

The background of the cover is an abstract, vibrant composition of swirling patterns and organic shapes. The colors are primarily bright cyan, magenta, and orange, with some darker purple and blue tones. The patterns resemble natural mineral formations or perhaps stylized gemstone textures. The overall effect is dynamic and colorful.

THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION TO THE
MAJOR GEMSTONES
OF SRI LANKA

DAVID SWARBRICK

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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR EVE

Who Shines For Us All

1

BETTER
THAN
CLEOPATRA

“Avoid eccentricity
either in dress,
conversation, or
manner. It is a
form of vanity, as
it will attract
attention, and is
therefore in bad
taste.”

THE LADIES' BOOK
OF ETIQUETTE
AND MANUAL OF
POLITENESS, 1860

It was Shakespeare's Enobarbus who remarked of Queen Cleopatra that "age cannot wither her nor custom stale her infinite variety." But in this observation Anthony's wise and cynical confident was only half right – for age is as much a skilful creator of variety, as it is of value; if Sri Lanka's famous gems are anything to go by. And Queen Cleopatra herself – apart from a nightclub in downtown Colombo and an elderly female leopard in Wilpattu – has yet to make much of a mark on the island.

The island is home to 75 semi or precious gems – including two precious stones - rubies and sapphires, the latter being the gem that is unmistakably twinned with in popular imagination. Amongst its better known semi-precious stones are Spinel, Amethyst, Sapphire, Garnet, Rose Quartz, Aquamarine, Tourmaline, Agate, Cymophane, Topaz, Citrine, Alexandrite, Zircon, and Moonstone. All are valued according to a strict criteria: Cut, Colour, Clarity, and Carat - or weight.

Thanks to the extreme old age of its rocks (90% are between 500 to 2.5 million years old), Sri Lanka's gems are so numerous as to often just wash out onto flood plains, and into rivers and streams.

Indeed, the mining of alluvial deposits by simple water-winnowing river mining was for long the classic technique used to find gemstones, separating them out from the river sand and clay by simple sluicing in wicker baskets.

Tunnel mining represents a more scalable technique. Typically, pits of 5 to 500 feet in depth are dug, with tunnels excavated horizontally from them. The clay, sand and gravel is then sluiced with water in conical baskets to separate out the heavier stones that then settle at the basket base. At a much more industrial level, backhoe earthmover machines, ablaze in their environmentally challenging acid yellow or orange livery, are used to excavate the topsoil.

Twenty five percent of the country's total land area is potentially gem-bearing, but the greatest concentration of mining is around the town of Ratnapura which accounts for 65% of mined gems, the balance mostly coming from Elahera, a district in the North Central Province.

The country's gem mining history reaches back to at least the 2nd century BCE, with the mention of a gem mine in The Mahavamsa. However, if biblical rumours of King Solomon's wooing of the Queen of Sheba with gifts of priceless Sri Lankan gems, are to be believed, the country's gem mines can be back dated at least another 700 years.

In 550 CE a Greek trader, Cosmas, wrote that "the temples are numerous, and in one in particular, situated on an eminence, is the great hyacinth [amethyst or ruby], as large as a pine cone, the colour of fire, and flashing from a great distance, especially when catching the beams of the sun - a matchless sight".

A later traveller to the island, Marco Polo, wrote in the 13th century CE that "the king of Ceylon is reputed to have the grandest ruby that was ever seen, a span in length, the thickness of a man's arm; brilliant beyond description, and without a single flaw. He gives them to the lapidaries who scrape them down until they split away from the ruby stones. Some of them are red, some yellow, and some blue, which they call nailam (saffires)".

Today, the country's gem industry is highly regulated, and its exports are one of the country's main foreign revenue earners, with sales escalating from around \$40 million in 1980 to over \$473 million in 2022. This places it in 4th position, below that of Garments (\$4.7 billion); Coffee, Tea & Spices (\$1.6 billion); and Rubber (\$1.06 billion).

This phenomenal acceleration dates in part to two bouts of government intervention: the establishment of the State Gem Corporation in 1971 and the 1993 Gem and Jewellery Authority Act. By these moves, the government centralised and professionalised the issuing of gem-mining licenses and the leasing of government land for mining. They extended control over sales and exporting and made it mandatory that gems discovered within mines could be sold arbitrarily; but must instead be presented at public auctions, with the government receiving a share of sales amounting to 2.5%.

The industry's value chain is a long one. Gem miners sell their stones to dealers, who sell the rough stones to cutter polishers. Historically, these have usually been Ceylon Moors descendants of Arabians traders. The glittering stones are then sold to wholesalers and onto retailers, where the greatest profits are to be made.

2

THE
DOUBLE DIP
GEMS

“Dispense with
ornaments
altogether rather
than wear mock
jewellery.”

