

# Sapphire Rush in the Jungle East of Ambatondrazaka, Madagascar.

An expedition report by Rosey Perkins

October 21<sup>st</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> 2016



*Figure 1: Thousands of Malagasy people mining sapphires in the jungle east of Ambatondrazaka on Oct 10th 2016.  
Photo: Rosey Perkins.*

## Introduction:

I heard about a sapphire rush taking place in the jungle near Ambatondrazaka, Madagascar at the end of a 5 week long solo trip learning about its sapphires. I had had a great month visiting sapphire mining areas near Diego (North) and Ilakaka (south). At the end of my visit I was in Antananarivo (Tana), the capital, discussing my journey with Marc Noverraz, a Swiss Gem merchant based in Madagascar. He told me there was “a rush” and many people were travelling to Ambatondrazaka to find natural blue sapphires in large sizes from a new deposit. Like the Californian “gold rush” (1848) to which many miners and opportunists travelled when they heard of the riches they could find, this “sapphire rush” was attracting the attention of people from all over Madagascar.

Nearly a year after hearing Vincent Pardieu presenting “Rubies from Zahamena National Park” at the end of my gemological studies at GIA in Carlsbad, I was excited to be in Madagascar with the opportunity of visiting “a rush”. I wanted to find out more: to know the size, colour and quantity of stones found at “the rush site”. I called everyone I knew and gathered that there were around 5000 people working in an area accessible by a 12 hour walk from a village near Ambatondrazaka. I also heard that traders believe sapphires from this deposit have a similar chemical composition to Burmese. The idea of these Malagasy sapphires being mistaken for Burmese by labs issuing reports would surely be good news to traders who would expect it to elevate their value. I couldn’t obtain many more details or samples from the traders or gemologists I made contact with but they were all excited. I decided to go to Ambatondrazaka and answer my questions for myself.



*Figure 2: Madagascar is located in the East of Africa in the Indian Ocean. It is one of the world largest island. It is gifted with a unique biodiversity and with many gemstone deposits.*

## From Tana to Ambatondrazaka and to the new mine site:

On 21st October I set out in a “*taxi-bousse*” from Tana to Ambatondrazaka. The atmosphere was party-like, the air filled with Malagasy pop that gained momentum and ended with several hours of dance music. Everyone was talking excitedly and I struck up conversation with a Malagasy tour guide/computer technician and sometimes miner, who introduced me to his friends and friends of friends. It became clear that almost all of us were heading to the mine.

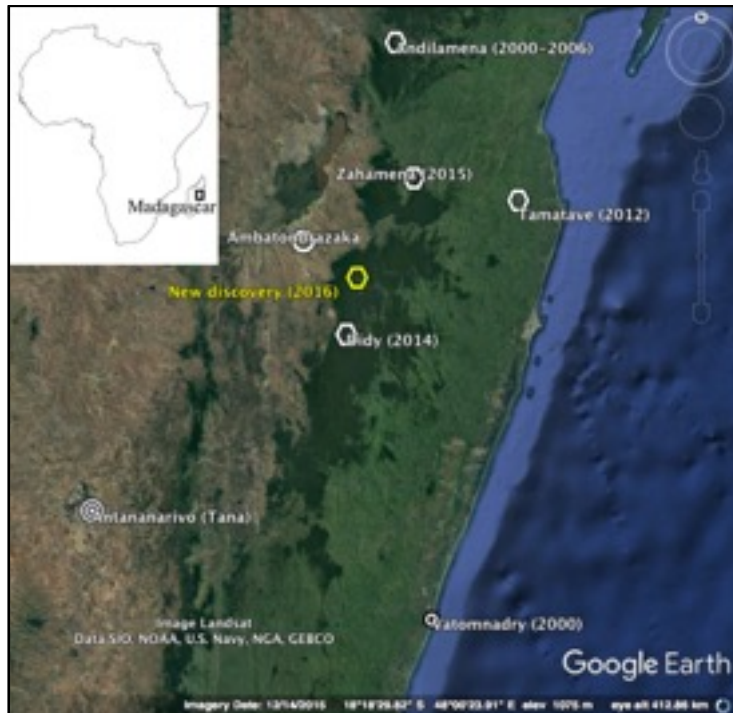


Figure 3: Map of the gem rich area in Madagascar North East with the location of the recent discovery and the other rush that took place in this jungle covered area since 2000 (Pardieu 2014, 2015).

