

living &amp; lifestyle



# stone lady

**Alma Small, 54, is the owner and managing director of Mandarin Stone, one of the largest importers and stockists of natural stone tiles in the UK, with showrooms in Monmouth, Bath, Cardiff, Cheltenham, Exeter and Bordeaux... Here she chats exclusively to *Ladies First* about her experiences in business, family life and her love of natural stone...**

## WHEN DID YOU FIRST ESTABLISH MANDARIN?

In 1990 during the UK economic recession - a tough start!

## WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO SET UP MANDARIN?

A business friend of my husband's who owned a roofing company in Weston-Super-Mare had imported some containers of stone floor tiles from America to test the UK market and he asked me to try to sell them for him.

## HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN STONE? DID YOU STUDY GEOLOGY?

I did study Geology for a short period, as well as Botany and Zoology and have always had a passionate interest in nature. I'm also interested in period properties and interior design.

## TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES IN BUSINESS?

My father died suddenly in 1972 when I was nineteen years old, he had a garage repair business and so I helped out with this until my mother sold it, you learn very quickly when dropped into the deep end!

I then trained and became a teacher - and then stayed at home with the children before returning to part time supply teaching in September 1989 when Samuel, my youngest went to primary

school. It was shortly after this that I was introduced to natural stone flooring through our business friend in Weston-Super-Mare.

I will always remember naming the company - it was such a milestone, the colourful Chinese duck and the Chinese hierarchy produced the name 'Mandarin Slate Ltd' in 1990. At this time most of our imports were Chinese Slate flooring, so it seemed to make sense. Since then I have watched the business grow and grow, and I now have a 50+ workforce which gives me a great sense of achievement.

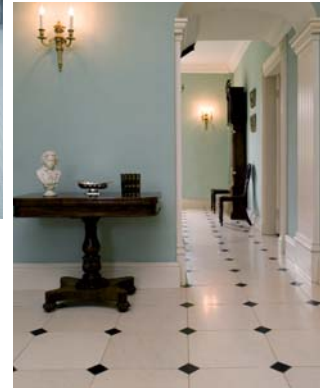
## DESCRIBE YOUR WORST EXPERIENCE

The worst experiences are always the occasional unhappy customer. I think I take it too personally!

## WHERE HAVE YOU TRAVELLED FOR YOUR WORK AND WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE HOTELS?

Travelling is now mainly restricted to Europe and Turkey and I still attend at least two 'Stone Fairs' a year. In the early years I travelled to China and Hong Kong quite regularly, the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong is still my favourite hotel.





### DO YOU THINK BEING A WOMAN HAS HELPED OR HINDERED YOU?

Being a woman has helped, we tend to juggle and organise without thinking about it and our foreign stone suppliers are often in awe and quite attentive when they know the company is owned by a woman.

### HOW HAVE YOU FOUND HAVING A FAMILY AS WELL AS A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS?

I worked from home a lot while the children were young, thank goodness for the fax machine! The family have always come first, although occasionally I used to ask friends to collect them from school if I could not get from whichever part of the UK I was in. I was the company's first sales rep until I employed one in 1992. I remember his starting salary being nearly double mine and I had to buy him a car.

### YOUR SHOWROOMS ARE VERY GLAMOROUS - WAS THIS SOMETHING YOU PURPOSEFULLY SET OUT TO ACHIEVE?

We display some of the stone as if it were in an art gallery as practically there is never enough floor space in our showrooms.

Our showrooms are a combination of

heavy industrial steel stands with wall hung tile boards, each showroom has a different feel but the concept is the same.

### HOW MUCH NATURAL STONE IS THERE IN YOUR OWN HOME? WHAT ARE YOUR PARTICULAR FAVOURITES?

Our newly renovated home has a ground floor of French limestone and marble bathrooms, I like honed limestone as it has a clean, contemporary look, at least for this particular project.

### HAVE YOU NOTICED CHANGING TRENDS IN THE MARKET? WHAT IS POPULAR NOW?

Like everything stone trends work in cycles. Certain lines may become less popular but they generally come round again. Antiqued stone is still very popular and gives a 'worn look' to a new floor; this type of finish will always be in demand.

### WHAT DO YOU PREDICT WILL BE POPULAR IN FORTHCOMING YEARS?

Polished stones, mainly

marbles are seeing a resurgence as well as simple uncomplicated designs to compliment our current minimal lifestyle.

Stronger colours such as pinks, reds and greens, not seen since the sixties are on their way back and are already in our stone range.

### WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT YOUR WORK?

I enjoy the stone sourcing and the buying side of the business, I still get excited when the first container of new stone arrives!

