making craft. The museum's entrepreneurial spirit is also reflected in its exclusive selection of natural products - including pure olive oil, jams, *loukoum*, *maamoul* and naturally flavoured cordials and waters.

In the *Hammam* boutique, it is hard to resist the variety of beauty and bathing accessories and myriad traditional soaps. As part of The Audi Foundation's strategy of safeguarding and developing manual, mechanic or industrial craftsmanship, designer Lina Audi collaborated with craftsmen from the Levant to develop a series of products that span the art of utilitarian and decorative *artisanat*. Here is where commerce and culture combine and prove that many of the age-old

Left: 'Skateboards' were worn by the craftsman to avoid marking the soap as they cut.  
 Centre: Olive oil; just one of the raw materials used in soapmaking.  
 Right: A rake used to divide the soap into blocks.

Facing page: The Audi Soap Museum features a wide variety of stamps (*tamrik*) and seals (*khetm*) which carry the names of long-forgotten factory owners, the name of the city or the quality of the soap. The oldest ones are *wallets* made entirely from wood, although later a negative intaglio engraving was added.



...ces explained by the museum are still alive and continue  
...y a vital economic role in Lebanon today.

The architectural entities of the soap factory, the  
...y residence, and the adjacent lodgings in the *medina*  
...nect to form 'Haret Audi' (Audi Islet). Over the last four  
...s, the foundation has been renovating the shop façades  
...oward the museum; a project that has received the  
...ng approval of local residents. "Not only did Mr Audi  
...le the museum to preserve the old and the ancient,  
...so restored the islet's surrounding buildings as part  
... initiative to show the people that when you preserve  
...ething, you give it more value," says Azar.

Today numerous regeneration initiatives involving  
...udi Foundation, The Hariri Foundation, the Debbané  
...y and the Municipality of Saida have been targeting the  
...y and the *medina's* many kilometres of labyrinthine  
...ts. "Since 2000, there has been a big change," says  
... "Now when you come, you see the difference." Azar,  
...mmutes daily from Beirut to ensure operations

run smoothly, is passionate about the museum and her  
work at The Audi Foundation. Her warmth and generosity  
are immediately apparent and is combined with a love for  
Saida and a wish to create a better future. "We help people  
tour the city. There are so many interesting sites to visit...  
From an economic standpoint, it is good for the city and it  
creates work," she says. Azar is also proud of the museum's  
visitors' record. Before conflict and heated political wrangling  
cast shadows over Lebanon, around 47,000 visitors were  
passing through its doors every 12 months; 16,000 of  
whom were foreigners. There is prevailing optimism that  
eventually visitors will return in similar and, hopefully, greater  
numbers to what must surely be one of the region's most  
enchanting museums. □

**The Audi Soap Museum in Saida is open every day except  
Friday and admission is free. For more information, please  
call +961 7753599 or visit [www.fondationaudi.org](http://www.fondationaudi.org)**

