

# Myanmar: The Whispering Land

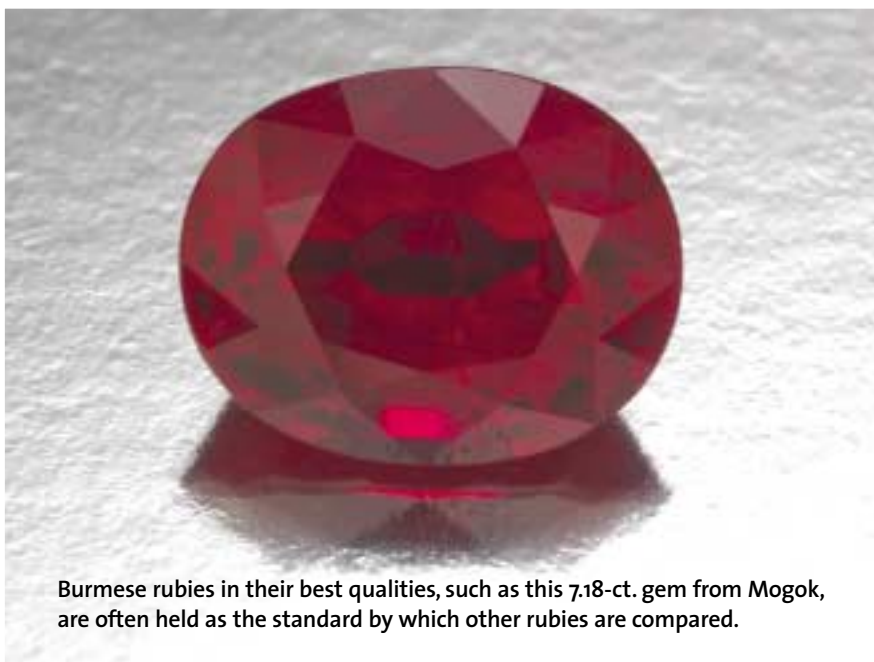
*Despite rich gem resources, this troubled country remains in despair*

BY ROBERT WELDON, G.G.

If gemologists were assigned to choose one exotic country with the world's choicest colored gemstones, the answer inevitably would be Myanmar, better known in gemological circles as Burma, its old name. "Burmese" rubies are the standard by which any ruby is judged, also the case with top-quality sapphire, spinel, peridot and jadeite jade.

However, the social and political realities of today's Myanmar threaten to disrupt this aura – and the sale of colored gemstone jewelry. The threat: educated consumers who are increasingly concerned about buying gems that directly or indirectly support unsavory regimes, wars or terrorists. Various dictatorships have maintained control over Myanmar's resources, including gems, for nearly 50 years, though some private mining is allowed. While Myanmar's junta organizes gem auctions in Yangon, formerly Rangoon, most gems slip out of the country's borders through smuggling.

The current and previous two U.S. presidents have condemned Myanmar's dictatorship, and President Bush signed a law banning the import of Myanmar products in 2003. The U.S. calls Myanmar an "outpost of tyranny" and criticized the country's military government in March for its "ex-



Burmese rubies in their best qualities, such as this 7.18-ct. gem from Mogok, are often held as the standard by which other rubies are compared.



Myanmar's future rests in the hands of a generation that has known only dictatorship.

PHOTOS BY ROBERT WELDON  
EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

tremely poor human rights record,” accusing the military of murders, rape and other torture.

Myanmar’s military rulers also keep under house arrest Aung San Suu Kyi, a political rival who was elected leader of the country in 1990 but has not been allowed to serve. Suu Kyi was briefly allowed to travel freely within Myanmar a few years ago, but was arrested again in 2003 after an ambush of her motorcade in which some supporters were killed and she was injured. In March, the United Nations honored Suu Kyi for her efforts to promote democracy in Myanmar. She also is the world’s only incarcerated Nobel Peace Prize recipient. During his administration, President Clinton awarded Suu Kyi with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in absentia. “She has seen her supporters beaten, tortured and killed, yet she has never responded to hatred and violence in kind,” Clinton remarked. “All she has ever asked for is peaceful dialogue. The only weapons the Burmese people have are the words of reason and the example of this astonishingly brave woman.”

The European Union recently stepped up its criticism of Myanmar and has threatened to impose further economic sanctions and withdraw economic aid if the military regime doesn’t take steps toward embracing democracy. Significantly, neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations recently warned Myanmar it risks forfeiting its expected chairmanship of ASEAN in 2006 if political reforms aren’t made.

