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# abtira

## NATURAL BEAUTY

SELF-CARE GURU ANNA BATYRA TALKS TO THE GUIDE ISTANBUL ABOUT FEMALE EMPOWERMENT, HER SUCCESSFUL ABTIRA SKINCARE BRAND, AND THE EPIPHANIES SHE HAS HAD IN THE TIME OF CORONA

TEXT Işıl İlkter

Before setting up shop in a small village on Turkey's Aegean coast, Anna Batyra, founder of slow skincare brand abtira, traveled to several European countries, along with India and Israel. "My milestones emerge—perhaps not surprisingly—as linked to the countries where I lived subsequently," Batyra tells The Guide Istanbul. "I have traveled a lot since my teenage years, but over time I found roots in a few places in particular. These have had a profound effect on me."

Batyra's urge to travel first kicked in during her teenage years, soon after which she moved to the UK, where she attended a private boarding school and completed her undergraduate studies at the London School of Economics. "I grew up behind the Iron Curtain, so the worldview I inherited was one of an oppressed people who were hungry to live in freedom," she says.

"My strong anthropocentric interests—in art, literature and human behavior within societies—are certainly rooted in that time," she adds, going on to recall her two-decade-long study of the social sciences.



Anna Batyra



Body polish





Abtira Studio

### 'HARD PIECE OF WORK'

The 2000s were what Batyra refers to as her “Continental Europe decade.” This included a post-doctorate degree in the social sciences in Belgium, along with work in the economic development field for an international organization based in France, which took her to both Asia and Africa.

Eventually, her academic inclinations brought her to Istanbul, where she spent five years specializing in gender studies at a number of different institutions.

She participated in a project at Boğaziçi University devoted to African polygamy, before spending time on Sabancı University’s education reform initiative, where she researched women’s role in the workplace and the Turkish educational system.

To her surprise, living in Turkey “turned out to be a hard piece of work,” Batyra says. “I had to find a like-minded crowd with whom I felt comfortable; people who dreamt and strived for alternative lives. That’s how I overcame the first culture shock.”

She wanted to understand the nature of the country, which she regards as a “heterogeneous entity,” at a deeper level. She did this in the way most familiar to her: namely, by studying it as an academic.

Perplexed by the lives of women in Turkey, she is quick to point out the many economic and social hardships they face.

“The reality of the labor market in Turkey does not encourage women to become

economically independent,” she says. “On the other hand, a binding set of social norms confines women to very particular ‘feminine’ roles as mothers and wives.” Batyra admits she may be indulging in generalizations here, “but, nevertheless, I have spent five years studying gender in Turkey.”

### PASSIONATE NATURE

After realizing that studying gender had exhausted her, and having obtained Turkish citizenship, she took on the role of an empowered woman in Turkish society.

She describes the beginning of her slow self-care brand abtira as an exercise in “emancipation.”

“Emancipation [can be] understood in various ways: emancipation as a woman living in Turkey, emancipation as a human craving to return to nature,” she explains.

Batyra has always had a passion for nature; she has always been drawn to the outdoors.

“Nature has always been like therapy for me,” she says. “When I lived in big cities, like London and Paris, I often found myself in parks, just breathing.”

Whenever she feels overwhelmed by the many challenges associated with life in Istanbul, Batyra takes flight to her home on the Aegean coast to reacquire herself with nature’s charms.

Bath salts





With a passionate interest in the medicinal properties of plants, Batyra has spent considerable time on the coast, where she tends her own garden and studies local herbs and aromatherapy with friends in Çeşme.

In 2017, she planted the seeds for abtira by making simple, homemade skin- and body-care products which she shared with her friends, neighbors and colleagues. “The rest just followed from that,” Batyra says.

## SKIN-DEEP

Abtira emerged within the context of the “slow food” and “slow cosmétique” movements—global trends that focus on producing healthy, sustainable and eco-friendly solutions for modern living.

Batyra points out that, as our largest organ, our skin demands slow and continuous care. Abtira currently offers a wide range of products for “natural and minimalistic” skincare, from soaps and tonics to moisturizers and masks.

She attributes abtira’s success to its female-led team, which includes Ezgi Onay, studio assistant; Ceren Özkan, office administrator; and Çağla Aybüke, chemical engineer. The team also works on a part-time basis with Sinem Kapar, an Istanbul-based pharmacist, and Metin Sakız, a soap-master from Aydın’s Söke district.

abtira garden



Linden leaves for herbal tea tonic water

Batyra’s husband, Bora Üçer, also frequently lends a hand. “Bora helps out in countless ways,” she says, “from artistic advice to the mundane logistical tasks that arise all the time.”

## FROM SELF-CARE TO SELF-ISOLATION

During the current coronavirus pandemic, Batyra says her life on the Aegean coast has not changed significantly. But she draws attention to how all the uncertainty has adversely affected the cosmetics industry.

She also expresses shock regarding what she describes as a tendency by some to exploit the pandemic for profit.

“The instrumentalization of females for profit during the pandemic has been terrifying,” she says. “They are pushing products and service-substitutes on women, without which—they claim—they cannot possibly do: beauty treatments, indoor clothing, new varieties of cleaning products and many others.”

With no end of the crisis in sight, the future of abtira, which sells its products online, is unclear.

“It’s been hard to find a satisfactory balance between being relevant in a hard time like this and being seen as overly keen to sell,” Batyra says. “I believe many weeks of self-isolation are still ahead of us.”

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