We reached Ambatondrazaka’s town centre at 02:00. After sunrise I called a local contact of Marc’s who showed me some samples of blue sapphire from the mine. I was glad to see, finally, some stones! As a foreign trader, he had to keep a very low profile, since the mine site was in an area of international protection for conservation and attracting “police attention” might trigger a lock down on mining activity. I planned to leave the following morning at 5am, not with an armed or professional security guard but with a local lady called Volihari. Her husband was a broker, her father was a karate master and she had friends and family in every part of local life. Her company was the best protection I could hope for.

It was an evening of preparation mixed with anticipation. That night the news reporter announced that the mining activity in the protected area was illegal, as was unlicensed trading in Ambatondrazaka. The next morning at 05:00 my guide and I left Ambatondrazaka for Ansevebe by motorbike.



*Figure 5: View from the track near Ansevabe. The mine is just to the right of the large, pointed hill. Though it looks like complete forest cover, there are actually areas which have been “tavyied” (burnt to grow crops on) by local people and also cleared by gold miners. Photo: Rosey Perkins*



*Figure 4: Mother and son walking towards the mine about 5km from Ansevabe village. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

From Ansevabe a single-lane dirt road rose steadily, following the spine of a hill before narrowing into a footpath and dipping down into the valley that lead towards the mine. We made 32 river crossings by foot, which explained why the people we passed were either wearing jelly shoes or nothing on their feet at all. I was surprised by how many were returning, either with their stones (though we were not shown any) or to collect commission from their sponsors who gave them money for rice in exchange for access to their stones.

Groups of people cooked rice on the river banks enroute. It seemed the mine was expanding.



*Figure 6: Group of men carrying mining equipment and supplies on their way to the mines. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

As we neared the mine site, the noise of chopping of trees, digging of gravel, cheers of encouragement, and above all, the cries of the Babakoto lemurs rose up as the ground fell away in front of us. Smoke drifted from hundreds of small fires dotted around an area of cleared forest, (approx. 100 hectares). It looked and felt like a medieval encampment before battle.

“*Salut vazzaha!*” I was welcomed by many people. “*A la carrera?*” (to the mine?) had been everyone’s question as we passed enroute. A group gathered round a person with a bloody wound on their head. They lay back in someone’s arm while chickens and their young clucked around them. As I was trying to establish what had happened, I noticed that one of the many young chicks navigating the crowd was swept up and with no hesitation, its fluffy breast was plucked and scattered into the wind. Next, a knife drew a few drops of blood from its belly and something was pulled out and fed to the patient. I guessed that a beating heart was the remedy for blood loss but I never gathered what had happened; I walked away.



*Figure 7: Man uses the bridge at The Rush A Site near Ambatondrazaka. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

I spotted the “Gendarme” (military police) in their camouflage and their jelly shoes and I hoped they wouldn’t send me back immediately. I took out my passport and a print out of a letter to the General Director of mining in Madagascar, Eddy Harilala Rasolomanana, who had written a welcoming response to an email in which notified him of my intent to witness mining activity during my stay in Madagascar. They spoke with Volihari, to whom they listened intently and authorised me to stay and take photos. I wasn’t allowed to buy.



*Figure 8: The Gendarme in jelly shoes, and one of the few wooden huts. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

## The Mine:

The mining site is located in a theoretically protected area south of Zahamena National Park and north west of Mangerivola Reserve. According to local people the area had been cleared of its trees few years ago before the recent gem rush by gold miners. The cleared area where mining was taking place was perhaps 800m in length but the mining extends into the trees for several hundred meters at either end. Sticks or stones marked the edges of a plot, there may have been 1000 dug by the time I left. 6 ft or so of overburden was shifted before the gravel bed could be accessed. 4-5 people would dig with spades and transport gravels to the river for sieving via a human chain with buckets. When harder material was reached, an iron pole was used to penetrate it. In some areas they were also tunnelling.



*Figure 9: Sapphire at the mine. Most of the production is composed of blue stones. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

People were sieving every colour of dirt - orange red to orangish yellow to bluish yellow, though I was told by one group they only found sapphire in the bluish yellow material. Sieves were either made from plastic containers with holes skewered into the sides or by metal framed with wood. I saw several people transporting their metal sieve rolled up and assumed they planned to make the frame at the mine.



