

Why you should care about where your coloured gemstones come from

Provenance has long been a shady subject when buying coloured gemstones, but some brands can tell you precisely who mined your stone and how



Emerald and diamond Flare earrings by Fernando Jorge, who visits the mines where his coloured gemstones are found

The jewellery industry has enjoyed a long history of relative anonymity when it comes to the sourcing of coloured gemstones. Consumers have until recently been happy with knowing their rubies are from Burma, their emeralds from Columbia, and their sapphires from Sri Lanka. They've been less concerned with how those stones were mined, who mined them, and who benefitted.

Things are changing. "From a trusted supplier," is the refrain so often heard in response to the question "where do you source your gemstones?", and attempts to find out more are often beaten back with long-winded explanations of how the coloured gemstone supply chain works. But as someone recently said to me, if we can trace beans to the very farm in Kenya where they're picked, why can't we trace gemstones? The answer is that we can, and there are brands doing it very well.

London jeweller Alex Monroe has worked with Danish gemstone company Wennick-Lefèvre for years, and his new Rainbow Sapphire pop-up is testament to that. The sapphires in question are in an extraordinary array of hues, from soft pink to sunshine yellow to pale green.



A natural lavender sapphire sourced by Wennick-Lefèvre for Alex Monroe

What's most interesting though is that they are all natural. Sourced from the Ilakaka region of Madagascar, not a single stone has been treated in any way, making them part of the 1% club (99% of gem quality sapphires set in jewellery in the world are treated).

Founder of Wennick-Lefèvre, Svend Wennick, came into the gemstone trade by accident. A former architectural designer who had studied at Central Saint Martins, he ended up browsing gemstone stores in Nepal when monsoons kept him from hiking the mountains. It sparked a passion, and he has since travelled the world sourcing artisanally mined stones from all over the world, but it's Madagascar that has stolen his heart.



18kt gold and cornflower blue sapphire one-of-a-kind ring, £5,200, [Alex Monroe](#)

Wennick knows first-hand how badly artisanal miners are treated by some governments, which is why he only buys directly from artisanal miners and has the stones cut in his own factory in Sri Lanka. It's a far cry from the way gemstones are usually sold, going through dozens of hands before they end up in jewellery. Counterintuitively, these beautiful untreated sapphires in a kaleidoscope of colours pay the miners less than the stones that end up being treated do.

Fernando Jorge, a Brazilian jeweller based in London, is also deeply concerned with where his materials come from. He visits mines himself in his native country to see how they're run and how the miners are treated. For his Flame collection he wanted to celebrate Brazil's minerals, and can tell customers exactly where the materials come from, down to the quartz and amethyst he had cut into sweeping arcs to be seamlessly joined together over gold in his Gleam earrings.



18kt rose gold, amethyst, rose quartz and morganite Gleam earrings, £19,900, Fernando Jorge ([matchesfashion.com](https://www.matchesfashion.com))

Still, visiting the country of origin isn't a necessity, especially now it's not always possible. London-based jeweller Emefa Cole has worked directly with a Kenyan gemstone cutter based in Nairobi for years, who sources rough stones from small-scale miners and brokers before cutting them himself. It means she can set a ring with luscious garnets or spinels cut by her own contact.

New York city brand Wwake has always worked with ethically sourced Australian opals, and it has now launched a range of rings using incredibly hued Australian sapphires, which are a far cry from the standard heat-treated blue most consumers are used to.

For those who want to get their hands on loose gemstones, look to gemmologist, author, and now co-curator of the secondary jewellery marketplace Omneque, Joanna Hardy. The Stone Vault collection of loose gemstones are all verified by Hardy, and available to purchase by individuals – quite a novel concept for an industry that tends to be secretive with deals happening between insiders, behind closed doors.



Loose gemstones available via Omneque's Stone Vault

Just listening to Hardy describe some of the gems on offer can cause the mouth to water. There is a huge cabochon moonstone of Burmese origin the size of a tiny bird's egg that Hardy says displays "great adularescence", which means an optical phenomenon that causes a metallic, bluish glow. A bi-colour Brazilian tourmaline of a stonking 51.75 carats is cut in a rectangular cabochon shape, like an elongated dome, which Hardy thinks would be fabulous set as a pendant. "It's a stone to have fun with" she says.

Hardy, who has visited artisanal ruby miners in Myanmar's Mogok region and chatted to sapphire miners in Madagascar, is not just passionate about the most highly valued stones, but also the unusual ones. A Brazilian oval cats-eye rutiled quartz retails for £500, and has inclusions (tiny scraps of another mineral) inside that Hardy describes as looking like "straws running through the stone" and "like an abstract painting."

It's not the sort of stone you'd see in the windows of Bond Street, and you'd be unlikely to ever find a match for it, but that's exactly what Hardy loves; the uniqueness of these one-of-a-kind gems, and the fact that for someone out there, each one is a perfect treasure.