

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

BEJEWELLED

Unearthing Sri Lanka's Most Celebrated Sapphires

DAVID SWARBRICK



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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR
COSIMA

WHO WAS BORN TO BE
SMOTHERED IN SAPPHIRES

“It’s always teatime.”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN
WONDERLAND
1871



ONE
THE ISLAND
MADE OF
SAPPHIRES

You don't need to be an oligarch, still less a well-healed duke or minor royal to notice if the family tiara needs an upgrade.

But that is nothing a sapphire cannot easily put right - for no stone sits more sumptuously on head, hand, or breast than the sapphire. The Sri Lankan sapphire to be exact.

Quite apart from a glittering light that illuminates its wearers, it is, if some sapphire traders are to be believed, a not inconsequential medical aid. Claims that it helps cataracts, inflammations, hair loss, skin diseases, nerve pain, rheumatism, and colic – to name but a few – are widespread, albeit untested.

Buddhists have long since taken this positive attitude to the stone one big step further, believing that sapphire accelerate spiritual enlightenment. Ellen Conroy in her seminal 1921 book “The Symbolism of Colour” quoted Buddhist texts that claimed the jewel produced peace of mind and equanimity: “it chases out evil thoughts by establishing healthy circulation. It opens barred doors to the spirit. It produces a desire for prayer. It brings peace, but he who would wear it must lead a pure and holy life.” Like the claim for curing cataracts, inflammations, hair loss, skin diseases, nerve pain, rheumatism, and colic, this claim, winsome though it is, is also untested.

It is, say some Buddhists, nothing less than the transformative third eye – the one that symbolizes clarity and insight, so enabling you to see beyond plain earthly things. Less happily, the Chinese, traders with the island since ancient times,

believed that sapphires were the congealed tears of Buddha - though this was not how Cleopatra was reputed to see the stone, using it with lavish application ground-up in her eye shadow.

Clearly though, the affinity between Sri Lanka and its sapphires is deep and well beyond most measures of what is ancient. Gem mining here reaches back to at least the second 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 mines can be back dated at least another 700 years.

Twenty five percent of its total land area is gem-bearing, mostly around Ratnapura and, less fruitfully, Elahera. 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, waterfalls to make Cartier wince. Indeed, the mining of alluvial deposits by simple water-winnowing river mining was for long the classic technique used to find gemstones.

Nowadays brutalist earthmovers excavate the topsoil; though tunnel mining is mildly kinder to the environment, with pits of 5 to 500 feet in depth are dug, and tunnels excavated horizontally from them.

Sales of Sri Lanka's gems boomed from \$40 million in 1980 to over \$473 million in 2022, a phenomenal acceleration promoted by two bouts of unusually effective 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 government land for mining. They extended control over sales and exporting and made it mandatory that gems discovered within mines be presented at public auctions, with the government receiving a share of sales amounting to 2.5%.

The industry's value chain is as long as a magical hamburger than everyone takes a good bite from before passing it on. Gem miners sell their stones to dealers, who sell to other dealers - who sell the rough stones to cutter-polishers. Historically, these have usually been Ceylon Moors

descendants of Arabians traders. The stones are then sold on to wholesalers and then retailers. And then to auctioneers who often resell the stones back to other consumers or retailers who resell them to new consumers. And so on, down the ages of recorded time.

But of all its many types of Sri Lankan gems, mined in apparent inexhaustible plenty, it is sapphires that anyone with the merest hint of glitter associates with the country. Eighty five percent of the precious stones mined on the island are sapphires.

Blue as the morning, the ocean, the sky, they are also red, purple; pink, gold sapphires, and lavender – the colour variety being dependant on the stone's chemical composition. Its green sapphires are its most distinctive, exhibiting a colour that is not found among other countries' sapphires.

Sri Lanka also excels at producing Hot Pink Sapphires, a yellow sapphire that is apparently a good deterrent against witchcraft, as well as orange, and white ones. And it is famous for a variant known as a padparadscha sapphire – from Padmaraga - a pink-orange stone as converted as the grail or meaning of life.

Even so, the colour that gets the most acclaim is – of course - the Blue Sapphire, the blue of inestimable, sophisticated material contentment. Selling for \$5,000 - 8,000 per carat, blue sapphires 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”.

But long before Loos, the country’s sapphires were much favoured for crowns, thrones, diadems, as well as accessories for First Nights and cocktail parties, or just to feel special curled up in front of the television. Hardly surprising then that over the centuries eighteen of the island’s sapphires have won for themselves an ineradicable place in the hearts of collectors, connoisseurs, aficionados, enthusiasts, and experts. And, of course, auctioneers.



TWO

SAPPHIRES TO
BE SEEN WITH

Made to be worn, flaunted,
noticed, all but two of the
country's most famous
sapphires are either trapped in
museums or lost to the public
eye.