*Figure 10: A woman and the tented community behind her. Photo: Rosey Perkins*



*Figure 11: Miners see something interesting with interested onlookers behind. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

I was told by one local miner how the gold prospectors discovered the sapphires. They had heard stones “exploding” when they were clearing this area of forest. They started digging and found some large blue stones identified as sapphires. People had been digging at the site for a month but the rush had started only a week before I arrived.



## The Need for Discretion:

During my 3 days at the rush site I did not witness one sapphire taken from the sieve. Though cheers rose, they often marked mock finds, falling trees or excited people cheering themselves on... or beckoning me over to take a “souvenir photo” of them digging. It is hard to estimate the number of miners there, I asked many people and was given figures between 10000 and 300000. The gendarme said 45000 and that sounded reasonable to me.

Considering the frenzy and hunger, the cooperation was impressive. They were living in 2-man tents or under tarpaulin sheets, which hung over branches taken from nearby trees. I imagined people had so few possessions that they could carry whatever was important. I heard that some who had sold “a fake” had been hit over the head with an iron bar. I didn’t gather whether the patient I had seen on my arrival was that victim, I didn’t see any violence at all.

The people at the mine site, most of whom were Malagasy, were approachable, though at first wary of me.

“*Journalist?*” they asked.

“*Student?*” I’d reply.

Actually many of the miners had seen me in Antsirabe, Ilakaka or Ambondromifehy, previous stops on my journey. I walked slowly around the mining area for 3 days, taking photos and talking to anyone who questioned me. They often beckoned me over for a “souvenir photo” and gestured to me the best way to reach them, which was often along fallen trees which served as bridges. Amazingly, I never saw anyone fall in and was glad not to have provided that kind of entertainment.



*Figure 12: Friendly miner at the mines. It was interesting to see there many people I had met few weeks before in different areas of Madagascar. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

## Life at the Mine

On the second day I really needed “the loo.” Until then I had found no privacy and so as I moved along the perimeter of the clearing I took the opportunity to turn up one footpath which led into the jungle. Shouts of “arrêt!” stopped me. Dozens of grinning miners shouted “toiletti!” as a gentle warning and they beckoned me back. But I had wanted the toilet and when I felt their attention dissolve I sloped off into the jungle...Oh yuk...the sight...the stench... I was taken aback, returned to the clearing, and to the laughs and cheers of the miners.

The Gendarme told me they paid someone to collect and bring them water but that most people took it from a wide open pit on lower ground where it wasn't clean. I was lucky to have eaten with the Gendarmes so far but when I accepted a meal from some local miners I understood what I'd seen and smelt in the forest. The water wasn't healthy, it produces drice the same colour as coffee and the spread of disease seemed a genuine concern of the Gendarme.

Each morning I woke up to the noise of digging, and cheers rising through the morning mist. Pots and pans clunked together as cooks served hungry people the staple: rice, pot noodles and watery haricot beans or coffee and *mofogasy* (circular shaped donuts). 5000 Ariary (about £1) was the price for a cup of coffee. It was several times the standard price but I heard no complaints; everyone had taken the same route in.



Figure 13: Breakfast: Rice, haricot beans, pot noodles. Photo: Rosey Perkins



*Figure 14: Breakfast in the mist. Photo Rosey Perkins*

I was the only westerner, but certainly not the only woman. I was surprised by the number of families there with small children and old ladies who had carried rice or other goods in on their heads. Often it took them several days and they camped on the way. I spoke with those who could speak French as I knew little Malagasy and few of them could speak English.



*Figure 15: Women and children near the new mining site in front of the chicken coop. Photo: Rosey Perkins*



*Figure 16: Bringing refreshments into the new mining site on foot. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

## Sapphires from the Rush Site

I spoke with many brokers, traders and miners who showed me stones from “au vive” (a light swimming pool blue with good transparency) to a deep “royal blue” (saturated deep blue, see fig 16). Some stones had uneven color distribution blue/white, many were actually milky stones (see fig 18 and 19) and some were “polychrome” meaning that they were several colours, but usually contained lots of brown.

They were “water worn” and the white stone (see fig 19) was the best crystal I saw there. The traders I spoke with said the blue sapphires at this site had a touch of green not seen in those from Ilakaka, but were otherwise similar.

