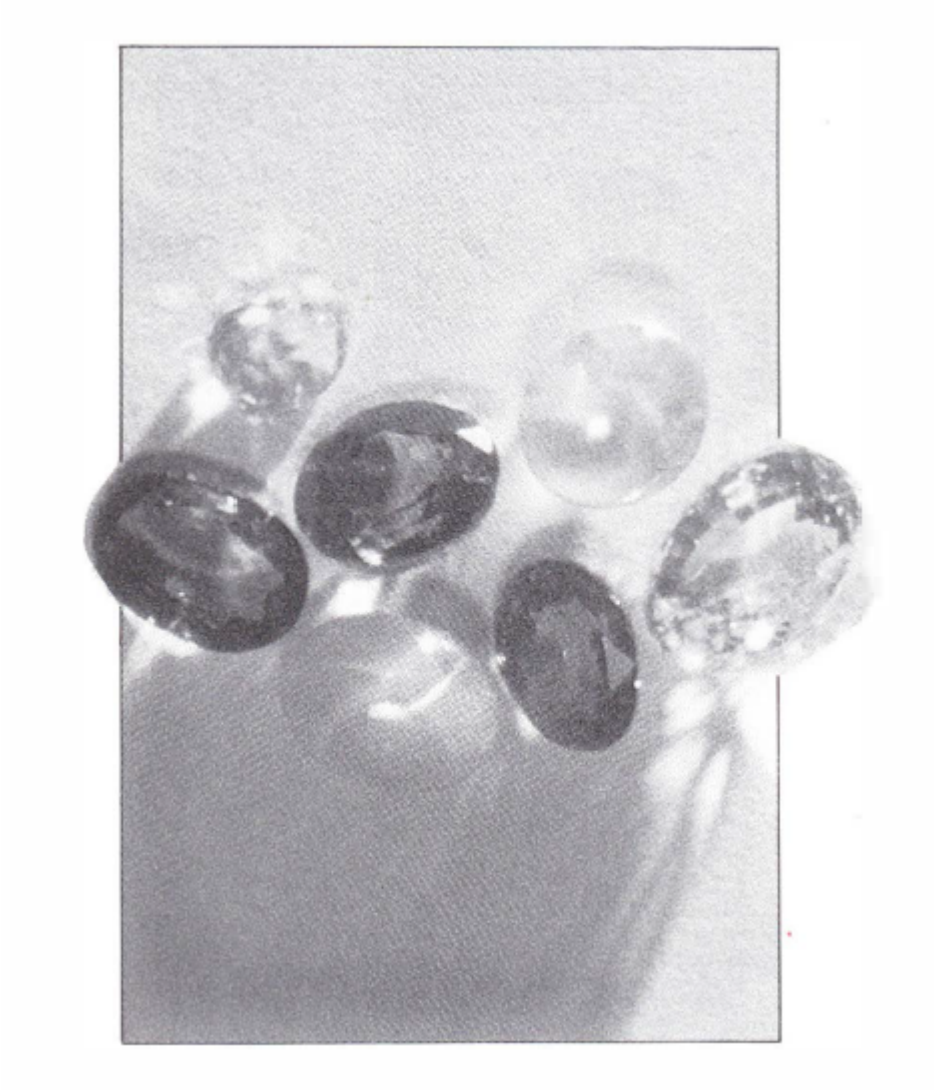
Sri Lanka’s Gems: A Gift from Paradise

Posted on



What gentleman dare leave Sri Lanka’s shores without a gift of a gem for his wife or girl friend? What wife or girl friend visiting here could resist the opportunity to purchase gems at their source?

At prices far below those in your home country, Sri Lanka’s gems are the perfect gift from paradise to take home. They are small, so they won’t add much to your

luggage; they are beautiful and a natural souvenir that will thrill and satisfy for ever, as well as making your friends emerald-green with envy.

Actually, emeralds are not found in Sri Lanka, neither are diamonds (although imported diamonds are cut here and there is a possibility that diamonds may exist in certain parts of the island). Opal and turquoise are other precious stones that are not indigenous. But there is an abundance of sapphires, rubies, cat’s eyes and alexandrites as well as a variety of other precious and semi-precious stones.

Sri Lanka’s gem bearing gravel, called ***illam,*** has put the island among the world’s top five gem production areas. (The others are South America, South Africa, Burma and Thailand.) The ease with which fabulous stones can be purchased, either in the gemming areas or in gem and jewellery shops in Galle, Kandy and Colombo is another reason for buying this most pleasing of souvenirs.