THE LADIES' BOOK
OF ETIQUETTE
AND MANUAL OF
POLITENESS, 1860

The two stones that stand like guardians of the jewellery vault in Sri Lanka are of course sapphire and rubies.

So great is the affinity between Sri Lanka and its sapphires that the nation might legitimately put in for a name change to be better called Sri Sapphire. They are most typically blue – but can also pop up black, colourless, grey, or even pink, orange – a variant known as padparadscha – from Padmaraga.

The country also excels at producing Hot Pink Sapphires, a yellow sapphire that is apparently a good deterrent against witchcraft, orange, and white ones. The gem accounts for 85% of the precious stones mined in Sri Lanka – but the colour variant that gets the most acclaim is the Ceylon Blue Sapphire, the blue of cornflowers, clear skies, and inestimable, sophisticated material contentment.

Selling for \$5,000 - 8,000 per carat, they are as much statements of investment as they are items of adornment: "A kiss on the hand may feel very, very good," noted Anita Loos, "but a diamond and sapphire bracelet lasts forever".

Sri Lanka's sapphires are found in alluvial deposits across the country, the very best from Elahera. Since Ptolemy noted their glittering existence, they are much favoured for crowns, thrones, diadems, as well as jewellery for First Nights and cocktail parties.

Sri Lanka's sapphires have won their place in global hearts since the very earliest times due to their exceptional clarity and transparency. For any wearer interested in absolute quality, they are the go-to source for best-bling, shorn as they are of the incipient vulgarity that often accompanies diamonds.

Not coincidentally, Sri Lanka's sapphires have given museums and auction houses jewels of such arresting quality as to gain themselves names and identities in the own right – including The Stuart Sapphire, still worn atop the crown of the reigning monarch of Great Britain, though the oldest and loveliest is probably the Roman Aphrodite Sapphire now housed behind thick glass in Cambridge.

Closely related to sapphires, the island's rubies are almost as famous. Grey, hard, and brittle, known to scientists as Cr or No 24, the modest metal, chromium, is what gives rubies their red colour, and the metal its brush with glamour, high octane cocktail parties, and the odd coronation.

Depending on the amount of chromium, the ruby shows every possible shade of red – but the pure, unmistakably fiery reds are the ones most cherished. Whilst the best of Sri Lanka's rubies show off just these qualities, they often also come in a varieties of pink, red with a dash of purple, a colour variant uniquely caused by the additional presence of iron.

The ruby King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba is said to have come from Sri Lanka. The island's rubies, Marco Polo was later to record in 1292 are "the size of a man's arm". Their unapologetic flashiness has long made them a favourite jewel for armour, crowns, scabbards, and religious statues— as well as necklaces, tiaras, broaches, rings, and bracelets.

Until relatively recently, they were impossible to distinguish from the more pedestrian spinel gemstones and many a ruby owner in the past – including Catherine the Great, the Black Prince, and the last Holy Roman Emperor – have posthumously found themselves somewhat shortchanged when the iconic ruby in their crowns were later identified as spinels.

Most rubies come from the mines around Ratnapura though some of the very best come from far south - in Udawalawe. Anyone visiting The Smithsonian might happily spend a little time gazing upon "My Baby," a 138.7 carat ruby from Sri Lanka beloved of its original owner, Rosser Reeves, the guru of American advertising, whose slogans for Bic pens, Minute Maid orange juice, M&M's and Colgate toothpaste recall a now lost world of innocent consumerism.

Pricing a ruby is an art form all of its own - but \$300 - \$250,000 per carat is a good a range as any – unless you own the Burmese "pigeon blood" Sunrise Ruby which sold for \$1,000,000

per carat. Even so, proportionality is everything,
as the Bible noted: "a wife of noble character
who can find? She is worth far more than
rubies."

3

GEMS TO
WEAR AT
BREAKFAST

"It is in as bad
taste to receive
your morning calls
in an elaborate
evening dress, as it
would be to attend
a ball in your
morning wrapper."

THE LADIES' BOOK
OF ETIQUETTE
AND MANUAL OF
POLITENESS, 1860

Four of the island's gems sits happily at the more affordable end of the scale, perfect purchases to set as necklaces or earrings to wear at breakfast or on short trips to the supermarket.

The most famous of these is the moonstone – sometimes known as Ceylon Opals. They come in shades of white, blue, and grey. A semiprecious stone, it gets its name for its texture - and the artful way in which its colour resembles moonlight shining through clouds. With a quality typically higher than almost any other mined in the world, moonstones are broadly subdivided into blue, semi- blue, and white. They are most usually found in alluvial streams; and in particular in near Ambalangoda in the south of the island.

Smaller mines exist in places like Matale; amongst gravels in such rivers as the Mahaweli and Walawe; and in smaller quantities in Elipitiya, Horton Plains and Weligama.