One miner told me that the area to the right of this photo (see fig 17) and beyond is where the larger stones were found, and middle area is where the milkier stones were found. I am not able to confirm that from what I saw. Neither did I see any of the fine +100 carat rough rumoured to have been found.



*Figure 17: Blue Sapphire in front of the mine looking West. Photo: Rosey Perkins*



*Figure 18: Milky blue sapphire called "geuda" by Sri Lankan traders. These stones are heat treated to become (hopefully) transparent and blue Photo: Rosey Perkins.*



*Figure 19: Whitish sapphire from the new mining site. The most intact crystal I saw. Photo: Rosey Perkins*

## Notice to Leave

On 23rd October the Gendarmes told me I would need to leave the following day. They said that the government would be sending in the military at any stage. "Infiltration" to this illegal mining site, they pointed out, would also merit arrest. They were also concerned about bandits who might have attacked us on the way back to Ambatondrazaka. They told me I would need their security guards but before that idea was implemented, a friend of Volihari's and a martial arts master suggested he came with us. I hired him immediately.

As I packed up, a man in his mid 30s came and asked me for a "souvenir photo" and my email address. He said he was a law student from Tana but that without the money to pay a bribe requested by his university, he was unable to graduate. He had come to the mine to find a stone to pay that bribe. How different were the reasons for visiting that mine! These people were not gemologists, many did not know the value of their stones and they were scared of being taken advantage of. Whether this story above is accurate or not, I've no doubt they were here to solve their (very real) problems.

On 24th October at 1pm our group left and at 17:30 we had reached two shacks in a clearing in a clearing in the jungle, a reasonable place to spend the night. The next morning, we left before sunrise and by the time we reached Antsevabe, 6 hours later, I'd counted 1000 people walking towards the mine. They left plastic wrappers behind to line their way. Huts were being built as resting posts and about 10 stalls had been set up beside the paths to serve weary walkers. On the road between Antsevabe and Ambatondrazaka I passed around 400 more: 3 tractor and trailer loads of people (each with 40 or so people in them) plus walkers, cyclists and people on the back of a motorbike with mining equipment or a rice sack to carry their belongings. There was a lot of activity on the road. I met one miner who said he had taken a stone out to Ambatondrazaka one day and returned to the mine the next - 24 hours walking in 48 hours!

## Back to Ambatondrazaka:

In Ambatondrazaka the traders (mostly Sri Lankan merchants) were busy. I recognised some miners in a trading office and saw the 70 carat sapphire they were selling. Negotiations had already taken 3 hours and the trader told me they usually take at least 4. News of that stone and some others as large as 125 carats had soon reached foreign buyers, and I know of some who have since flown in to join the rush. I can say with confidence that the mine was growing by 1500-2000 per day while I was there, though I heard from home in London on Nov. 1<sup>st</sup> that production of this new deposit has reduced and many miners have moved to a ruby deposit in the same region. The general feeling is that the Government will eventually stop the mining activity in the jungle, but while the stones keep coming nothing else will.



*Figure 20: A 70c rough sapphire from the new deposit seen in Ambatondrazaka: Photo: Rosey Perkins*

## A word of thanks:

Thank you Vincent Pardieu (from GIA Bangkok) for your advice, introductions, support and photo editing skills and hammock mosquito net; to Marc Noverraz (from Colorline Ilakaka), for your information, hospitality and support and to Volihari for your stoicism and companionship. Thanks also to those I've chosen not to name in the article but without whose help I may not have made it.

I relied on the information, skills, introductions, hospitality, patience, good will and humor of all those above and many more people whose paths I crossed.



## Disclaimer:

This article is about the experiences of the author and the information she gathered on her trip to the mine site. Any views expressed are only the author's opinions. Her information is dependent on the people she has met. If information in this article is proved incorrect, incomplete, biased or offensive it is not the authors intent. The aim of the article is to record and share this personal and unusual experience.

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## About the author:

Rosey Perkins is a gemology graduate GG GIA from London. She is fascinated by gemstones and particularly sapphires. She enjoys tracing back their journey from the market to the mine and meeting the people enroute, an interest that has taken her to Australia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Tanzania, Mozambique and Madagascar. Recently, before that solo visit to Madagascar she has joined Vincent Pardieu (GIA Bangkok) on several field expeditions (Vietnam, Tanzania, Mozambique) as his assistant and field cameraman. You can read about her experience at: [www.roseyperkins.com](http://www.roseyperkins.com)