

South Seas Pearls

Monsters in the world of undersea gemstones

Many large historically important pearls are of unknown origin. Ironically, we do know the source of one unusually large, perfect pearl known as the Roseate Pearl, but do not know where it lies now! In the 1880s divers began harvesting a large white mollusk off the North Shore of Australia with the scientific name *pinctada maximus*. These mollusks were initially harvested for mother of pearl and any natural pearls found inside were strictly a bonus. The boom town of Broome became the center for the local pearl trade and over fishing rapidly depleted the stocks until the 1930s when the government stepped in to regulate the harvest. One of the biggest dealers in those early days was Abraham de Vahl Davis. In 1912 Davis is rumored to have taken a fortune in pearls including the Roseate Pearl aboard the steamer ship SS Koombana. He boarded in Port Hedland and was headed for Broome. The Roseate Pearl had already been the cause of violent death and gained a reputation for being cursed, so locals were probably not surprised when the SS Koombana ran into a cyclone and sank to the bottom with no survivors. The Roseate Pearl returned to the ocean floor never to be seen again. Since no photographic record exists of the pearl, it has been relegated to the shady world of legend. Bits of wreckage have been found over the years, but no sign of the treasure in pearls!

The South Seas lie between the northern coast of Australia and the Southern Coast of China and are the native home of the giant oyster, *pinctada maximus*. This oyster comes in white lipped and gold lipped varieties and therefore produces pearls which range in color from silvery-white to golden. Although pearl cultivation was originally developed by British Biologist William Saville-Kent in Australia, the process was first used commercially in Japan, and it wasn't until 1956 that the first commercial pearl farm began operations in Australia. Today South Seas pearl farms are located primarily in Australia, Indone-

sia and the Philippines.

South Seas pearls are commonly 12-15 millimeters in diameter although larger and smaller specimens are available. There are several reasons for the large sizes associated with South Seas pearls. First of course is the size of the mollusk. These oysters typically are the size of dinner plates. Second, while freshwater mollusks are implanted with up to 25 nuclei in the mantle and Japanese Akoya mollusks are usually implanted with two or more nuclei in the gonad, the South Sea pearl oyster is only implanted with one large nucleus in the gonad. Third, warm water and the abundant supply of plankton in the South Seas both contribute to faster growth rates for the oyster and pearl. Finally, Akoya pearls are typically harvested after about one year while South Seas pearls usually remain in the water for at least two years.

Like all pearls, South Seas pearls are graded on color, luster, shape and surface quality. Color ranges from white to golden with the extremes usually being the most expensive. Luster is related to transparency of the nacre with less expensive pearls appearing more chalky. All South Seas pearls are nucleated with a sphere made out of clam shell, but the harvested pearls come in a variety of shapes from spherical to baroque. The more round the pearl is, the higher the value. Surface quality varies from totally smooth to pearls that have small pits or bumps in the surface. While all of these characteristics affect the price of a pearl, the beauty of a pearl is in the eye of the beholder.



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