

Special Report **Watches & Jewellery**

**Watches & Jewellery Colombia**

## **Colombia moves to put emeralds on a par with Roquefort**

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The nation wants to be the first to attain appellation of origin for a precious stone

Gideon Long in Coscuez, Colombia NOVEMBER 10, 2018

Roquefort cheese, Scotch whisky, Cornish pasties and Spanish serrano ham are foods with one thing in common: they are all protected by appellation of origin.

Until now, this protection has been granted mostly to food and drink. The French have their *appellation d'origine contrôlée* to stop imposters passing off cheap plonk as Bordeaux; Italy's *denominazione di origine protetta* safeguards everything from Parmesan to balsamic vinegar from Modena.

Now, Colombia wants to do something similar with its emeralds. The country's miners are seeking appellation of origin (AO) status for their green gemstones. If they succeed, not only would Colombian emeralds become the first precious gemstones in the world to be protected on the basis of origin, but the move could also transform an industry that was once a vipers' nest of lawlessness. Only Mexican amber from Chiapas, considered a semi-precious stone, has similar status.

The sector now attracts international investment. "We want to guarantee traceability from the mine right through to sale," says Edwin Molina, president of the national emerald producers' association, Aprecol, which leads the AO campaign.

"We want customers to know that when they buy a Colombian emerald, they are getting the genuine thing, that it was exported from Colombia legally and that it was mined ethically and responsibly."

Colombia is not the world's biggest producer of emeralds — Zambia and Brazil both mine more, Aprecol says — but what it lacks in quantity it makes up for in quality. Its emeralds are regarded as by far the best in the world, with a deep, lustrous hue that sets them apart from those of their rivals. They sell for many times more than stones from elsewhere.



A 50m shaft in the mine's Cafetal pit © LightRocket via Getty Images

“The best quality emeralds come from Colombia and have done for centuries,” says Emily Barber, director of auction house Bonhams’ jewellery department in the UK. “The price per carat escalates rapidly with size and hinges largely on the colour and clarity of the stone. The best specimens possess a rare combination of intense colour, also known as ‘green fire’, and crystalline transparency.”

In April this year, Bonhams sold an emerald and diamond necklace featuring a 12-carat double-sided cabochon emerald crescent and a six-carat pear-shaped emerald drop — with both stones hailing from Colombia.

The piece had a presale estimate of £150,000-£200,000 but sold for nearly **£1.33m**. “Collectors and connoisseurs are showing particular interest in old emerald material from the early deposits in Colombia,” Ms Barber says.



Emerald and diamond necklace sold by Bonhams in April

Gemologists say Colombia's emeralds are geologically unique, a crucial factor in the push for AO status. Using chemical fingerprinting and X-ray spectroscopy, they can determine not only if an emerald is Colombian, but whether it comes from Muzo, Coscuez or Chivor, the three main production areas in the mountains of Boyacá, north of Bogotá, the capital.

Aprecol says it also plans to use blockchain technology to store information about the provenance of its gemstones.

The association intends to submit its AO application to Colombia's patent and registration office before the end of the year. If approved, it will then go to the UN's World Intellectual Property Organization in Geneva for further consideration.

Mr Molina says he hopes the whole process will be completed by March next year, and the miners appear confident of success, given the exhaustive groundwork they say they have done.



Miners bring a cart to the surface © LightRocket via Getty Images

The association says the move would set a global benchmark for all gemstones should others follow suit. It would force producers to comply with strict criteria, such as committing to best labour and safety practices, declaring taxes, paying proper salaries and demonstrating a commitment to environmental sustainability.

One worry is that stringent standards on the industry could put some smaller miners out of business. Another concern is about policing. Who will ensure producers comply with their new commitments?

## The best specimens possess a rare mix of intense colour known as ‘green fire’

Given the industry’s brutally dark past, however, the bid for AO status is progress. Emeralds have been mined in Boyacá since pre-Columbian times. Muzo, the most famous mining town, is named after the indigenous tribe that lived there before the Spanish arrived in the 16th century. The Spanish enslaved generations of Amerindians, forcing them to dig out the “green gold” in appalling conditions.

In the 1980s, emerald mining was entangled with Colombia’s cocaine trade. José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, once the right-hand man of late drugs lord Pablo Escobar, emerged as a powerful Boyacá figure. His bloody feud with Colombia’s “emerald tsar” Víctor Carranza lasted through the decade until Rodríguez Gacha was shot dead by police in 1989.

By the time Carranza and other emerald barons signed a peace deal in the early 1990s, Colombia’s “green wars” had claimed about 10,000 lives.



A worker reaches into the Cafetal pit’s gallery © LightRocket via Getty Images

Things started to change in 2009 when Minería Texas Colombia, a US-based company, moved into the area. When Carranza died four years later, MTC bought full operating rights to his biggest emerald mine and began modernising it.

Dubai-based, Toronto-listed Fura Gems followed in January this year, completing its acquisition of the nearby Coscuez mine, a once lawless place where miners relied on whatever money they could make from the emeralds they scratched out of the ground.

“For the first three months we hardly mined anything. We just concentrated on making the mine safe and expanding it,” says Dev Shetty, president and chief executive of Fura Gems. “We had a lot of informal miners on site when we arrived. We hired 270 of them, putting them on payroll. They’re now getting benefits and pensions they weren’t getting before.”



Given the country's mining industry's brutally dark past, the bid for AO status is progress and is hoped could boost other sectors © LightRocket via Gelly Images

New technology is allowing miners to dig deeper and find new seams. Mr Shetty says that despite centuries of exploitation, Colombia has hardly scratched the surface of its emerald deposits. He expects Fura Gems to be mining at Coscuez for at least another 25 years. “My granddaughter will be able to mine here,” he says. “That’s how big the resource is.”

For Colombia, AO status could transform an industry that should be a source of national pride but which is all too often associated with gangsterism. The hope is that

it will be a boon for the country's design and fashion industries and boost tourism in the spectacular, lush green mountains of Boyacá.

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