

## Madagascar Sapphire

### African island is rich in species and gemstones

Madagascar has long been known as a land of rich bio-diversity. Fully 80% of species found in Madagascar are found nowhere else on earth. Probably the most recognizable of those unusual inhabitants is the lemur. Madagascar is home to over 200 species of lemur and none are found anywhere else on earth! To modern gem connoisseurs, Madagascar is also known as the largest producer of fine blue and fancy color sapphire for the last decade.

Sapphire was first mined commercially in Madagascar in 1998 when some blue sapphires found on a riverbank near Ilakaka were shown to visiting Thai businessmen. As word spread, the small town grew exponentially in population. The potential riches combined with lack of infrastructure created an environment similar to the California gold rush days. Often, entire families would arrive and work the mines in hopes of striking it rich. Mining consists of both large, well-organized open pit mining and small-scale hand dug pits. Even in the large mines, most of the digging is done by hand with shovels. The sapphires are weathered out of the original hard rock they formed in,

so recovering the sapphires usually involves screening the sand and mud to separate the larger stones. Then the stones are picked through by hand to identify the potential gemstone rough. Ilakaka is only the

first of many sapphire mining areas in Madagascar. According to some experts, only 10% of the island does NOT have gemstones. We will be wearing Madagascar gems for many years to come. The concern will be how to control the rate of mining so as not to destroy the ecosystem.

The range of sapphire colors found in Madagascar is very similar to that found in Sri Lanka. It is believed that the islands of Madagascar and Sri Lanka were once part of a larger landmass and separated from East Africa and the Southwest coast of India. That would seem logical since all of these areas are rich in gemstones. It seems ironic that sapphires have been mined on the tiny island of Sri Lanka for over 2000 years, yet have only recently been discovered on the much larger island of Madagascar!

Most of the sapphire rough from Ilakaka is cloudy when recovered from the ground similar to many Ceylon sapphires from Sri Lanka. The cloudiness is caused by thousands of microscopic titanium dioxide crystals formed within the sapphire. When properly aligned, these stones can often be cut to form star sapphires, but usually, they are heated to temperatures high enough to dissolve the titanium dioxide, then cooled at a rate that doesn't allow it to re-crystallize. When the merchant is fortunate, the result can be a transparent fine blue sapphire. Because the color and quality of Madagascar sapphire is so close to that from Sri Lanka, many of them have been sold as Ceylon sapphires. The practice became so prevalent that today the term Ceylon sapphire is used in the trade to describe sapphire of a certain type, rather than one specifically from the island of Sri Lanka.

**4.08ct Sapphire and Diamond in 18KT \$9700**

**4.34ct Sapphire and Diamond in 14KT \$4900**

**Cabochon Sapphires in Fine Silver Brooch \$595**

**1.38ct Sapphire and Diamond Ring \$2790**

**Ilakaka Sapphire Mine**