Myanmar appears to have dug in its heels under the pressure. Its current junta was reduced to two main leaders after a recent purge. The purged leader was viewed in the military hierarchy as having ties too close to Suu Kyi and for hint-

ing to the world that democratic changes were imminent.

### Industry Choice

When the International Colored Gemstone Association announced a gem tour to Myanmar’s famous corundum and spinel locality of Mogok after its biennial congress in Thailand in February, the choice seemed appropriate given Thailand’s proximity and deep links to Myanmar’s gemstone riches. ICA says the trip was an educational opportunity, not a business or buying trip.

Gem dealers who criticize the U.S. sanctions say they deprive Myanmar’s citizens of economic growth needed to fuel an eventual democracy. They call the policy duplicitous because it punishes Myanmar while the U.S. runs trade deficits with more repressive regimes such as China. In fact, in a worrisome development for the trade, China’s relations with Myanmar have expanded greatly since the sanctions.

As the ICA tour arrived in Myanmar from Bangkok, the military regime suddenly rescinded its offer to allow a visit to Mogok – without apology or explanation. Instead, the tour visited Yangon, Mandalay and Bagan. Tour members were disappointed at the lack of a gemstone focus but accepted the situation without rancor.

### Witness at Bagan

At daybreak, wisps of wood smoke hung low between the ancient Pagodas of Bagan. The rising sun flashed golden light on the gilded pagodas and tinged brick ones with crimson. The beauty of the scene was palpable. Sensing this, the men and women who labor daily at this tourist attraction gathered



Smoking a relaxing cheroot, this woman was a young child when Myanmar, then called Burma, ceased being a province of India in 1937.

at its markets, where steaming tea brewed on wood-burning stoves.

A tourist in western garb sipped tea and joined the laborers as they readied for the day. Glances from his tea companions turned to conversation in English. One asked in a conspiratorial whisper, “Do you like Myanmar?”

“I love it,” the tourist said.

“We have no opportunities here,” the whisperer countered. “We have little hope.”

For the tourist, who asked not to be identified, it was a jarring glimpse into daily reality for the people of Myanmar. The topic arose also when a woman atop an ancient pagoda glanced nervously in various directions and then spoke in a fierce undertone, saying the world has largely forgotten her country, except for the U.S. She added that tourists are fed a wrong impression. “If The Lady cannot succeed in her quiet struggle against the junta, we will never make it,” she said. “The Lady” is how Myanmar’s people refer to imprisoned leader Suu Kyi, who holds such sway over the populace that the three military men she trounced in the 1990 elections have let her out in public only on rare occasions. Suu Kyi remains a proponent of non-violent change, a Gandhi-esque figure, growing more determined in seeing a democratic future for Myanmar as the years slip by.

## Change – Facade or Reality

Since my last visit to Yangon a decade ago, there have been changes. Streets in the ramshackle capital have been paved and cleaned, lessening the huge plumes of dust that once kicked up around Shwedagon Pagoda, the infinitely beautiful ancient landmark. Markets around the city appeared bustling and, to a degree, looked well-stocked. French



Myanmar remains a deeply religious nation. These two young Buddhist girls pose in front of the Mount Popa monastery.



Wisps of fog and smoke lie low in the early morning at the archaeological wonder of Bagan, where temples date to the 9th century.

## Buying Burmese Gems: Customs Makes It Legal

In December 2004, U.S. Customs & Border Protection, which enforces a U.S. ban on products from Myanmar, ruled that gems mined in Myanmar undergo “substantial transformation” when they are cut and polished in other countries and, therefore, are considered products of the country where they were cut. Thus, jewelers can still legally buy rubies, sapphires, jadeite or spinels that originate in Myanmar but are cut elsewhere – as most are.

However, at least one major jeweler – Tiffany & Co. – has continued its ban on buying gems originating in Myanmar. “Mining of these gems supports the existing Burmese regime,” says Michael Kowalski, chairman and CEO of Tiffany. “We support democratic reforms and an end to human rights abuses in that country. We believe our customers would agree with that position.”

Jeweler Brian Leber of Western Springs, IL, a longtime supporter of human rights causes in Myanmar, says he also will continue to follow the spirit of the U.S. ban, despite the “substantial transformation” ruling. “Our business will continue to refuse to buy any goods of Burmese origin,” he says. “The two main grading criteria to determine value for colored gems – color and clarity – are a direct result of geological conditions of the stones’ place of origin and remain unchanged by a third-party country’s cutting.”

Leber also points out that country of origin plays a significant role in a gem’s pedigree, especially with Burmese ruby and sapphire. “Any item whose identity is so strongly tied to its source, despite any cutting or refiguring, has not undergone ‘substantial transformation.’”