Pearls, sapphires, rubies and other precious stones were among the earliest exports from Sri Lanka. Legends of the island’s richness in gems stem from the past. In the third century, BC, King Devanampiyatissa sent gifts of gems to Emperor Asoka of India. King Solomon is said to have obtained gems from Sri Lanka, together with elephants and peacocks, in his attempts to woo the queen of Sheba. The walled city of Galle is thought to have been the biblical port of Tarshish from where treasure troves of gems were shipped throughout the world. The gems came from Ratnapura, the fabled city of gems mentioned in Scheherazade’s story of Sin bad the sailor.

Ratnapura is 101km from Colombo. While it has an ancient lineage, modern development and commerce have overtaken the town’s historical charm. It is still the centre of Sri Lanka’s gem industry with a soil that is lush with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of precious stones. Traditional • methods of finding gemstones can be seen during a visit to the Ratnapura district. The most common method is mining, not by a network of shafts and tunnels as in gold or diamond mines, but by separate pits dug down to the ***illam.*** The gem-bearing gravel is lifted out in buckets and washed, a little at a time, in conical, closely-woven baskets. Sharp, experienced eyes watch alertly for the glint of gemstones as the gravel is sifted. River beds, too, are a source of gems. The method of panning is to use long poles to which are attached wide sweepers. The gravel is swept up from the river bed and then washed and sifted in the usual manner. Gems are frequently sold, by auction, close to where they are found. The sharing of the proceeds follows a traditional formula with fixed amounts going to the miners, the washers, and also to the suppliers of

the bamboo and wood used for scaffolding in the mine. The owner of the generator and water pump used, and the land owner and sponsor of the mining venture all take a cut too. Gem auctions also take place in Ratnapura itself. The gem being sold is passed from hand to hand among the potential purchasers. Bids are made in whispers or in the ancient manner of touching fingers under the cover of a handkerchief. Each finger and part of a finger indicates a different amount which can run into thousands of rupees. When you visit Ratnapura you will have no shortage of offer.s of gems for sale from people on the sidewalk, or even from motorcyclists chasing your taxi. However, unless you are an expert, it is advisable to buy only from reputed gem or jewellery merchants.

Tbe sapphire is the national stone.

There are small museums in Ratnapura where gems are on display and where demonstrations of gem cutting and polishing can be seen. If you don’t have the time to visit Ratnapura but are in Kandy, then you could see a video about this country’s gems and the gem industry at Premadasa and Company jewellery showroom at 800, Peradeniya Road, Kandy.

The sapphire is the national stone of Sri Lanka and it was in Sri Lanka that the largest known Sapphire, a stone weighing just under 20kg was found. Sapphire is the greek for blue and the blue of saapphires is especially attractive, while the richness of a good ruby is irresistible.

In his book about Sri Lanka called Bridge over troubled water, English investment adviser, Michael Wynne-Parker states that there is considerable misunderstanding about the distinction between the ruby and the sapphire.



Fishing for gems

“The truth,” he says, “is that there is no clear demarcation, since both are gem varieties of corundum. But modern practice is to call corundums of all colours, except red, sapphires. The red ones, of course, are rubies. Both are next in hardness only to diamonds.”

Star sapphires and star rubies are particularly attractive gems because they are blessed with a star that seems to shine out from within the stone.
The island’s second most valuable gem-bearing mineral is chrysoberyl, which yields alexandrite and the exotic honey-yellow and apple green cat’s eye.

The alexandrite, which changes colour in artificial light from olive green to raspberry red, was discovered in Russia in 1830 and is found only there or in Sri Lanka.

Gems are sold by carats. According to Wynne-Parker: “To the goldsmith, the carat is a designation of quality, whereas to the gemologist it is a designation of weight. Since 1907, the metric carat has been adopted worldwide, each carat relating to 200mg.” All reputable gem merchants and jewellers would be willing to give advice on the purchase of gems, whether they are sought for investment, as a gift or set in locally designed and created jewellery. A visitor can purchase any amount of gems to take home, providing proof of having exchanged sufficient foreign currency to cover the purchase is shown to customs on leaving the country. Keep both the payment receipt for the gems and also the document given to you by bank or hotel when you change money.

Gems can be checked for authenticity at the showroom of the State Gem Corporation at 24, York Street, Colombo.

