Burmese Spinel
Bright jewels from a mysterious, hidden land

What is it inside mankind that drives us to explore – to seek out the unknown and mysterious? I enjoy traveling and have been to Thailand several times to purchase gemstones. On a few of those trips I made it to the border with Burma (known today as Myanmar), but the crossing was closed to tourists so the interior remained hidden. I was beside myself with curiosity because this mysterious land is a prime source of legendary gemstones, both historically and recently. Finally, there was a brief window of opportunity to visit in the late 1990's and I made a trip to Rangoon with my family, visiting the markets and enjoying the sights. At the time I was optimistic that we would soon be making visits every two or three years to buy gems. Unfortunately, any political changes at that point were only superficial and business once again became difficult.

The good news is Burma appears to be opening up its borders again. In fact, US citizens can now apply online for tourist visas and reportedly hear back within three days! While whole sections of the country are still closed to travel, we hope that Burma will continue on the road to democracy and the long suffering Burmese people will get a chance to benefit from the abundant natural resources they have.

At this time it is still illegal to import Burmese ruby and jade into the United States, but trade of other Burmese gems is unrestricted. Burmese rubies are valued for their *open* color. At times they are so bright that they appear almost fluorescent, while most rubies from other locations have overtones that make them appear dark. The interesting thing is that Burmese spinels tend to have this same property of open, bright color. I grew up watching Star Wars so I enjoyed reading a GIA article by fellow traveler and gem explorer, Vincent Pardieu. In it he notes that the *force* is strong in spinel but one needs to *beware of the dark side*. Pink and red spinels from most locations are touched by dark overtones similar to garnets, but many Burmese spinels are bright neon red and pink, clear of those dark overtones. The best known source for these bright spinels is the Namya area, north of Mandalay.

Spinel was made synthetically in a laboratory sometime around 1900. Since it was available in several different colors and was a very durable stone, the synthetics became immediately popular as birthstones. Unfortunately natural spinels were extremely rare then and didn't have any specific historical names for the different color varieties. So when the new synthetics were produced by the tens of thousands, the name spinel became associated with synthetic. Natural spinel still suffers today from that name association and similar to zircon, usually requires some education before customers are clear on the difference.

Natural spinel has a hardness of 8 making it an ideal gemstone for all types of jewelry including rings. Large bright spinels are very unusual and typically end up in collections, so much of the jewelry available focuses on smaller stones, either singly or in clusters.

0.62ct red spinel with 0.65ctw diamonds and black onyx in palladium $3200

0.83ctw spinels and 0.10ctw diamonds in 14KT earrings $1250

1.19ct orange spinel and diamonds in 14KT gold and sterling silver pendant $1350

Assorted stackable spinel rings $700-$900

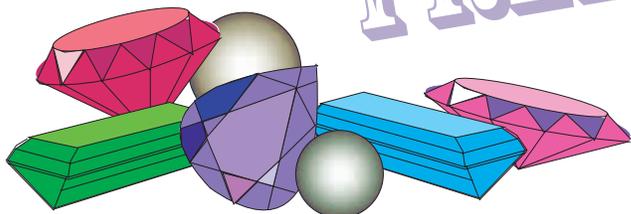**A parcel of Burmese spinels shown with spinel specimens in white quartz**

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