

A Brief History of Tanzanite



Hailing from the most eastern reaches of Africa in the country of Tanzania, home of the awe-inspiring Serengeti with its abundant wildlife, and the magnificent grandeur of Mt. Kilimanjaro, came the most incredible discovery of the last century: A gem so exotic and so rare that it is found exclusively in an area just a few kilometers long. The area is called Merlani and lies between Mount Kilimanjaro and the Olduvai Gorge. The only nearby town any note is that of Arusha, really just a village approximately 50kms to the northwest.

This amazing discovery was made by members of the indigenous Massai tribe in 1967 supposedly as they were out bush walking. Tanzanite is an incredibly beautiful gemstone that derives its stunning appearance from its remarkably strong Trichroic properties, that is it shows alternately three different colours, blue, violet and red depending on the angle from which it is viewed. However all Tanzanite that is cut for commercial purposes is heat treated thus tending to fix the colour bringing out the best. Generally the best quality and cut of Tanzanite is a deep intense violet bluish colour.

The fact is that it is actually a form of Zoisite and in its untreated form is a dull grayish brown in colour that in order to release its almost unrivalled natural beauty is heated to 500 degrees Centigrade.

The heat treatment needed is why it was never discovered until a lightning strike caused a bush fire that naturally heated the rough Zoisite bringing forth the amazing stone we know as Tanzanite much to the delight and amazement of the Massai tribesmen. Tanzanite was first presented to Tiffany and co and introduced to the world in 1969 2 years after its discovery. They named it Tanzanite as a tribute to the country of its origin and because it is said to reflect the beauty of a classic Tanzanian night.

Tiffany and co then launched a huge marketing campaign that created the phenomenon that has taken the gem world by storm. It is so beautiful that it is often mistaken for Kashmir Sapphire. Due to its late discovery and its incredible properties it is the **only** gemstone to have been added to the official birthstone list by the American Gem Society since 1912 and is now a birthstone for December along with Turquoise and Zircon.

It has a hardness of 6.5 on the Moh (hardness) scale which makes it a softer stone requiring more care. This is another reason for its increasing rarity as it can be extremely easy to break in the mining and cutting processes thus making it hard to get out of the ground in larger sizes. This in turn is increasingly along with the fact that it is only found in the one area and is getting harder to find is pushing up the prices of the heavier, cut goods.

Another development was that in June of 2003 in order to protect their own cutting industry, the Tanzanian government introduced legislation banning the export of unprocessed tanzanite over the weight of 1 carat. Adding a burden to the already great demand of heavier goods.

A word of caution with regards to the use and care of Tanzanite, Tanzanite is quite fragile; it has hardness of 6.5 on the Moh scale. To put this in perspective, compare Tanzanite to Sapphire which has hardness of 9.

Tanzanite is also very brittle. For this reason, be very gentle with this exotic gem. Never use ultrasonic cleaners to clean the jewelry with Tanzanite.

In April 2005, a company called Tanzanite One Ltd. publicly announced that they had taken control of the tanzanite mine known as "C-Block". Over the next year, this company established a De Beers-like control over the tanzanite market. This is the first time that a colored gemstone has been controlled in this way. Further increasing the difficulty of obtaining top quality and larger stones.

Also, Tanzanite is becoming increasingly difficult to find in the better grades and colours. Most of the Tanzanite presently coming out of the ground is of a far lower quality than has been available for a fair price in the past. Suppliers have been pressed from all of their vendors to continue to maintain a firm line on price, yet continue to provide good color. Something had to give and that something was price. In August 2005, the largest tanzanite crystal was found in the C-Block mine. The crystal weighs 16,839 carats (3.4 kg) and measures 22 cm by 8 cm by 7 cm.

In February 2006 Tanzanite One Ltd. announced that they were moving forward with their marketing strategy to make Tanzanite "the" birthstone. They plan to market the rare gem as a stone one would give a child at birth, to celebrate new life. Something that the Massai tribesmen already do.

The price of Tanzanite has obviously risen due to the ratio of supply and demand (and can only continue to do so) with high grades of Tanzanite selling for as much as US\$1200 per carat. Like most other gems, when the carat weight of a tanzanite increases, its price per carat goes up. It is still possible however to buy top quality Tanzanite for around the US\$700 mark in the smaller sizes such as 3 to 5 carat.

Tanzanite has been available in the world since the late 1960's and has become one of the most coveted precious gems on the planet.

In 1997, Tanzanite was lifted to an all time high when it featured in the movie Titanic, which starred Leonardo Di Caprio and Kate Winslet as the ill-fated lovers of the infamous ship's doomed maiden voyage. Actress Kate Winslet (Rose) donned a stunning heart shaped Tanzanite pendant surrounded with diamonds named the 'Heart of the Ocean.'