One of the two you can see still worn is
the Stuart Sapphire, last sported by
Charles III at his coronation in
Westminster Abbey on the 6th of May
2023.

Arguments – all but improvable – rage
gently over this 104-carat stone that sits,
god like at the top of the crown,
surrounded by supplicant diamonds. Is it
from Sri Lanka – or Afghanistan, India, or
Burma?

Most experts reckon on Sri Lanka, But its
provenance is obscure, and it can only be
reliably dated to Charles II and his
brother, the hapless and exiled James II.


Less controversial is the only other
famous island sapphire still worn in
public today - the Princess Of Wales's
Engagement Ring. Compared to the other
notable sapphires given by Sri Lanka to
the world,

Princess Diana's Engagement Ring, now to
be seen on the hand of the current
Princess of Wales, Kate, is best
categorised as small but perfectly formed.

A mere twelve carats, this oval ring
rocketed into the homes of anyone with a
television set when the then Prince of
Wales declared his

love (“whatever that is”) for his future wife, Lady Diana Spencer in 1981. It was later inherited by her elder son and at some point between 2010 and 2011 was resized to fit the finger of his own finance, Kate Middleton, a brilliant blue reminder of Sri Lanka in any of the millions of photographs published of her around the world every week.

But there the trail of stones worn to be seen stops abruptly. A full half of the island’s most famous sapphires are demurely and democratically available to view trapped within the reinforced glass cases of a handful of richly endowed museums.



THREE
SAPPHIRES
IMPRISONED

The Smithsonian Museum in
Washington, D.C leads the
pack of museums stuffed with
sapphires with effortless
aplomb

Its collection is headed up by the legendary Logan Blue Sapphire, the stone's 423 carats almost outnumbering the combined total of the other three Sri Lankan sapphires in its collection. Entirely without flaws, the stunning stone emanates a lush cornflower blue with violet overtones and has been set as a brooch supported by twenty white diamonds. Not that anyone is allowed to wear it now. Its discovery is famously opaque. It is thought to have been mined in the early nineteenth century, cut, and polished and then packed off to Paris for sale. After various adoring owners, it eventually passed into the hands of Robert Guggenheim, the American benefactor behind the Smithsonian's Hall of Gems and Minerals. Guggenheim gifted the jewel to his new wife, Rebecca, around 1938. On his death she gave the jewel to the Smithsonian.

Roughly half the size is the Smithsonian's next great Sri Lankan stone - The Star Of Artaban.

Once upon a time, many centuries ago, a wise man named Artaban set off from Persia to join the three Magi visiting the baby Jesus. The Bible tells us nothing about who these three wise men were - though tradition has it that they were named Melchior, Caspar and

Balthazar and came respectively from Persian, India, and Arabia. But there was a fourth - Artaban, the magi who never actually made it to Bethlehem, despite having purchased three unforgettable gems as presents, one of which was a sapphire.

This vague fable, with a sapphire at its centre, provided the perfect name for a milky blue 287 carat sapphire from Sri Lanka whose own origins are also mildly impenetrable.

What little is known of the colossal stone is that it was bought in 1943 by a member of the Georgia Mineral Society and gifted anonymously to the Smithsonian.

The Smithsonian's third great sapphire is The Star Of Bombay. Arguments continue over whether the gem is Sri Lankan or Indian. It was discovered at a time when the British East India company ruled Sri Lanka and on the balance of probability, it seems more than likely that the 182-carat stone was mined on the island before setting off on its world travels.

Hollywood was to be its happiest home for it was bought by Douglas Fairbanks in the 1920s for "America's sweetheart," his wife Mary

Pickford "the best-known woman who has ever lived." Star of the silent screen, her own fame came to an abrupt halt was sound was added to the movie mix a few years after she received her glamorous Sri Lankan sapphire.

Hopefully, its unusual violet-blue colour (caused by a singular mixture of titanium, iron, and vanadium) gave her some consolation in the decades that followed. On her death in 1979 it was donated to the Smithsonian.

The Bismark Sapphire, the ultimate honeymoon gift, is the lucky Museum's fourth great island sapphire. It was discovered in Sri Lanka in 1920, though rumours within the South Asian gem trade claim that it was merely sold here – but that it originated in Burma.

Whatever the truth of its provenance, it was bought by Harrison Willaims, an American carpet sweeper-cum-millionaire for his third wife, the remarkable Countess Mona von Bismarck, named by Chanel in 1930 as "The Best Dressed Woman in the World;" set to music by Cole Porter in "Ridin' High" in 1936; and painted by Salvador Dalí in 1943. Given Harrison Williams' fortune (now valued at over 11 billion dollars) the 98.6 carat honeymoon present was but a

bauble. The countess was to outlive Willaims and at some point between her fourth (Count Albrecht von Bismarck-Schonhausen) and fifth husband (Count Umberto de Martini) donated the jewel to the Smithsonian Today it sits there for all to see (but never again wear), mounted in a pendant necklace of diamonds and smaller submissive sapphires.

