

Imperial Topaz

Brazilian gold mining town produces golden gemstone

In about 1751 “Brazilian Rubies” were reported from the area known today as Ouro Preto, in Minas Gerais, Brazil. This area produced the majority of the world’s gold during the eighteenth century when Brazil was a Portuguese colony, the riches fostering a creative and philosophical community that has been compared to modern-day New York City! The gold was eventually mined out, but we are interested in the “rubies” which we now know were peach to red colored topaz. A 120 square kilometer area west of Ouro Preto is still the only commercially viable area imperial topaz is mined in the world.

Prior to Ouro Preto, the most important source for precious topaz was the Königskrone (King’s Crown) topaz mine. This snail-shaped outcropping composed of granite near Saxony, Germany has been producing yellow topaz since the middle ages. At that time it was thought to cure insomnia and prevent all sorts of nasty things from happening. In his 1903 treatise “Gems and Gem Materials”, Oliver Cummings Farrington presented commentary of his own on a famous historical legend. *A topaz presented by Lady Hildegarde, wife of Theoderic, Count of Holland, to a monastery in her native town, emitted at night a light so brilliant that in the chapel where it was kept, prayers could be read at night without the aid of a light. A statement which might well be true if the monks knew the prayers by heart!*

Today there are several mines operating in the topaz belt

west of Ouro Preto, but the largest and most mechanized is the Capao de Lana mine near the small village of Rodrigo Silva. At the Capao mine, topaz crystals are separated from the earth using

high-pressure water cannons. The initial sorting is done with sieves and final sorting is done by hand. Fortunately, when a particularly promising vein is uncovered, recovery is occasionally still done by hand. According to Peter Keller, each day approximately 900 tons of ore are processed, yielding an average of about nine kilograms of topaz but only a small percentage of that is usable as gems.

Historically, several yellow stones went by the name topaz. Even in the last fifty years, countless yellow and smoky colored quartz gems have been sold as topaz and smoky topaz. In reality, smoky colored topaz is virtually unknown. To help distinguish the two, the trade refers to real topaz as precious topaz. There is no standard for what is precious topaz versus imperial topaz. Many dealers use the two terms interchangeably. Usually however, imperial topaz denotes a range of colors from yellow to red or even purple with the most typical being peach or sherry colored. While it is possible to lightly heat the stones and leave a light pink color, most of the material is cut without any treatment. Other colors, notably brown or cognac are less rare, and can be found in a variety of locations, including the United States.

Topaz always contains varying amounts of both hydroxyl (hydrogen and oxygen) and fluorine, and the relative amounts of each can help distinguish the source of a gemstone. Topaz from Ouro Preto is distinctive by being very rich in hydroxyl rather than fluorine.

Due to its distinctive coloration, imperial topaz from Ouro Preto can be found in any major museum housing a gem and mineral collection. One famous specimen is a 1.8-kilogram, 27-centimeter crystal housed in the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. The Smithsonian collection includes a beautiful 93.6-carat faceted topaz from the Capao mine along with several smaller faceted gems and some beautiful, fiery orange, double-terminated crystals.

Pictured top to bottom:

1.44ct Imperial Topaz and Diamond Ring \$1395

18.77ct Imperial Topaz in Rose and 18KT Gold \$3495

Cognac Topaz and Imperial Topaz Beads \$795

Imperial Topaz in Hammered Gold \$995