They are promoted as the stone of emotions, an essential accessory for the improvement of mental clarity and emotional equilibrium. They are also much favoured by travellers as a form of other-worldly protection.

Long used by jewellers, they gained a particular boost during the Art Nouveau period (1890-1910), not least through the creations of the French goldsmith Rene Lalique.

Fake moonstones abound – but there is a tried and trusted method to distinguish the real McCoy: if you roll the stone between your fingers and it becomes translucent, it is probably a fake. Genuine stones – like the colour of a rainbow - never change colour.

For something, a little flashier, three other semi-precious stones beckon.

Agate is a modestly priced (\$10 to \$100 per carat) semi-precious quartz that occurs in a wide range of colours including brown, white, red, grey, pink, black, and yellow. Sri Lanka specialises in blue-tinted agate, said to pacify inner anger, and anxiety.

Amethysts are also famous for self-medication. Sri Lanka is one of the world best sources of high-quality amethysts, a semi-precious gem (\$20-\$50 per carat) that occurs in transparent pastel roses to deep purples. Used in jewellery, as well as alternative healing, its supporters argue that it helps relieve stress and anxiety, fend off headaches, fatigues, and anxiety; and promote cell regeneration.

The last of the three – unfairly overlooked is Citrine. Named from the Old French word for lemon, Citrine is a relatively rare semiprecious quartz gem that abounds in Sri Lanka in colours that vary from transparent and pale yellow to brownish orange and sells for \$10 to \$50 per carat.

4

LUNCH
WEAR
GEMS

"It is not polite to stare under ladies' bonnets, as if you suspected they had stolen the linings from you, or wore something that was not their own."

THE LADIES' BOOK
OF ETIQUETTE
AND MANUAL OF
POLITENESS, 1860

Three semi-precious stones cry out to be worn at lunches in fashionable restaurants or in the homes of irritating acquaintances you wish to silence and impress.

The most notable of the trio is Tourmaline. Although available in almost every possible colour, Sri Lankan Tourmaline tends to be restricted to yellowish-green & bright green colour ranges. This semi precious gem is found right across the island, especially in Uva, and Ratnapura. It came into global prominence when the Dutch East India Company imported large quantities of it from Sri Lanka to the west. There it was called the "Ceylonese Magnet" because it could attract and then repel hot ashes due to its pyroelectric properties. It sits happily in the mid-market at \$100 \$400 per carat – with the exception of Paraiba Tourmaline, a non-local bright green variant, which can cost around \$30,000 per carat.

It pairs well with aquamarines, a semi-precious stone with such sufficient quantities of iron in its crystals as to ensure a cherished green-blue to blue colour set of glittering variations. Abundant and comparatively affordable (\$130 - \$900 per carat), it is found all over the island - in Rathnapura, Morawaka, Hatton, Nawalapitiya, Galle, and Matara. Its comparative inexpensiveness has not stopped it decorating some of the world's more famous people, including the French Emperor Louis XV who owned the 109.92 carats Hirsch

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Aquamarine, Queen Elizabeth II who commissioned an Aquamarine Tiara, Eleanor Roosevelt who collected the gift of a 1,298-carat aquamarine gemstone when she visited Brazil in 1936 - and the colossal 225,000 carat Dom Pedro Aquamarine, named after the anachronistic Brazilian emperors, Pedro I and Pedro II.

To complete a truly sparkling lunch assemblage, add in zircons. Mined in Matara and known locally as Matara Diamonds, zircon has long been a popular substitute for diamonds around the world, its price ranging from \$30 to over \$3,000 per carat, depending on quality.

Although typically found in colours from brown and red to blue and purple, it is mostly cherished in its colourless and purest form which most closely resembles diamonds. The colourless zircon found in Sri Lanka is noted for its brilliance and fiery flashes of multicoloured light.

5

THE
COCKTAIL
PARTY GEM

"There are many little pieces of rudeness, only too common, which, while they evince ill-breeding, and are many of them extremely annoying, yet they are met with every day, and in persons otherwise well-bred."

THE LADIES' BOOK
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One gem and one gem only is the recommended wear for those short brief cocktail parties, book launches and first nights where you have but a few seconds to really make your mark: the cat's eye. It gains its name with unflinching exactitude for the stone – semi precious though it is – seems to stare right at you, demanding your full and dotting attention.

Known to science as chrysoberyl, the colour of Cat's Eye differ from semi-transparent golden yellow to slightly greenish or brownish yellow. They exhibit a distinct, ever changing light band that glides across the surface, resembling the eye of a cat.

They are found widely across Sri Lanka including Rakwana, Bulutota, Pelawatte, Horana, Panadura, Rathnapura, and Mestiya. Given their price range of \$3 to \$1700, there's an affordable eye for almost everyone.

