

# AUSTRALIAN SAPPHIRES: THE CORUNDUM THAT MATCHES TODAY'S TRENDS

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Australia has long been known as the source of some of the world's finest opals, but of late its popularity has once again been on the rise for the interesting sapphires it produces.

The country's history with the gem started in the 1850s, when gold miners happened to find corundum. Commercial production of Australian sapphire didn't really get going until the early 1900s. Techniques and production picked up over the decades, with the 1960s and 1970s seeing a boom in production thanks to new mechanized mining techniques and high demand from Thai buyers, a report from GIA said. The large amounts of Australian sapphires entering the market also helped expand Thai sapphire cutting, treatment, and trading.

In the 1980s, Australia was the source of about 70% of the world's sapphires, mostly from New South Wales, according Australian government agency Geoscience Australia, but as mining with machines became more prevalent around the world, Australian miners struggled to create a global market for its sapphires amid competition from Madagascar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia, and its share of the market dropped to about 20%-30%, it estimates.

Sapphires (as well as rubies) have been found in all of Australia's east-

ern states, including Tasmania, all of which are alkali basalt-related. According to the GIA report, of the areas on the country's East Coast where sapphire deposits have been reported, there are three regions widely known as its primary mining districts: the Inverell-Glen Innes region on the New England Plateau in New South Wales, the Rubyvale-Anakie district in Queensland, and Lava Plains in northern Queensland.

Historic examples of Australian sapphires include the 169-carat Pride of Queensland, the largest faceted yellow sapphire ever found in Australia, and the 733-carat Black Star Sapphire of Queensland, with a six-point star. A young boy named Roy Spencer found the original crystal from which it was cut, which weighed 1,156 carats, in Queensland in the 1930s, according to



Australian sapphire rough and cut stones, all from Anakie. Weight of cut stones (from left to right): 1.97 carats, 1.76 carats, 0.97 carats, 1.90 carats, 2.11 carats, 1.72 carats, 2.37 carats, 2.06 and then 2.60 carats. (Image courtesy of Earth's Treasury; Photo credit: Jeff Hapeman)



Rough Australian sapphires.  
(Image courtesy of Fura Gems)



The parti-color sapphires from Australia are one of the reasons the country's corundum has increased in popularity of late.  
(Image courtesy of Fura Gems)



Rough Australian sapphire from Fura Gems.  
(Image courtesy of Fura Gems)

the Royal Ontario Museum. Some accounts claim he took it to his father, a miner, who simply thought it was a black crystal and threw it down, after which it became a doorstep for many years.

The modern gem market, looking for unusual and unique stones with a good story, has created opportunity once again for Australian sapphires, which are increasingly popular with today's buyers. The country produces classic blues as well as green, teal, yellow, and, quickly becoming its most popular, the parti-color sapphires, which offer two or more hues.

In 2020, a major player entered the market when Fura Gems announced it was acquiring the Australia mines

of Capricorn Sapphire and Great Northern Mining. Their mining licenses are in the highlands of Central Queensland, approximately 850 kilometers northwest of Brisbane.

Great Northern Mining's licenses comprised a continuous block of 15 square kilometers and share a boundary with Capricorn Sapphire Mining's licenses, comprising 5 square kilometers. Together, they provided Fura with 76 sapphire mining licenses and have made the company the world's largest sapphire producer. According to Fura, it produced approximately 5 million total carats of Australian sapphires in 2022 and about 6 million carats last year. ♦

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