New York's American Museum of Natural History houses two other great Sri Lankan sapphires in among its labyrinthine halls of stuffed animals and mannequins. The greatest of these, The Star Of India, is larger than any other Sri Lankan sapphire now with US citizenship. Much debate and not a little bit of earnest patriotism has gone into confirming its origin as Sri Lankan. But if the 'India' tag is wrong, so too is that of 'star' for this much misnamed stone has not one but two such stars on it making it rare beyond the dreams of avarice. The milky quality of the stone was caused by the minerals within it that also produced its dreamy star effect, the tiny fibres of the mineral, reflecting light like cat's eyes. Its discovery may be a mystery, but its trail becomes clear in 1905 when the gem arrived in London, brought by a British army officer from Madras. It was cut by the jeweller Albert Ramsay to leave a 563.35-carat almost flawless star sapphire.

. It was bought by the American millionaire J. P. Morgan and lived an inappropriately peaceful life in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City until its theft in 1964. The thieves were helped by the gem's alarm system being battery-dead – but within days Murph the Surf and his villainous cronies were arrested, and the gem returned to its museum: forever admired and never worn.

The museum's other great stone is The Midnight Star Sapphire. A deep purple-violet star gem, it gets its name from its shadowy appearance, an appropriate hue for a 116.75 carat gem with a provenance that is anything but well illuminated.

Most experts appear to agree that it does actually come from Sri Lanka (though their reasoning can be Babylonian to follow) but reliable records only date back to the end of the 19th century when the stone was acquired by George Kunz and sold to the American financier, J.P. Morgan.

Three of Sri Lanka's paramount sapphires live in museums in France, Russia, and the UK. The oldest by far is The Aphrodite Sapphire. Modestly sized and sitting safe in a gallery of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum this is not simply a sapphire,

almost certainly from Sri Lanka, but also one of the earliest and most beautiful Roman jewels in the world.

Carved at some point in the first century it depicts Aphrodite feeding an eagle. Centuries younger is the Talisman Of Charlemagne. Attributed to the eighth century emperor, Charlemagne,

The Talisman is a reliquary said to hold fragments of the hair of the Virgin Mary and a remnant of the True Cross. A dazzling early medieval jewel in its own right, it bears at its centre what experts at the Palace of Tau Museum in Reims, say is a 190-carat blue grey sapphire from Sri Lanka.

The last matchless museum sapphire not to fall into American hands is The Empress Maria's Sapphire. The ninth largest blue sapphire in the world, this 260.37 carat sapphire was purchased as a holiday keepsake by the empresses' husband, Tsar Alexander II in the London Great Exhibition of 1862.

Just the year before the Tsar had won acclaim for his emancipation of Russian serfs – a liberal legacy that nevertheless did nothing to forestall his assassination twenty years later by People's

Will, an anarchist organization. At the time of receiving her gift, the Tsarina had been married for 23 years, but it was only in 1860 on the death of her formidable mother-in-law that she came into her own, and took a more decisive role in the Russian court. The Tsarina was no wallflower. Behind the scenes, she encouraged her husband to liberate the serfs, further democratic initiatives and promote capitalism.

The sapphire was made into an oval brooch adorned with a further 56 carats of diamonds and for eighteen years was worn with stylish delight. On the Tsarina's death in 1880 it was donated to the State Diamond Fund, still in existence today by way of the Borovitsky Gate in the Kremlin where it sits, almost lost amidst such an orgy of other rare gems, insignia, and crown jewels as to dim the dawn itself.



FOUR
LOST
SAPPHIRES

The final tally of seven of the island's most significant sapphires have disappeared from the public eye even though many of them were only discovered in the past few years. Glimpsed once or twice, they now sit in private safes or Swiss banks, or perhaps on the necks of adored second wives from Moscow and Jeddah to Manhattan.

Oldest of these Missing- Presumed- Glittering-in-Private-Stones is The Blue Giant Of The Orient. Weighing in at 466 carats, it is one of the world's largest sapphires - though it was rumoured to be over 600 carats when it was first discovered in 1907, pulled from the waters of the Kalu Ganga, a river that winds across the foothills of Adam's Peak.

It was bought and processed by O. L. M. Macan Markar & Co, a jeweller based in Colombo, who oversaw the cutting and polishing.

Macan Markar, established in 1860, was one of the country's preeminent jewellers, whose customers reached deep into the British royal family. The cutting of the gem properly revealed the stone's massive facets which yielded to the maximin possible light saturation so rendering the stone an impressive corn flower blue.

Its life thereafter became a mystery. Valued at \$7,000 in 1907, it was sold to an anonymous American buyer.

