

**D**o you wear a precious stone? Have you ever wondered where that stone came from? How many hands it passed through from the time it was taken from the earth until it finally came to you? I regard each stone as an object full of secrets to be unravelled and relish the thought of being able to trace precious stones right back to their source.

When an invitation came to visit the annual Gems and Jewellery Fair in Bangkok it was a call to embark on a voyage of discovery. Travel formalities were completed in a trice and there I was on the trail of Thailand's famous rubies and sapphires. They find them even in the silvian sand of the rivers, along with the occasional amethyst, aquamarine, garnet, spinel and zircon. Moreover, Thailand is a major international processing centre where gems are cut, polished and set.

What many people don't know is that the craft of working with gold and precious stones came to Thailand from South India. The oldest pieces of jewellery in Thai museums shows typical Dravidian influence. The Dvaravati Mon people of Southern Thailand learned the tricks of workmanship and faithfully copied the designs.

The very first gems used were rubies, which appeared in Mon gold jewellery with its distinctive dot design, the dots being individual rubies. Increasingly, the use of emeralds and sapphires in combination with rubies, came into vogue, culminating in some of the truly splendid works of the Ayutthaya Period, 200 to 400 years ago, when gold crowns, swords, even items of clothing such as slippers, were lavishly spangled and studded with gems — all for royalty of course.

The wares on display at the Gems and Jewellery Fair is fit for kings but happily the event is open to anyone who loves beautiful things. More than 2,000 stalls, interacting with some 1,500 exhibitors from across the globe — frankly I didn't know where to begin. My eyes were dazzled no matter which way I looked — sapphires, tourmaline, diamonds, rubies, garnets, cat's eyes, topaz... here was every kind of stone I had studied in the course to qualify for my gemologists degree in Mumbai. One whole wing was devoted exclusively to diamonds and some pavilions were devoted to dealers from particular countries. There was a separate section for the instruments used in gemology. I couldn't miss that!

The 'display work' was an education in itself — something we in India give little thought to. In fact, special emphasis was laid on the display of gemstones at various stalls. There was enormous variety. Some were



### FASHION

For a jeweller, gems are both profession and passion. SOLI SETHI describes the delights of the recent Bangkok Gems & Jewellery festival

**JEWEL SHOW**  
Every kind of stone — sapphires, tourmaline, diamond, ruby, garnet, topaz and many more — was on display at the jewellery fair in Bangkok.



austere — the jewellery was shown under special lights against a matte black backdrop. Others displays were almost theatrical, like one that duplicated a little hut on a bench or another got up like a great big glass jewel box. Even the packaging was imaginative and added to the appeal of the jewellery.

They say 'johari hi hire ki kismet jaisie hai', but after spending three days at this fair, I could see how many things go into enhancing the value of

a precious stone. The fair was also a treat because it brought together people in the business who are very knowledgeable.

Thailand, and its neighbours, especially Myanmar, Cambodia, and, more distantly Sri Lanka, have some of the most beautiful sources of coloured gemstones in the world. The city of Chanthaburi, like Ratnapur in Sri Lanka, is one of the world's most famous "gem towns". This region is

known primarily for mining rubies and secondarily for yellow sapphire or black star-sapphire. Because of the concentration of skilled workers in Chanthaburi, traders here import gems from all over the world for processing. You can buy just about any kind of stone at Chanthaburi's weekend market.

Even some small towns have become important gem-dealing markets — for example Mae Sot and Mae Sai on the Burma border. Good quality

jade and jadeite are found near these places.

Another gem-source lies on Thailand's eastern border with Cambodia and Malaysia. This is Trat Province. The rubies from this place are darker and less costly than the Chanthaburi and Burmese rubies. The town of Bo Rai is the main ruby centre. Some of the gems here come from the famous Pailin Mines in Cambodia. When the bloody-handed Khmer Rouge were running that country they got much

of their money from selling Pailin rubies. They extracted so much that the mines are almost depleted now.

If sapphire rules your heart then head for Kanchanaburi or Phrae. Kanchanaburi may be a strange new name for you but you have surely heard of the River Kwai and the bridge that World War II prisoners built over it for the occupying Japanese. The sapphires from this place are known for their deep blue colour — some are the colour of ink. The Phrae sapphires mines are oldest mines in Thailand that still yield gems — they have been worked for nearly a thousand years.

As a jeweller on a purchasing trip, I also got good advice on what to beware of in Thailand.

The rules are simple: Purchase only from a well-established firm. Beware of anyone offering an incredible "bargain".

Don't let a guide, taxi driver or other local take you to a shop. They receive a hefty commission which of course goes on top of your bill. Buying gems or jewellery to resell at double or triple the purchase price is an impossible proposition under any circumstances. Buy jewellery only for personal satisfaction for your own use or for loved ones.

Make price comparisons in various shops before deciding to buy. Never be in a hurry.

Never mail sapphires or other precious stones. Carry valuable items with you.

Do not believe special (jewellery) sales of any kind. Reputable dealers hardly ever offer sales and never send tents to lure tourists to their stores.

There are no promotions, shows or special sales on jewellery authorised by the government or any official agencies at any time of the year.

The government does not own, operate, subsidise, or authorise any jewellery stores.

As far as you can, take time to verify all claims. Wares, promises, personal guarantees, unchecked documents, unauthorised verbal or written statements, casual references, etc. — for example Mae Sot and Mae Sai on the Burma border. Good quality

All Thai embassies, consulates or any delegations abroad are neither bound nor responsible for refunding goods that are bought in Thailand. When in doubt about a gem shop, check it with the TAT at

Tourist Assistance Centre, Tourism Information of Thailand, Ratchadamnoen Nok Avenue, Bangkok (Tel: 281-5051, 282-8129).

Our final warning: Don't expect to make any profit from buying jewellery; otherwise "grasp all, lose all".