

THE MEMENTO

By Kimberley Lovato
Photography by Janelle Jones



Off the Hook

An artisan tackles Belize's invasive lionfish problem, one piece of jewelry at a time

Khadija Assales deftly maneuvers her pliers, twisting 14-karat-gold-filled and Argentium silver wire into charms or buyers' initials. The Belizean jeweler adorns her pieces with sea glass, shells, and gemstones, but four years ago, she started incorporating an even more local material: lionfish fins. The venomous Indo-Pacific species invaded Atlantic and Caribbean waters about two decades ago, voraciously gobbling up marine life

and posing a serious threat to the world's second-largest barrier reef.

"Making jewelry felt like a creative way to help our reef," says Assales, who owns boutiques in San Ignacio and Placencia. At first, she speared the fish herself and dried their non-venomous tails in the sun. "It was a cool story," she continues, laughing, "but not a good use of my time."

Now, Assales gets her lionfish from fishermen in the village of Sarteneja. She

hand-cuts the tails before coating them in resin and setting them. Interested in making your own? Assales offers lessons through Airbnb Experiences. This year, she also plans to start teaching her craft to unemployed women to help them gain financial independence. "I want to do more for my community," she says, "and I am finally in a position to do so." Jewelry from \$20, lessons \$45 (including a pair of earrings), kajexpressions.com