For nearly a hundred years it vanished from the public eye – to reappear unexpectedly in May 2004 at the Christie's Magnificent Jewels action catalogue in Geneva. Remarkedly, it failed

to sell in the auction but was later sold privately for \$1 million – again to a most anonymous collector; and has once again disappeared from the public eye.

Its discovery was later followed by that of the Blue Belle Of Asia. Rarely has a modest paddy field ever yielded so rich a crop as this, Fished out from marshy rice fields near Rathnapura in 1926; and bought by O. L. M. Macan Markar & Co, it was polished and processed to reveal a 392.52-carat stone. Advertising his gem for its ‘highly prized peacock blue colour and excellent clarity,’ O. L. M. Macan Markar & Co sold it to Lord Nuffield, the founder of Morris Motors Limited in 1937. Quite why the motor magnate wanted it is a mystery.

He claimed he wished to present it to The Queen Consort, Elizabeth, on her coronation in 1937, but it was instead to vanish for thirty-five years - begging the question: Did it ever reach the Queen; or did she resell it in secret? Its next public airing was in the 1970s when it was examined by the Swiss-based gem dealer, Theodore Horovitz.

In 2014 it reappeared at an auction and was bought for \$17.29 million by a secretive and disappearing Saudi collector.

In a perfect example of nature obediently following Hollywood, the next sapphire, the so-called Heart of the Ocean in the film “Titanic,” was posthumously created following the film’s success as a 170 carat Ceylon blue sapphire, set with sixty-five acolyte diamonds. The sapphire replaced the inexpensive blue quartz flung by Kate Winslet into the icy ocean. It was worn with much acclaim in 1998 by Celine Dion when she sang “My Heart Will Go On” at the Oscars. And as is often the way with over mighty jewellery, it vanished some years later when it was auctioned for over \$2 million at a charity ball to a buyer who remains anonymous to this day. More affordable copies of the necklace can be bought on eBay.

The size of the last four Sri Lankan sapphires beggars belief and proves that if, as Scott Fitzgerald said, there is a diamond as big as the Ritz somewhere, there is also a sapphire almost as big as a family dog. The first of these is The Pride Of Sri Lanka.

In a world where carats are king, the 856 carats of The Pride of Sri Lanka easily catapults the stone into the rarified reaches of Sri Lankan sapphires twinkling in a glittering stratosphere. It was pulled from mines in Marapanna, a few kilometres from

Rathnapura in 1998. In a year overshadowed by the new violent excesses of the civil war, its discovery, along with the country's cricket team's victory in the test match against England, was one of the few triumphs of the year. Displayed briefly in a glass box, it was soon to vanish altogether, bought by a buyer whose identity is likely to still be a mystery to the Inland Revenue.

Nearly twenty years later, in 2015 the Star Of Adam was found. Various price quotations have been given for this 1,444-carat sapphire pulled from Rathnapura's mines - and the difference between them is more than sufficient to power the economy of a city state country for several months. \$100 million; \$175 million; \$300 million - all emerge as possible price points for this 280-ounce egg-shaped stone.

What makes the stone so remarkable, size excepted, is the distinct 6-rayed star it displays, an effect known amongst jewellers as "asterism," deriving from the complex make-up of the stone itself which produces an internal reflection effect. The stone's owner, who has wisely chosen to remain anonymous, has gone to ground since announcing that he might be interested in a sale.

And then in 2021 two stones were uncovered whose size was so vast as to trigger the mythical teras of Buddha himself. The Serendipity Sapphire was the first of these. Weighing in at around 510 kilograms and 2.6 million carats, this is the world's largest star sapphire cluster. It was discovered in July 2021 in Kahawatte near Ratnapura – and entirely by accident, when Mr Gamage, a gem trader, set workmen to dig a well.

Since its discovery, Mr Gamage has wisely chosen to remain entirely silent on the subject of his home improvement bonanza. Just a few months later, in December, The Queen Of Asia was found. So used to amazing discoveries, the phlegmatic world of intentional jewellery was ill-prepared for the discovery of this 310 kilogram, 1.6 million carrot blue sapphire. Unearthed in Batugedara near Ratnapura, it was despatched for deeper examination and authentication, and then rumoured to be bought by a Dubai-based company – though the news trail has since gone cold.

A container load of other massive sapphires have also piled up, awaiting proper authentication, each one Sri Lankan and

each set to break eye watering record for size, quality, or value. They include an orange sapphire of 825 carats and eight blue sapphires: 138; 260; 254; 856; 1200; 2516; 4002; and 8042 carats. All nine of them have disappeared from the public eye, sold on in private auctions held in hotel suites swept for bugs – and perhaps one day polished up and worn to a coronation or a pop star's 70th birthday party.

Keep your eyes peeled for them; and don't ever blink.

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, 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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