

BY DIANA JARRETT, GG

# Heaven ON Earth

UNCOVERING THE KASHMIR MYSTIQUE

[ OPPOSITE ]  
35.09 ct cushion shaped  
Kashmir sapphire from  
Christies Magnificent  
Jewels Geneva.

High in the Great Himalayas, tucked into an obscure setting is a land called Jammu and Kashmir. From time immemorial, the mysterious terrain created fodder for exotic folklore, and was the object of contentious land disputes. Throughout the centuries many cultures have dominated the province; Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and the British Crown. Today, the ancient mountainous district is administered by the state of India. Yet pockets of this richly complex region still reflects its primeval adage.

“If there is a heaven on earth,  
it’s here, it’s here, it’s here.”

Mughal Emperor Jehangir, d. 1627 in Kashmir

The fabled Kashmir sapphire discovered there has also enjoyed the kind of intriguing history of which exotic legends are woven — and most all of them are true. Early accounts claim that the legendary gemstones were stumbled over by nomadic tribal herds-men roaming high in the Padar region in the latter part of the 19th century. Were it not for a massive landslip the story goes, the earth would have never given up its priceless hoard described by early traders as profusely abundant and of enormous proportions.



### SO SOON GONE

By the early 20th century however, the region had virtually been stripped of its ransom, rendering large scale recovery efforts a thing of the past. Local poaching continued to trickle out stones for decades. And while the rest of civilization outside these isolated peaks whirled at breakneck speed into the 21st century, this region became largely deserted as a sapphire deposit. Indigenous tribal groups remained much as they were 200 years ago. Today, precious few of the enchanted gemstones enter the marketplace. When they do appear, all bets are off as to what price they may achieve. Those who do understand Kashmir sapphires are a small elite group of collectors willing to pay a high premium for this celebrated gem.

Certainly the now defunct Kashmiri mines were not the world's only source for sapphires. Other far-flung regions like

Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Thailand and Cambodia all produce sapphire and some of it is of exceptional quality. But for the serious connoisseur, nothing less than a genuine Kashmir sapphire will do.

### TRAITS REVEAL THEIR ORIGIN

Kashmir sapphires are not famous simply for their romantic story of discovery. Early sapphire finds had a quality never seen before — in any part of the world. Distinguished by a velvety softness and a lustrous cornflower hue, Kashmir sapphires look like no other sapphire in existence. Their vibrantly saturated blue color handles light in a spectacular way; and importantly it does not lose its rich appearance under different light sources. This trait is most likely the result of its famed silk-like inclusions found throughout the crystals which contribute to the scattering of light to remove

[ RIGHT ] Rugged terrain and harsh climate are natural barriers to penetrating the region.

[ BELOW ] 10.09 ct cushion shaped Kashmir sapphire ring, signed Cartier. Acquired and sold by Stephen Silver Fine Jewelry.



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CREATIVELY CLASSIC

Kashmir rough crystals are fairly easy to identify by a distinctive white clay-like substance coating the surface. Absent are the purplish or grayish tones so pervasive with sapphire harvested elsewhere. In a word, these stones reign with incomparable color.



**[ ABOVE LEFT ]**  
Kashmir rough crystals alongside oval cut Kashmir sapphire.

**[ ABOVE RIGHT ]**  
The 17.16 ct Imperial Blue Kashmir Sapphire ring.



extinction. This helps Kashmir stones to hold their color in all lighting conditions.

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#### HAZARDOUS RECOVERY METHODS

Even now, considerable areas remain unexplored in sections of Jammu & Kashmir, so theoretically there is potential for production of sapphires today. But few outsiders will risk entering the area in search of these blue stones. Aside from the difficulty in getting there, the area's religious and military factions are always at odds with each other, and are dangerously inhospitable to foreigners.

Bangkok-based ruby and sapphire authority Richard W. Hughes understands the obstacles facing would-be 'Indiana Jones' explorers attempting to penetrate the region. "Mining methods at the Kashmir mines have always been primitive due to the altitude and remote location." The Valley has an average height of 6,100 feet above sea-level but the surrounding mountain range averages an elevation of 16,000 feet. Even today, the way to the mines remains accessible primarily by foot, with the closest road-head about six to eight days' march from the mines. "Much of the journey winds over narrow mountainous paths fit only for man and small pack animals. In many places large rivers must be crossed, spanned only by hanging bridges not designed for large loads. This,

LEFT: PHOTO COURTESY KASHMIR BLUE;  
RIGHT: PHOTO COURTESY SOTHEBY'S HONG KONG



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[ TOP ] Primitive bridges string together treacherous routes to the mine.

[ BOTTOM ] Gujar mountainous tribal members in the Kashmir region.

as much as anything, has ensured that mining methods remain primitive," Hughes cautions.

Kashmir sapphire authority Ed Cleveland has immersed himself in the culture by living with the Kashmiri people for well over a decade. Any trading done is accomplished at the mercy of the harsh weather conditions Cleveland disclosed. "Usually indigenous miners have a mere 60 day window of opportunity to get in and out of this brutal terrain," he reports. That narrow opening occurs in July and August. "By November, or early December we encounter 25 foot high snow falls along the trading route," he points out. In some places average January temperature is -4°F with extremes falling to -40°F.

Soon after first visiting the region he became fascinated with Kashmir sapphires. And after finessing a steep learning curve, Cleveland found his niche as an expert in identifying new or old sapphire crystals as they became available. One has to be there when those precious stones appear — so Cleveland relocated fulltime to the Himalayas. "Only a handful of dealers worldwide have experience trading with Kashmir. We scour the mountains tirelessly going over Kashmir by jeep or motorcycle searching for stones before they reach the West."

#### PRICING HISTORY

With its rich and storied past, and a very limited supply, it's understandable that the prices for fine Kashmir sapphires are on a steep trajectory. Some of the most available methods of keeping tabs on their ascending price are through fine auction houses around the globe. Every new Kashmir sapphire coming up for sale is bound to set a new record price. But not every fine Kashmir sapphire sale occurs at auction. Many of the finest stones are also traded privately out of public scrutiny.

On October 7, 2014, Sotheby's held their Magnificent Jewels and Jadeite auction in Hong Kong. Included in the outstanding collection for sale was an exceptional 17.16 carat Kashmir sapphire, named The Imperial Blue. It bore all the hallmarks of the finest Kashmir sapphire. The size was almost unheard of, Sotheby's said. "Its remarkable weight of over 17 carats is practically unseen in sapphires of such pedigree; combined with a homogeneous kingly blue colour and exceptional clarity which made an emerald cut possible, this extraordinary gem displays superior qualities rarely found in even the finest Kashmir sapphires." It sold for \$4,059,031 setting a new world record for Kashmir sapphires, earning \$236,540 per carat.

#### WHAT'S NEXT ON THE KASHMIR TRAIL?

The cognoscente embraces with optimism the recovery of more of these famous jewels in the future. And geological surveys suggest the presence of untapped areas rich with sapphire, according to Cleveland. But until that day arrives, serious collectors will pounce on the pieces as soon as they appear on the auction market; and a broadening number of new devotees will continue to marvel at these storied stones. ■



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