

RUBY AND SAPPHIRE

rush near Didy, Madagascar

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In April 2012, a gem rush occurred in northeastern Madagascar at coordinates 18°20'16" S, 48°33'53" E, located about 25 km south of Didy village, which is situated 50 km south of Ambatondrazaka, a small quiet city famous to be Madagascar main rice producing center.

The rush began after some parcels of fine blue sapphires and rubies were sold into the local market in early April in Moramanga, Ambatondrazaka and subsequently in the capital city of Antananarivo by gold miners and people working for a local logging company active in the area. Rapidly the word spread out particularly in the Sri Lankan sapphire buying community. Within few days hundreds of Malagasy miners from Andilamena area and then from the whole island took the road to the jungle covered hills South East of Didy. Buyers also moved to the region: While Malagasy businessmen followed the miners in the jungle, the Sri Lankan settled mostly in Ambatondrazaka where the prices for renting houses and offices soon boomed.



(Figure 1) On the way to Didy.

When the authors reached Ambatondrazaka on April 19th 2012, about 300 Sri Lankans were already present while the first Thai buyers appeared on April 21st.

The new deposit appears to be situated inside the Ankeniheny–Zahamena corridor, a temporary protected area where mining is not allowed. Rapidly the government sent about 30 soldiers in an attempt to stop the mining in that protected area. However, as thousands of Malagasy miners reached the area on April 21st the soldiers were reportedly unable to stop mining and local miners returning from the mining site on April 23rd told the author that after few days of tension between the miners and the soldiers, mining started again under the protection of the soldiers.

Arriving in Ambatondrazaka on April 19th the authors took the road to Didy on April 20th. The drive was made challenging by patches of deep mud (figure 1). Soon after our arrival in Didy, we were notified by local security forces that all foreigners had to return to Ambatondrazaka in an effort “not to motivate the local population to work on the illegal mining site.”

One of us (NR) continued alone to the mining area. From Didy, the journey started with a three-hour boat trip up a local stream, followed by 10–15 hours’ walk through dangerous and dense jungle terrain.

On April 22nd the mining site was inhabited by an estimated 5,000–10,000 people. Miners worked the gem gravels with hand tools in shallow pits (figure 2). The gravels were localized along a stream at a depth of <1 m. Gems were also reportedly found on the adjacent hillside.

Most of the production consisted of blue sapphire (figure 3), without any milky or geuda-type material that is commonly found at other Malagasy deposits. The new deposit also was producing orangy pink sapphires and orangy red rubies, often containing some blue areas that are reminiscent of corundum from Winza, Tanzania.

When we left the area, more than 400 foreign buyers (mostly from Sri Lanka) had opened buying offices in Ambatondrazaka. Both in that town and in Didy, we saw several clean and attractive blue sapphires weighing up to 4 g, and heard about fine stones approaching 30 g. We also saw some clean orangy red rubies up to 3 g and were told about fine rubies weighing 5 g. Local and foreign gem merchants were excited by the prospect of obtaining this attractive new material, and prices escalated quickly due to fierce competition among the buyers. Several samples are currently being studied by GIA and their gemological properties will be published in the near future as “News from the Research” on www.giathai.net and www.gia.edu websites.

At the end of June 2012 we have received news that the Malagasy authorities have closed most of the buying offices in Ambatondrazaka and also sent troops on the mining site to enforce the law and try to stop gem mining in that forest covered area dedicated to conservation. Many miners have now reportedly returned to Ilakaka and other mining areas around the island and the future of that new deposit is still unclear at the moment.

by GIA Laboratory Bangkok



Ruby rough from Didy.



(Figure 2) Malagasy miners on their way to Didy.



(Figure 3) Blue sapphires from Didy