– by Peggy Jo Donahue



ALEXANDRIA  
JEWELRY LLC



*Fine Jewelry for  
all occasions*



Alexandria Jewelry LLC  
718-352-1511

192-12 Northern Blvd. Flushing, NY 11358  
[www.alexandriajewels.com](http://www.alexandriajewels.com)

restaurants with crisply ironed linens, magnificent teak furniture and uniformed waitresses have cropped up, serving French fusion cuisine.

To the casual tourist (and many pour in, staying at luxurious government-owned hotels throughout the country), it would appear Myanmar is on the upswing. But critics suggest this is a facade that hides government-sponsored corruption and oppression. Tourists can't see Suu Kyi's sealed compound, nor do they witness reported mass relocation of citizens, the "disappearance" without trial of protesters or the children reportedly enlisted as soldiers to confront ethnic armies in northern Myanmar.

What they do see are ubiquitous slogans the regime devised to keep its population at attention, including:

- ✓ "Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views."
- ✓ "Oppose those trying to jeopardize the stability of the State and progress of the nation."
- ✓ "Oppose foreign nationals interfering in internal affairs of the State."

✓ "Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy."

This may be why Suu Kyi's infrequent messages resonate so deeply with the people of Myanmar and why the walls that continue to keep her prisoner have not been effective in obscuring her vision.

"Our country will not prosper through constructing an imaginary world," she said in 2003. "Drifting will not benefit our country. But ... we must always have hope. There is a difference between having hope and dreaming. It is not wrong to have hope, but you have to work toward achieving that hope. Just sitting down and dreaming will not do ... Our vision is that we will have genuine and a full measure of democracy and the full measure of human rights for which we will struggle on. A fantasy world is not what we want and that is not what we are building."

If Suu Kyi's vision were to transpire, Myanmar's people would not have to lurk in the shadows. Nor would they feel compelled to whisper their despair to the outside world. ■



Gem dealer and explorer Yianni Melas took this rare picture of Aung San Suu Kyi during her brief freedom in 1996. "The Lady exudes dignity and kindness, while maintaining an aura of leadership," says Melas.

## Memories of Burma

ICA travelers to Myanmar share photos and opinions

The International Colored Gemstone Association took a gem tour to Myanmar (formerly Burma) in February and early March.

Richard Hughes led the tour, composed of 15 people from Canada, Belarus, Germany, France, Greece and the United States.

In light of the debate that swirls around the subject (see previous story), PROFESSIONAL JEWELER's Robert Weldon, who also made the trip, offered participants a chance to convey their thoughts about the tour in words and pictures. The thought-provoking mix of opinions and photos follows in alphabetical order:

### Sergei Barilo

Head of the Laboratory for Superconducting Materials  
Physics Institute of Solid State & Semiconductor Physics  
Byelorussian Academy of Sciences

BELARUS

*Much was recognized when I came to this fascinating land: the world's storeroom of minerals and people's smiles. Perhaps none from our team of ICA travelers could imagine it better than I, or sympathize as much as I do with the Burmese. Bearing in mind the country of my birth's 75 years under the former USSR, I have heard and still listen to the shrill sound of the Burmese people's eloquent silence. I understand their blind submission to the so-called "Council of Peace and Development." I do not trust in any of the 12 political, economic and social objectives currently claimed by the government newspaper, New Light*



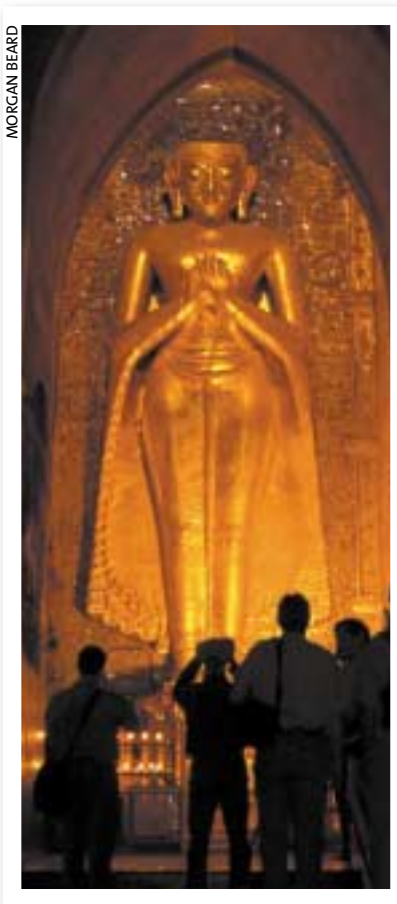
Richard Hughes, ICA gem tour leader, chats with a young Burmese girl near Taungthaman Lake.

