The Journey Of a Gem Stone...

Posted on



Miner busy washing precious gems in the rough.....

“I want you to understand that the island of Ceylon is, for its size, the finest island in the world, and from its streams come rubies, sapphires, topazes, amethyst and garnet,” said Marco Polo when he visited the Island in 1292. To explore this interesting finding, we set forth on an adventurous journey to unveil the unique odyssey taken by these precious stones...

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The early morning breeze swept across our faces, keeping us calm before the afternoon heat set in. We made our way towards Galle District in the Southern Province, through several breathtaking blankets of lush greenery.

We reached our destination, a gem mining site that belongs to Ayura, a gemstone and jewellery company spanning over four generations. Recognised as a leading sapphire company, Ayura has produced precious gems and bewitching pieces of jewellery to both, local and international markets.

A luminous green paddy field lay ahead in our horizon. Walking into the heart of the field, we felt the blades of paddy that were still wet with crystalline dew drops. In the centre of the field were two mines, a few metres from each other, with several miners surrounding them like moths attracted to light.

Local miners live with their families within the vicinity of the paddy field. They begin their day with the traditional Buddhist ritual of worshipping Lord Buddha, seeking blessings to have a successful and safe day at work. There are several motors set outside the mines, with pumps extracting water, which usually floods the mines overnight. This process of dewatering the mines takes approximately two hours to complete and was previously done manually and painstakingly, taking much longer than machine powered dewatering.

Amateur miners train under a baas – an experienced senior miner who guides them through every step of the skill up to identifying the gems from residual stones

Once this process of dewatering is complete, the adventurous journey of excavating precious and semi-precious gems begins. Through layers and layers of what seems like mud are materials such as soil, sand and gravel. Standing at the edge of a mine and staring into one of them, intrigued in child-like wonderment, we could see several wooden shafts built around the periphery of the pit, which is the source of producing precious stones! Around ten to 12 feet below the ground level, these shafts provide support for the miners to work safely.

One miner was working at the base of the mine, whilst another miner stood midway, supported by horizontal wooden shafts placed at an angle overlooking the base. The former was literally throwing small woven baskets, filled with piles of residual soil and gravel, to the latter. This was passed on in a sequence to miners standing outside the mine, up to the washing area, where identified stones are washed using

modern electric washing machines. This type of gem mining is called pitting.

Gem mining is an ancestral skill passed through generations in Sri Lanka. Karunadasa is a miner with 25 years of experience in gem mining since he was 18 years old. Amateur miners train under a baas, like Karunadasa – an experienced senior miner who guides junior miners through every step of the skill up to identifying the gems from residual stones. Miners take breaks only for their sleep, buth káma (lunch with rice) and thé wathura (tea), working throughout the year except during heavy monsoons, during which they switch their role from miners to farmers. Therefore, this is a skill earned after several years of practicing the art.

Sri Lanka has also been called Ratna Deepa, which translates to Gem Island

Miners take approximately ten days to explore each mine. So far, this particular paddy field has hosted around 100 such excavations. The mines will be reused for paddy cultivation and hence the entire process is environmentally friendly, neither damaging the natural landscape with chemical pollutants nor disturbing the livelihood of these local farmers and their families.

In addition to skills, equipment, workforce and time that go into the entire process, I understood better, as I saw, how crucial it is for these miners to have an unlimited supply of hope, to succeed in this patience-testing art. Precious and semi-precious stones are found daily in these mines with miners' effort and dedication. Every morning they wake up with a new realm of faith in luck, to find at least one unusual stone of unpredictable value. It's this motivation that keeps miners passionately inspired in this art.

Rough stones have to be cut and polished, which will make all the distinction between making stones of variable value.

The colour is the most fascinating and attractive feature of a gemstone and there are various styles of cutting stones based on their natural formation. The common types of gems found in Sri Lanka are Sapphires, Star Sapphires, Cat's Eyes, Rubies, Star Rubies, Alexandrite and other semi-precious stones. Sapphires are the most popular variety, out of which blue, pink and yellow Sapphires are the most popular in respective order. Sri Lanka has been called several names throughout the ages; Thaproban, Heledіva, Ceylon and Serendib to name a few. The Isle has also been called Ratna Deepa, which translates to Gem Island owing to its long and colourful history of over 2,500 years within the world of gems. After this exquisite

experience, as far as gem stones are concerned, I see not much has changed since Marco Polo’s visit to this Gem in the Indian Ocean many centuries ago.

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