The nation's most notable cat's eye was fished out of a paddy field in the late 1880s in Pelmadulla. The paddy was part of a 20,000-acre estate belong to Iddamalgoda Kumarihamy, the daughter of Iddamalgoda Nilame.

For decades, the 700 carat stone lay unpolished, bequeathed eventually to the grand old lady's grandson, a notable collector of cacti, who arranged for the gem to be cut and polished in 1930. The result was a stunning 465 carat cat's eye, the largest cut example in the world, earning it the moniker "The Eye of the

Lion". Other notable, if more modest, Sri Lankan cat's eye can be found at Buckingham Palace (a 105 carat cat's eye passed down from Edward VII to Charles III); the 105 carat Ray of Treasure (now in the possession of the National Gem and Jewellery Authority in Sri Lanka); and the 58.19 carat Maharani Cat's Eye in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.

6

GEMS FOR
DINNER
PARTIES

"Need I say that
the knife is to cut
your food with,
and must never be
used while eating?
To put it in your
mouth is a
distinctive mark of
low-breeding."

THE LADIES' BOOK
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AND MANUAL OF
POLITENESS, 1860

The last five gems are the go-to stones for dinner parties, should you be wanting to give your sapphires and rubies a bit of a rest. And if you really want to do that then head for spinels. Often mistaken for rubies or sapphires, spinels come in red, pink, and blue colours and are widely available in Sri Lanka. They make up a major part of its gem exports to the rest of the world. The value of this semi-precious stone has increased over time, and a carat will now put you back between \$300 to \$3000.

Although now much easier to identify, many a ruby owner in the past including Catherine the Great, the Black Prince, and the last Holy Roman Emperor— have posthumously found themselves somewhat shortchanged when the iconic ruby in their crowns were later identified as spinels.

This was also the fate of the famous Timur Ruby-cum-Spinal which was 'liberated' (along with the Koh-I-Noor diamond) from the Moghul India in 1849. It was presented by the East India Company to Queen Victoria and set into a necklace, still to be glimpsed from time to time on the necks of royal Windsor ladies.

Wise wearers often have them set with topaz to ensure the sort of twinkle to bring a dining table to a appreciable halt. From colourless to pink or blue, the higher value topaz stones are typically red or peach orange, sometimes called Sherry Topaz. They cost from \$100 to \$1000 per

carat. Open pit mining for this semi precious gem is carried out in many places in Sri Lanka, including Matale, Sigiriya, Balangoda and Nawalapitiya. Recent advances in industrial techniques for inducing colour into colourless topaz by irradiation have created something of a topaz bonanza for Sri Lanka as its topaz is especially susceptible to this treatment and produces the best shades of blue.

But for a complete change perhaps and to double your appeal opt for Alexandrites, for in buying this semi-precious stone, purchasers gain two jewels for the price of one - for the stone's unusual light absorbing qualities give it the possibly of such different appearances that it is often known as an emerald by day and a ruby by night.

Although relatively scarce on the island, Sri Lankan alexandrite's exceptional quality has made it much prized within the jewellery industry; and for between \$3,000 - \$20,000 per carat, you could sport one for your next appearance in Hi Magazine, the island's celebrity fix. Alternatively, you might search the world for the missing Naleem Alexandrite, a Sri Lankan gem of unparalleled quality said to be the largest such stone in the world - weighing in at 112 carats.

It was sold by a noted gem collector, Al Haj Naleem, in Beruwala but the onward chain of buyers has long since gone cold and it has not been recorded as having been seen anywhere

since 2011 – a year of such unpropitious and unparalleled misery as to offer perfect cover for the shy gemstone.

Gorgeous though they are, they are improved still further when set in jewellery that includes garnets. There are many so-called garnet species, the reddish shades being the most popular, and the blues the rarest. Sri Lankan garnets span a wide spectrum of colours, from deep reds to vibrant oranges, gentle pinks, and even green.

The greater their ability to transmit light, the greater their value as a semi precious stone. They range in price from \$500 to \$7000 per carat. From the Pharaohs to Jackie Onassis Kennedy, the gemstone has long been a favourite of jewellers worldwide.

The last of the quartet is the sort of gemstone that you ought really to wear just for yourself. A delicate pink version of mineral quartz, Rose Quartz is mined in many shades from very light to medium-dark pink; and Sri Lanka has the happy role of being a leading source for high quality rocks.

Beloved by alternative therapists, it is also called the "Heart Stone," and is a symbol of unconditional love, infinite peace, deep inner healing, self-love – and, given its price of between \$100 to \$1000 per carat, a relatively well endowed wallet.

People will, as they say, stare so its no bad thing to give them something to look at. But as Diane Von Furstenberg, a lady who knows as much about looking good as tasking good, remarked - "Jewellery is like the perfect spice—it always compliments what's already there". So in the end, wear it just for yourself

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, art and marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

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