*of Myanmar. As a Belarus citizen, I know today that "a peaceful, modern and discipline-flourishing democracy," which Myanmar's junta claims it will develop, has no possibility.*

*I do trust in the hidden, but genuine light in eyes and hearts of the Burmese people and in the forces of democracy, which a truly free market would unleash.*

### Morgan Beard

Editor in Chief, *Colored Stone* magazine  
DEVON, PA



Gilded Buddha.

*Burma is a country of temples. Even in the poorest villages, you'll see a dazzling white-and-gold pagoda somewhere nearby; in the larger cities, there'll be temples with saffron-robed Buddhist monks. As visitors, we come and marvel at the wonders of the ancient Burmese. But for the country's modern inhabitants, these places are still part of the fabric of everyday life. It's a testament to the true wealth of Burma – the strength and the quiet faith of its people.*

**Alexandre Hahn**

Goldsmith and Gemologist,  
Gerhard Hahn Pearl AG  
DUESSELDORF, GERMANY

*I get goose bumps of joy thinking of moments I spent in Burma. Imagine walking toward a village and a bunch of kids follow you and then break out in laughter when you show them their own picture [on a digital camera screen]. Imagine sitting in a Pagoda and feeling the peace around you. Burmese talk to you and are genuinely interested in what you say! It was amazing to feel their vibe. The people have so little but give so much kindness and warmth. The whole trip to Burma was a special moment with tears and pure joy, which I will never forget.*



Boys share a laugh.



**Richard W. Hughes**

American Gem Trade Association  
Gemological Testing Center  
CARLSBAD, CA

*Burma is a land of contradictions. Wherever one travels, large posters titled "People's Desire" are on public display. And yet according to Buddhist teachings, it is desire that is at the heart of human pain.*

*Contradictions also abound in the militant attitudes of many outsiders toward Burma. Many desire that we should not visit Burma because its citizens are saddled with a poor government. I believe America is currently saddled with a poor government. The last thing I would want is isolation because of it.*

"People's Desire."

# merchandise | gemstone photo essay

ROBERT KANE



Burmese girl wears thanaka made from powdered tree bark. Effective as a sunscreen, it's also worn as a fashion statement.

**Robert Kane**

President, Fine Gems International  
HELENA, MT

*Initially, it is the legendary gemstones that draw gemologists and jewelers to Burma. The mystique and allure of Mogok – the Valley of the Rubies and Sapphires – and the incomparable jade mines in the north captivate most of us. This was the case for me on my first trip to Mogok in 1991. After three subsequent trips to Mogok and more than a dozen visits to other parts of Burma, the fabled gemstones remain a strong attraction. However, it is the rich history, the Buddhist and Burmese traditions, and the warm-hearted optimistic, intelligent and gentle nature of the people that make Burma a truly enchanting country to visit.*

**Richard Krementz**

Richard Krementz Gemstones  
NEWARK, NJ

*The jade market in Mandalay is far from the beaten path in U.S.-embargoed Myanmar. Imperial jade, arguably the most expensive gem, is mined nearby and traded in this ancient capital. The ramshackle, narrow alley market has more than a thousand people cutting, grinding, sawing and polishing the most treasured gem of China. Jade bangles and cabochons are formed on primitive equipment, mostly human-powered. Dozens of traders are trading stone papers with intense green, translucent cabochons of ... dyed quartzite! A boy shows me a native-cut ruby – it's synthetic. Mixed with sapphire is treated blue topaz. And this is at "the source," where natural gems are so*

RICHARD KREMENTZ



Sunset at U Bein's Bridge near Taungthaman Lake.

*plentiful anybody can buy them. All I can think of are the countless tourists and amateur "gemologists" who think they are getting a deal when they buy overseas. They sure are.*



Andrew Lucas

Product Manager/Gemology,  
Gemological Institute of America  
CARLSBAD CA

*Markets at exotic sources are always a great attraction. The feeling that comes from watching local dealers make transactions among themselves at makeshift trading tables outdoors is exciting and a great place for photography. At numerous small cutting and polishing facilities, one can witness the entire jade fashioning process and see rough dealers selling jade boulders and slabs. With the U.S. embargo in effect, temptation to buy is completely removed, so we move through the stalls as observers. Would-be buyers should be warned, however: dyed green and lavender jadeite, flame-fusion synthetic ruby, sapphire and synthetic ruby doublets are all available for the unsuspecting.*



Burmese jade trades at a Mandalay jade market.



