

Sri Lankan Gems: Starring the Sapphire and Ruby



Sri Lankan sapphires steal the show at many famous collections. Photo By: Fred R. Malvenna.

One of the world's five leading sources of precious stones, Sri Lanka produces almost every gem of commercial value except diamonds, emeralds, opals and turquoise. These range from the precious to the rare, such as sapphires (blue, white, yellow and orange), ruby (red and pink), cat's eye (honey/hazel), alexandrite (bright green in daylight and raspberry red in artificial light) taaffeite (unique to Sri Lanka) and korne-rupine plus a dazzling assortment of about sixty semi-precious varieties in almost every color. These include amethyst, garnet, moonstone, zircon, topaz, tourmaline, quartz, spinel and agate.

Sapphires and rubies are curiously two colors of the same natural mineral corundum. When a sapphire or ruby contains minute internal channels of foreign matter suitably arranged in relation to the main crystal structure, the gem is given a rounded 'cabochon' cutting to achieve a brilliant six-point asterisk of light flashing inside, a priceless star sapphire or ruby. The most valued color for sapphire is corn-flower blue, and for ruby, pigeon blood red. The traditional gemming areas of Sri Lanka are the valleys and foot-hills around the town of Ratnapura, literally the 'city of gems'. In the recent past, however rich deposits have been discovered all over the northern and southern borders of the central mountains.

Gem gravel in Sri Lanka usually occurs in alluvial deposits of rivers draining gem-bearing crystalline rock. When the gravel occurs at some depth (usually 20 to 25 meters) it is recovered by sinking pits. Riverbed gemming is resorted to when gem gravel lies close to the surface. The stream is dammed and blocked gravel washed in wicker baskets. Both methods are age old and probably date back thousands of years to Sri Lanka's very origins of gemming. Once the gravel is rinsed, gems can be recognised by their color and sparkle to the naked eye, even by the most uninitiated observers.

Not merely their recovery but even the cutting and polishing of gems is still done to some extent in the traditional way in Sri Lanka. A rotating leaden plate, operated by hand, is used together with a polishing paste compounded from burnt rice-husks. Not surprisingly, Sri Lanka gems, notably sapphire and rubies steal the show in many famous collections such as British Crown Jewels, The Iranian Crown Jewels, the Smithsonian and Hope Collections and the collection at the American Natural History Museum, which treasures the Sri Lankan sapphire of 563 carats, largest in the world. This priceless gem is unfairly named the 'Star of India'. Sri Lanka's State Gem Corporation is also proud of its 363 carat star sapphire, the third largest of its kind in the world. The largest known blue sapphire, weighing in the rough 19 kilograms, was mined in Sri Lanka; so was the magnificent 500-carat Blue Giant of the Orient and the 400-carat Blue Belle of Asia.

It is possible to see gem mining, cutting and polishing, and comprehensive collections of Sri Lanka gems in the gemming areas, especially in the Ratnapura district. The Ratnapura National Museums as well as private gem museums in the district have good collections of rough and cut stones and present demonstrations

of cutting and polishing. Jewellers and gem merchants in Colombo and the resorts also have handsome collections on display.

Gems may be purchased at the State Gem Corporation salesroom No. 24, York Street, Colombo 1, Tel. 23377 or at their branches elsewhere in Colombo, at leading resorts as well as at a host of approved gem merchants and jewellers. Guarantees of purchase as well as testing and appraisal of stones is available to buyers both from the State Gem Corporation and from approved gem dealers. Receipts for purchases should be obtained and preserved as they may be necessary for customs clearance.

* Zam Gems Pvt. Ltd (Showrooms)

1A Lobby Area, Hotel Lanka Oberoi Colombo 3

Tel: 20001 10

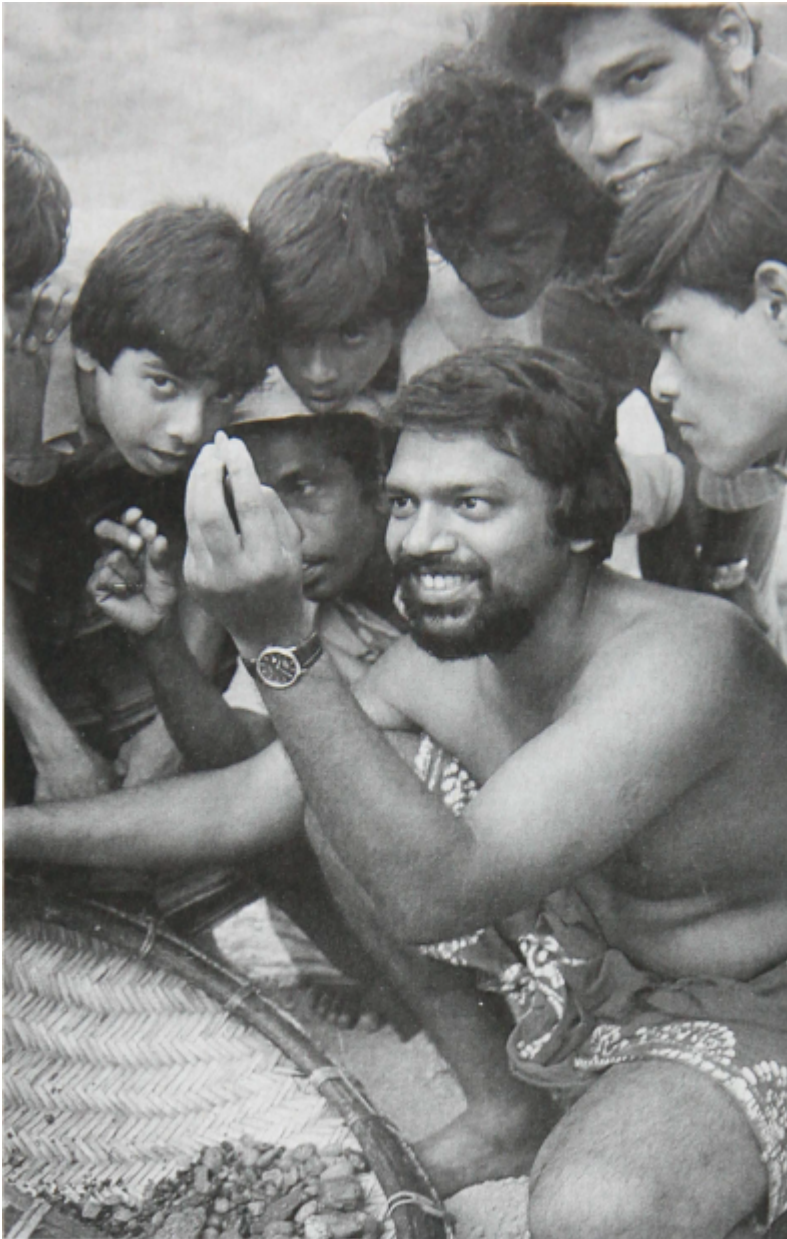
Shopping Arcade, Hotel Lanka Oberoi Colombo 3

Tel: 21171



River gravel is washed in wicker baskets. a method of gem mining dating back thousands of years.

Photo Courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.



Once the gravels are rinsed, gems can be picked out even by the uninitiated observer.