

HISTORY OF DIAMONDS

Diamonds are the most prized and highly valued of gemstones. Throughout history they have been admired by royalty and worn as a symbol of strength, courage and invincibility. Over the centuries the diamond acquired unique status as the ultimate gift of love, in myth and reality. It is the hardest known substance yet has the simplest chemical composition, consisting of crystallized carbon, the chemical element that is fundamental to all life. Diamonds come in many colors and their optical properties are stunning. They disperse light into the colors of the rainbow, and sparkle far more than any other gemstone.

First mined in India over 4000 years ago, diamonds were used to decorate religious objects, serve as a talisman against evil and a protector in battle. Buddhists also recognized the deep symbolic significance accorded to diamonds in ancient Buddhist scriptures, including the 'Diamond Sutra' which states that truth is eternal, just like the diamond. Diamonds are also found in the culture and mysticism of Hinduism, Jainism and Tibetan Lamaism. The Sanskrit word 'vajra' – meaning both thunderbolt and diamond – was the name for a small metal weapon having the symbolic nature both of a diamond (able to cut any substance but not be cut itself) and of the thunderbolt (irrepressible force). The Buddhist equivalent, 'dorje', was a talisman in the shape of a four-faceted diamond which represented the sacred Mount Meru, believed to be at the center of the universe. The highly valued Tibetan diamond dzi bead represents the dorje/vajra symbol and bestows diamond-like qualities on its wearer: it can help bring to light the many beautiful or dormant facets within the self, and its brilliance shines on the wearer to illuminate beauty and repel all that is ugly.

In ancient times India was the world's only source of diamonds until the beginning of the 18th century, except for minor deposits found in Kalimantan, Borneo. Most were mined from alluvial deposits along riverbanks. Today the most prized historical diamonds are still known as the 'diamonds of Golconda,' a region located between the lower reaches of the Godavari and Krishna rivers. Golconda diamonds are believed to be the finest and purest of any gemstones. They have a perfect internal crystal structure, exceptional transparency and are without any trace of color.

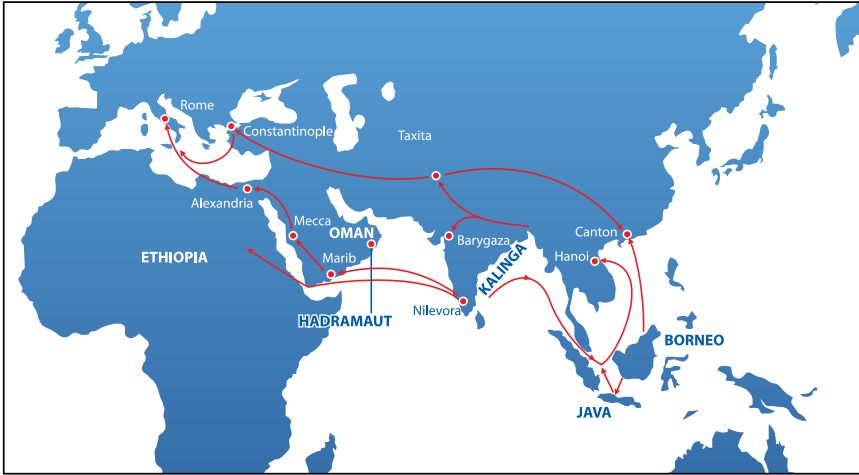
It is believed that Alexander the Great brought the first diamonds to Europe from India in 327 BC, instigating the expansion of trade routes between Europe and the East.

Ancient Greeks believed diamonds to be 'tears of the gods' and splinters of falling stars. The word 'diamond' is derived from the Greek word 'adamas', meaning invincible, indestructible, and later translated into Latin as 'diamas'.

During the Greco-Roman era, diamonds became a valuable commodity in trade and gradually became a symbol of luxury. Romans were also known to use diamond fragments set in iron as tools which were traded with China and used for carving jade or drilling pearls.

DIAMONDS

The early diamond trading capital was Venice, where polishing a diamond's facets began in the 1330s. For centuries, Indian diamonds reached first Rome and later Venice by two routes, known collectively as the fabled Silk Route; the southern route was by way of Aden, Ethiopia and Egypt and the northern route was through Arabia, Persia, Armenia and Turkey.



Trade routes from the Orient to Old Europe in the first centuries B.C.

By the late 14th century the art of diamond polishing had spread to Bruges and Paris and later, in the 15th century, Antwerp became the new flourishing diamond center, supplied with rough stones through Lisbon as well as Venice.

In the 17th century the French traveler and diamond merchant, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, made a series of voyages to India and brought back a number of stupendous diamonds to Europe. London also emerged as an important cutting center at this time, and later took over the role of a major trading center for rough diamonds.

Indian mines became increasingly depleted and by the early 18th century Brazil had surfaced as the next biggest supplier of diamonds. As resources slowly dwindled in Brazil after just 150 years, a new discovery was made in South Africa.

In 1866, a child found an unusual pebble near the Orange River at Cape Colony. This turned out to be a diamond of approximately 21 carats that was named 'Eureka'. The following year another stone was discovered, later confirmed as 83.5 carats, which became known as the 'Star of South Africa'. The largest and most magnificent diamond of all time was found in South Africa in 1905, weighing 3,106 carats and named the 'Cullinan'. The great diamond rush had started, and new deposits continued to be discovered, larger than any the world had ever known. At the beginning of the 20th century South Africa had established itself as the world's top diamond producing country, and was followed by other countries within the African continent and beyond. This marked the start of a new chapter in the history of diamonds.