

SAPPHIRES FROM YOGO GULCH, MONTANA

Maureen Pratt, GIA GG, FGA

Their rarity has combined with increased demand thanks to online jewelry buying and consumer appetite for unenhanced gems to create high prices consumers don't always understand.

Since their discovery in the late 1800s, fine quality Yogo sapphires over 1 carat have commanded a premium. Today, the gem seems to be benefiting from trends in design, sustainability, and increased consumer appetite for unenhanced gems, as well as the growth of e-commerce platforms. An awareness of the unique properties and pricing for sapphire from Yogo Gulch, Montana, can be helpful in understanding its place among sapphires from other localities.

Among the rarest of gemstones found in the United States, sapphire from the Yogo Gulch area of Montana ("Yogo sapphires") has one of the most intriguing pedigrees and unique gemological profiles. Discovered by gold miner Jake Hoover in the late 1800s, the gemstone was definitively identified by Dr. George Kunz of Tiffany & Company. Its excellent hardness made it useful for industrial purposes such as watch manufacturing, and its eye-clean appearance and spectacular color made it particularly popular among American jewelry designers of the early 20th century.¹

Unlike other sapphires from Montana, Yogo sapphires do not need heat treatment to show their true colors, ranging from fine "cornflower blue" to violetish-blue.

"Regarding heat treatment, Yogos don't require it nor would they benefit from heat treatment, generally," said Dr. Aaron Palke, senior manager of colored stone research at GIA. "Yogo sapphires have great color right out of the ground and don't have the silk you'd need to intensify color during heat treatment. On the other hand, Montana sapphires (not Yogos) are commonly heat treated and in most cases do benefit from treatment, with their colors usually intensifying considerably, either gaining blue or gaining yellow/orange, depending on the conditions of heat treatment."



A 14-karat yellow gold, freshwater cultured pearl, and Yogo sapphire brooch and pendant. (Image courtesy of Parlé Gems)

Besides its unique gemological characteristics, Yogo sapphire's rarity is also due to the small, flat, tabular shape of the rough material. Faceted Yogo sapphires tend to be small; gem-quality, faceted Yogos of 1 carat and over are extremely rare. With today's increased demand for single-origin, unenhanced colored gemstones, visibility and prices for the American gem are responding accordingly.

Jason Baide, owner and designer, Gem Gallery in Bozeman, Montana, told *GemGuide* his store raised prices last year "fairly across the board."

"Pricing is tracking with demand," Baide said. "The larger Yogos have had such a high demand but less supply. A 1-carat, AAA, round Yogo used to fall in the \$12,000 to \$15,000 range. Since the pandemic, it's moved closer to \$18,000 to \$20,000."

By comparison, as of January 2025, *GemGuide* listed the price for a 1-carat, upper extra fine, unenhanced sapphire from Burma at \$6,400 to \$7,500 and a 1-carat, upper extra fine, unenhanced Ceylon sapphire at \$4,650 to \$5,350.²

The price differential between Yogos and other sapphires can be daunting to consumers, especially those not familiar with the gemstone's singular provenance and unique characteristics. Brecken Farnsworth, vice president, Parlé Gems, told *GemGuide*, "We've kept our prices pretty stable because the demand seems to be mostly in Montana." Still, she said, "A lot of customers have a hard time validating the price. It seems wildly expensive."

Appraisers and others who see or work with antique or contemporary jewelry featuring Yogo sapphires might also feel challenged by the differences in price or properties between Yogos and other sapphires, whether from Montana or else-

where. But with the increase in awareness and market for Yogos has also come more resources that provide education, information, and, in the case of reputable gemology labs, identification of the gemstone.

Baide told *GemGuide*, “We do a lot of education on Yogo with clients in the store, share a lot on our website. GIA has done a great job.”

The market for Yogos has a strong base in the United States, particularly Montana, and is growing internationally, thanks to the increased popularity of online jewelry buying.

“During the pandemic,” Baide said, “people became more comfortable with making significant purchases without a face-to-face interaction. Since the pandemic, we’ve been selling more Yogos in the country and outside the country.”

Novel uses for faceted Yogos are also increasing visibility for the gem. Jewelry designers, including Farnsworth/Parlé, are pairing Yogo sapphires with other gemstones and using unique one-of-a-kind cuts that draw consumer interest.

“I have been putting it with opal and moonstone,” Farnsworth said. “People seem to have an appetite [for the gem]. It’s gorgeous.”

The Gem Gallery website shows numerous finished pieces of jewelry that feature unfaceted Yogo sapphires set in 14-karat gold.

“They’re smaller, fashion-forward items in the \$500-\$2,500 price range,” Baide told *GemGuide*. “We’ve seen the biggest demand in rough Yogos. Some are tumble-polished, some completely raw pieces. It’s a great way to use the flatter crystals. The Yogo grows so flat that often there’s not a lot of cuttable material.”

Yogo sapphires are also frequently seen in American jewelry from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Baide said these sapphires might be cut differently from more recent examples, exhibiting more of the gem’s depth of color. When antique pieces come to the store, Baide said, “Most of the time, we try to resell them as an antique. It breaks my heart when we have to disassemble something that’s an antique.”



An elongated cushion-cut Yogo sapphire weighing 1.25 carats. (Image courtesy of Parlé Gems)



Yogo sapphire and 14-karat yellow gold feather earrings. (Image courtesy of Parlé Gems)

Despite the increased visibility for Yogo sapphires in the U.S. and other markets, including Japan and Europe, mining challenges make future new supply uncertain. Yogold USA, which was mining on properties owned by Roncor Inc., filed for bankruptcy in 2024. Farnsworth told *GemGuide* they haven’t been able to source a significant amount of the material, although they still have “pretty good stock.”

Baide’s father, Don Baide, runs the Yogo Mining Company, which is currently the owner of separate claims in Yogo Gulch. The Vortex claims were staked in the 1980s and are located in a smaller section of the deposit, but, according to Jason Baide, “have more robust infrastructure.”

Improvements to the Vortex mining area, with attention to sustainability, are ongoing. “It is a very unique type of deposit. The hardness of the ore is a challenge, as is not damaging the sapphire as you go down,” Jason Baide told *GemGuide*.

Despite the challenges with mining Yogo sapphire, trends are in favor of continued and, perhaps, increased demand. Parlé Gems, which has been selling Yogo sapphire for 50 years, brought Yogo sapphires to AGTA GemFair Tucson three years ago and continued to do so in 2025.

“We appreciate Yogo sapphires,” Farnsworth said. “It’s unheated, with strikingly beautiful color.” ♦

NOTES

1Renfro N.D., Palke A.C., and Berg R.B. (2018) Gemological Characterization of Sapphires from Yogo Gulch, Montana. *Gems & Gemology*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp. 184-201.

2*GemGuide*, <https://app.gemguide.com/pricing>. Pricing accessed Jan. 27, 2025.

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