Barbara Malcolm  
Visual Anthropologist  
NEWARK, NJ

*We moved as a group of 15, arriving in small villages by large boat or bus. We navigated narrow alleyways of outdoor markets looking for treasures. We climbed mountains and steep staircases that led to vast temple complexes where people were privately and publicly engaged in spiritual practice. Sometimes we were experienced as disruptive intruders, sometimes as honored guests. Our cameras were high-tech appendages that facilitated non-verbal communication. Where we pointed our lens was an indication of our interest. When we replayed the digital picture for the person in the photo, we shared our experience of what was similar and different between us.*

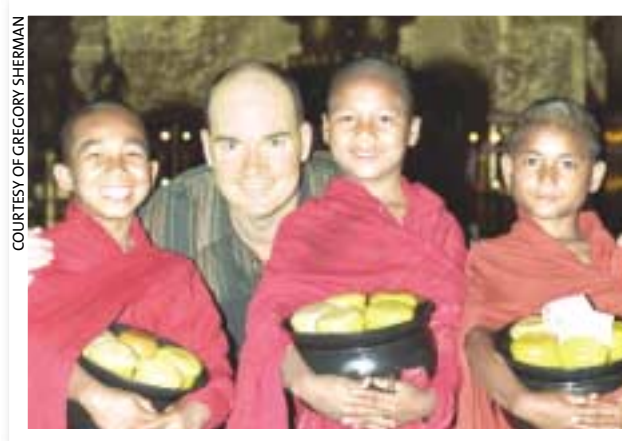
A Burmese family visits the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar.

# merchandise | gemstone photo essay

## Gregory Edward Sherman

Appraiser  
RED BANK, NJ

*I am forever changed by my experience in Burma. It was a powerful reminder that the gemstone industry is multidimensional and endlessly fascinating. Gems are inexorably entwined with culture, politics, history, religion, economics and folklore – and with the people of all nations. We can no more isolate gems from this milieu than we can isolate the stars from the universe. I came seeking knowledge of gems, but the Burmese people, particularly the children, stirred me beyond all measure. The Burmese are guileless and have a gentle spirit. This is a land where golden sunsets, golden temples and golden smiles call to me from halfway around the world in my dreams, bidding me to return, which I shall surely do.*

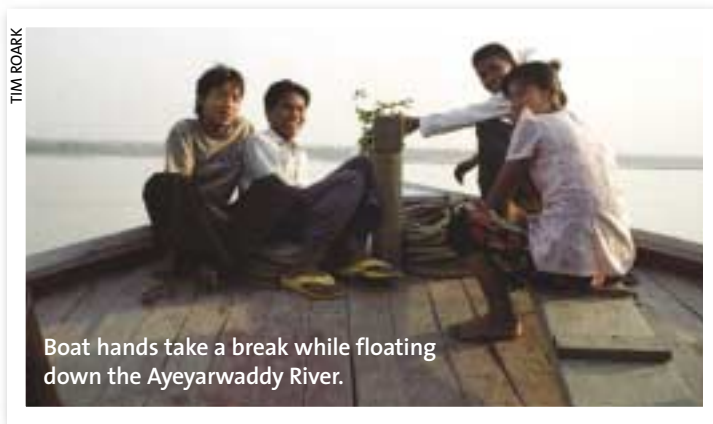


Gregory Sherman poses with monk apprentices at a pagoda in Mandalay.

## Tim Roark

President, Tim Roark Imports  
ATLANTA, GA

*We chug quietly down the Ayeyarwaddy River. What a contrast to Bangkok and Yangon! The weather is perfect. The cloudless sky is toned a light sepia by the farm burnoff beyond the sand banks of our dry-season river. Swifts glide and dip along the water's surface, catching insects. We dreamily float through this beautiful land populated by gentle people.*



Boat hands take a break while floating down the Ayeyarwaddy River.



## Robert Weldon

Senior Writer/Director of Photography, PROFESSIONAL JEWELER  
PHILADELPHIA, PA

*We must remember the Burmese gems we cherish are unique products of a geographically stunning country and its graceful people. We visited no gem mine on this trip, but ICA members instead studied something of equally great importance: Burma's people. That the Myanmar government denied access to an international group flies in the face of the junta's oft-stated desire to open the country to the world. But this group of gemologists came away with something far more precious than memories of a historical mine. We will never forget the sweet nature and unvarnished beauty of the people we met during our meanderings through Burma's magnificent landscape.*

Burma's future lies in the hands of the young – like this apprentice monk. ☐