

Better by design

Consume



Bahrain-based **Walla Al Alawi** has fused tradition with her own designer touches to create a unique range of abayas. *Jane Millard* found out more

The last decade in Bahrain has seen the abaya transform from a plain piece of fabric into an individualised fashion garment. The trendsetter inspiring this change has been Walla Al Alawi. On meeting with Walla, we were struck by her abaya swirling into the heavens, revealing a silk leopard skin lining, loose linen pants and chiffon bodice, finished by a leopard skin bandana concealing her

hair. It was certainly very striking, and someone who agrees is Saks Fifth Avenue's Bahrain manager Anne Sarah, who has signed Walla for an exclusive range of kaftans and jalabiyas that will launch during Ramadan at the store in Bahrain City Centre.

After graduation in 1998 from Ibn Khuldoon School in Bahrain, Walla studied fashion design and

marketing in London and Milan. She explains: 'When I returned to Bahrain after fashion school, I wanted to embrace my culture, but also to really modernise things. The world is becoming smaller and people are wearing clothing from everywhere – you can see celebrities modelling kaftans on the red carpet.'

Walla began working from home with the abaya, modifying the basic cut, adding lining, and decorating it with embroidery and beaded trimmings, which attracted attention. 'People would come up to me and ask, "Where did you get this?"' she reveals. 'They were simple designs really in 2001, just a chiffon lining or some embroidery, but everyone wanted one.'

It was actually in London that Walla found her loyal supporters for the couture abaya. 'Gulf nationals gather in London during the summer,

where I visit with my family,' she says, looking to explain the popularity behind her designs. 'I was freely wearing my abayas, and it was from here that my clients – who include royal families in the Gulf region – grew. In the beginning they wanted the designs to be simple, but now they are asking for bolder styles – it's amazing. When

I started, there was a handful of shops with plain abayas, now they are practically on every corner with elaborate designs.'

Walla's family own the Al Hayat Group of companies and have been supportive of her development.

An unintentional trendsetter, Walla adds:

'I would be sad and say to my father that everyone is copying me, but he would respond by telling me it is only the best designers that get copied – it's a great form of flattery.'

Walla's abaya collection is exclusive and available by appointment only, with designs that are unique. The same applies to her bandanas and shele, with styles for special occasions that are all from quality fabrics made in Italy. Although it's an exclusive range, Walla does endeavour to create a customised abaya in order to suit a person's budget.

Branching out further, Walla next created a ready-to-wear range that is

available in her boutique, Celebrity Corner at Al A'ali Shopping Complex. Once again she explores the fusion of old and new. 'I wanted this range to be unique,' she says. 'It is simple clothing, like a blouse, but with a touch of traditional hand embroidery. Each piece is an individual story. The styles are different to the abaya, but you can still see it's Walla.' Celebrity Corner also creates abayas to go with the ready-to-wear range, threading the styled theme to all the garments in an outfit. Walla adds: 'My range is growing step by step; it's a solid development.'

In collaboration with Saks Fifth Avenue, Walla is now launching a new range of unique kaftans and jalabiyas.

She explains: 'My kaftans are exotic pieces, unique in style, but once again easy to wear. I have chosen quality jerseys that feel really

cool when you put them on, as if you could fly away. I'm also using soft chiffons with beading and hand embroidery.'

Her passion for al fresco colours, boldly blending orange and yellow chiffons or turquoise and green velvets, works very well. Walla explores colour and contrast with traditional and modern styles, and this is apparent in her Saks range, which also provides flexibility. 'At Saks I have created a catalogue that offers a variety of colours for the customer, so that it works with their skin tone,' she says. 'First you select your jalabiya, and then the preferred colours – this does have a 20 per cent surcharge, and it takes around two weeks to complete.' The garments are made in a small workshop in Milan that focuses on the cuts and finishing (sewing and stitching) – the hand beading and embroidery is completed in her Bahrain workshop.

The name 'Walla' actually means 'loyalty' in Arabic, and she is using her name for the new range at Saks Fifth Avenue. 'With all my clothes you can see a touch of Arabia in the styles,' she says. 'I try to encapsulate modern creativity within my own culture; I'm exploring the Arabian traditions, and this is reflected in all of my designs. Designers in Paris and Milan really appreciate the uniqueness of my collection.'

Walla's range is available now at Saks Fifth Avenue, Bahrain City Centre (17 172 000), and will officially launch on August 27 with an invitation-only event. The ready-to-wear collection is available from Celebrity Corner, Al A'ali Shopping Complex (17 564 789, www.celebrity.bh)

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