



Rough Diamonds

The Queensland gem fields attract their share of dreamers and dropouts. Peter Brown is one of the more successful fossickers, reports Roderick Eime.



SOME SUCCESS STORIES read like fairy tales. When a penniless Peter Brown arrived in the hot, dry and dusty Queensland Outback town of Rubyvale in a spluttering and smoking VW combi in the late 1970s, one could be forgiven for thinking he was some lost hippy blown in from nowhere.

But despite this clumsy beginning, Brown became entranced by the tiny town straddling the Tropic of Capricorn. Like the neighbouring hamlets of Sapphire, Anakie and Emerald, the wealth was hidden in the dirt. Unlike the legendary El Dorado, Rubyvale's streets were not paved with gold, but were littered with gems.

Brown was transfixed by the tales he heard from the old miners at the bar of the local inn. "The yarn that really got me going was one of the local favourites. A 1,000-carat rock was found by a 14-year old in 1935 and was finally cut to become the famous 700-carat Black Star of Queensland in 1948, after being used as a doorstop in the family home.

"Then, no sooner had I arrived in Rubyvale than another kid, Smiley Nelson, kicked up a huge yellow sapphire weighing 2,019 carats. This one became another legend, the Centenary Gem, and eventually sold for a lot of money. The kids were finding these huge gems by accident. I was sure I could find some of my own."

The rest, as they say, is history. Today, he and wife Eileen operate the award-winning Rubyvale Gem Gallery, set up in 1988 in response to demand from both new and repeat buyers.

"We'd outgrown the home-based business and Peter was now pretty good at cutting and setting the stones himself," recalls Eileen.

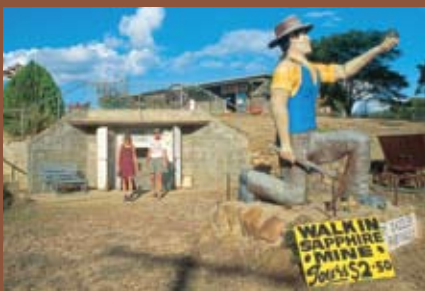
But she's being modest. Peter Brown is one of the best-known gem cutters in the whole region. His jewel settings are recognised throughout the world and are sought after by serious buyers and dealers on every continent.

Inside their restored 1914 miner's cottage is a showroom more like a big city boutique, with shiny display cases full of lustrous gems in their 14 and 18-carat gold settings and gift boxes. Instead of fossicking buckets and gift shop trinkets, Eileen serves visitors Devonshire tea among wild lorikeets in the little garden pavilion, and there is even a small cabin for overnighters. Behind the counter, Peter cuts and sets the stones extracted from his private underground mine nearby.

Unlike some of the town's tourist mines, Peter's is not for casual visitors. Anybody invited down the shaft must wear a hard hat and clamber down the rickety metal ladder.

Picks and shovels are a thing of the past. Today, a cast of pneumatic robots, led by an unwieldy-looking mechanised digger, performs the hard work. Around the corner a generator throbs, providing life to this mechanical cave monster. When operating, the beast erupts into a fierce crescendo of vibration, devouring great chunks of the grotto wall and leaving them to tumble onto the floor in a messy heap.

A miniature, self-powered, metal dump truck then gathers up all the soil and



PHOTOS: RODERICK EINE





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rocks before stumbling along a makeshift underground railway, where it disgorges its load into a vertical bucket shaft that transports the material to the surface. There, an even bigger, uglier monster awaits.

Peter’s surface rig looks like it belongs on the set of a *Mad Max* movie. The junkyard sculpture shakes the very ground it stands on, as the tonnes of dirt and rocks are sorted in a painfully loud drum-rolling process that culminates in a trickle of pebbles being spat out onto a small conveyor belt. The meagre output is then inspected by hand and the choice stones selected.

PETER AND Eileen admit to pressure from overseas markets and lament that their fields were once the most productive sapphire-producing areas in the world.

“Today, large quantities of sapphires are being mined in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, Madagascar and China,” says Eileen, who believes the quality of cutting will always distinguish Rubyvale gems from their mass-produced ‘native cut’ competitors overseas.

Mechanical mining ceased in and around Rubyvale more than 20 years ago, so the supply of stones is restricted to hand mining and fossicking. This has the double effect of preserving the environment from overzealous extraction and maintaining the value of the stones.

“There’s nothing quite like spending a morning fossicking, finding one or two quality stones and having them cut and set to take home as a special souvenir,” says Eileen.

“Sapphires can occur in any colour and shade imaginable so – except for rubies – they are described as green sapphires, yellow sapphires, etc. We mainly produce the blues, greens, yellows and parti-colours (mixtures of blue, yellow and green), but the odd fancy stones (pink, purple, orange) also occur very rarely. Peter found a purple recently.

But if you think that popping into their gallery to purchase the purple stone is a good idea, expect to be disappointed. “I’m keeping it,” she says. ■

The Big Blues

Sapphires rank alongside rubies, emeralds and diamonds as precious gemstones. They specifically belong to the corundum family, a crystalline form of aluminium oxide. Rubies are actually red sapphires created by chromium impurities, while the softer emeralds are beryllium aluminium silicate with chromium and exclusively green.

Sapphires are created deep inside the Earth and brought to the surface through violent volcanic action. While commonly regarded as a blue gem, they can actually occur in a wide range of colours depending on the presence of other minerals, like iron and titanium.

The central Queensland sapphire fields are probably best known for their yellow and golden-hued stones. These are rare enough to be highly desirable and they sell quickly, while other fancy stones like purples and pinks are so rare that most finders keep them. Depending on size and colour, a cut Queensland sapphire can range in cost from \$100 to \$2,000 per carat.



Diamonds are exclusively carbon in composition and their unique crystal, allotrope, is the hardest naturally occurring material. It is not the most valuable though. All things being equal, that mantle belongs to the ruby.

Some believe the central Queensland gem fields around the appropriately named towns of Emerald, Rubyvale, Sapphire, Anakie and the Willows Gem fields are still the most productive area in the world for beautiful sapphires. The stones can be found on or just below the surface, and in ancient alluvial beds, as a result of explosive distribution many million years ago. This makes the area ideal for casual fossickers.

