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# Australian Opals: Fireworks from Down Under

By Andrew Z

Grilled shrimp on the barbie and *Crocodile Dundee* may have helped to popularize the place affectionately referred to as "Down Under," but the real celebrity of Australia literally comes from down under—down under in the opal mines and fields.

Opal is the designated birthstone for October, and the word *opal* comes from the Greek term *opalios*, meaning "change of color." Arabs believed that opals fell from heaven in flashes of lightning. Cleopatra is said to have worn an opal to attract the attention of Mark Antony. Historically, the opal is a gemstone highly regarded for its beauty.

"Keep it simple" is a familiar phrase, and when it comes to opals, Mother Nature set the standard. As water runs through the earth, it can pick up silica from sandstone, which eventually settles in voids and pockets somewhere between 40 and 100 feet below the surface. The water evaporates, and this cycle repeats itself for a few million years. Then, voila—opals are formed.

There are two general categories of opal: common and precious. I will only be discussing precious opal and some of its varieties. Precious opal is distinguished by a phenomena coined by gemologists as "play of color," which is what makes it so beautiful and valuable. By holding an opal and moving it around in the light, different colors will appear and disappear. The degree and intensity of this phenomenon directly affects the value.

Some of the varieties are light white opal, black opal, boulder opal, and fire opal. Light white is the most common variety, and the gems that are on the market are predominately bland with little play of color. There are certainly exceptional and valuable white opal specimens, but they are not as common in the marketplace. Black opal is not actually black, but has a dark background and much deeper color. Black opal was first discovered around 1902 in the Lightning Ridge area of Australia and became so popular that by the 1920s there were reports of over three thousand miners working the area. Whenever I look at the color flashes of a fine black opal, it reminds me of how I felt as a youngster looking into my friend's tropical fish tank. He had those glow-in-the-dark fish swimming gracefully under a black light, constantly in motion and on fire. Nice black opals are the



most expensive of all the varieties and can cost more per carat than a diamond!

Boulder opal is another magnificent form. It has a brown ironstone host rock that is a natural part of the opal. Boulder opals are very valuable, second only to black opals. Don't confuse the brown backing on boulder opal with the much less expensive factory-attached glued backing on an opal doublet. Fire opal can be found in Australia; however, it is much more available in Mexico and Brazil. A fire opal looks completely different than all the other varieties. If you haven't seen one, imagine a rich orangey-red free-form of Jell-O or, in a faceted stone, Jell-O with facets—almost like liquid fire.

As beautiful as opals are, they require a certain amount of care to keep them looking great. They are fairly brittle, easy to scratch, and heat sensitive. Don't clean them with fluids that have ammonia or alcohol. Do wear your opals, as your natural body oils will enhance their beauty.

When choosing an opal, look for brilliant colors throughout the entire stone. Rotate it and observe the play of color. For durability, consider its thickness and how it is mounted in the jewelry. Also, consider a custom design with a free-form opal. Many of the fine black and boulder opals are cut to maximize their beauty, and not to just fit a cookie-cutter factory setting. Figuring and comparing the cost of a fine opal can be challenging because each one is unique. Use your common sense, but the best advice is to find a professional jeweler that you feel comfortable with and then develop a working relationship with him. A knowledgeable jeweler can advise and help you select the right opal for your needs.

So, maybe the next time you're sitting down watching a rerun of *Crocodile Dundee* or munching on some grilled shrimp, you'll be fortunate enough to own a small piece of the rainbow from Down Under! ■