

Mirror image

GEMOLOGISTS ARE THROWING DOWN THE GAUNTLET TO THE PRECIOUS STONES INDUSTRY IN THE BIGGEST EVER CHALLENGE TO ITS MONOPOLY OVER GLAMOUR. MIRRORS OF THE REAL THING, LAB-CRAFTED SIMULANT DIAMONDS ARE PUTTING A MORE DEMOCRATIC PRICE ON LUXURY

For the precious stones industry, technology is a twin-faced fix. Just as one branch of technical expertise is being wielded to figure ever more clever ways to drag diamonds from the earth's deep, hot underbelly, another is being wielded to similar effect in laboratories producing simulant gems at a vastly lower expense.

Simulant stones are convincing mimics created by expert gemologists in laboratories to look, react and behave much like natural gems without actually adopting their atomic structure and physical properties. Simulants came to attention in spectacular fashion when the first generation of lab-created emeralds flooded the jewellery market in the 1970s, causing their value to bottom out at an unflattering five percent of that of their natural cousins. But the simulant stones industry has grown up since then. And this polished, adult edition has finally arrived – this is more than skin deep.

Solidly weighted, burning with the fire of a natural diamond, cast in beautiful 18 carat gold settings, desert diamonds are unique – indistinguishable from natural diamonds to the naked eye. Branded Desert Diamonds What Women Want, these simulants are the Saudi Arabian-born lovechild of a Melbourne-born innovator named Sally Cowley and a team of talented Thai gemologists.

This story meanders back to lonely Saudi deserts, where an abundance of quartz causes the desert floors to light up at dusk with millions of glittering stones, much to the enchantment of occasional foreign visitors. “‘Desert diamond’ is a fictitious term used for quartz stones found in the desert,” Cowley begins. “In Saudi Arabia, people would walk through the deserts, pick up the quartz stones, and have them polished and set into jewellery. We used quartz in the early days, but with evolving technology we found higher quality simulants that matched the brilliance of a real diamond. It seemed natural to use the name desert diamonds to reflect where it all started.”

Cowley launched Desert Diamonds What Women Want in 2002; today, she is at the helm of a global company operating in 26 countries. “My concept was simple,” she says. “I wanted to create a collection of exquisite 18 carat gold jewellery that could compete with the high end jewellery market in terms of quality. We use the highest quality simulant, superior settings and gold weight reserved for high end brands. This, I genuinely believe, is what women want. Luxury jewellery without the price tag.”

“As awareness of simulants has grown, so has the brand,” Cowley continues. “In the European market, diamond simulants are well accepted. Many people only buy one real diamond in their life but they can still have the look at an affordable price, making an increasing demand for this product.”

Perhaps the name “diamond” is a bit of an embellishment. After all, desert diamonds are lab creations, not three billion year old natural gems mined at great expense under some of the world's most difficult conditions. It is also important to note the distinction between simulant and synthetic diamonds. Synthetic stones are created in labs under controlled conditions, but they are grown from “seeds” as exact material clones of natural stones. Distinguishing between synthetic and natural diamonds is difficult and can only be done by extensive testing in a qualified lab. This scientific breakthrough came at a price, however. Respected Boston-based synthetic diamond producer Apollo offers a pair of synthetic diamond stud earrings with a total weight of just 0.48 carats for US\$995; still pricing many buyers out of the market.

Cue simulants. They behave exactly like natural stones on all counts that matter to consumers. These diamond imitators often start from a different compositional base such as cubic zirconia, synthetic rutile (a form of titanium dioxide), moissanite (a rare mineral form of silicon carbide), yttrium aluminium

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garnet, gadolinium gallium garnet or glass. Rated at 8.5 on the Mohs hardness scale – natural diamonds are 10 – desert diamonds are cut, polished and treated identically to the real thing, and are as close to a natural diamond as one is likely to get without opting for a synthetic.

“The simulants I use are made from a chemical composition created to imitate the qualities of natural diamond and selected to meet our specifications,” Cowley says, but for reasons of confidentiality, she cannot reveal the name of the organisation that produces her stones. “This highly skilled process results in the final precision of cut, luster, brilliance and longevity of the stone,” she adds. As a finishing touch, the stones are polished with real diamond powder. The jewellery comes with a lifetime guarantee not to break or lose its luster. Cowley, at least, is putting her money on the fact that desert diamonds are also forever.

The increasing acceptance of simulants as high quality items reflects the emergence of a pragmatic approach to luxury. Women still want to look and feel great, but now they are looking for intelligently priced high quality options. Spending six months’ salary on a real diamond is increasingly considered irresponsible. Thus simulants are spanning the impossible divide between “real” and costume jewellery. Hallelujah.

In order to maintain integrity and the sense of luxury, simulants must receive equal treatment as diamonds in all other ways – the cutting must be identical, the gold must be at least 18 carat and solid, the settings must be elegant and expertly crafted, and the stones must maintain their brilliance for life. This is the gap in the luxury market that Cowley and other producers of diamond simulants are aiming to fill.

It is unsurprising that desert diamonds have been such a hit in the Gulf, where a woman’s style is the ultimate statement of her

personality and creativity. Coupled with the region’s thirst for innovation, this culture of luxury is firing the demand for desert diamonds in the UAE. “Desert diamonds are very popular with local [Emirati] women,” says Sharon Moore, the distributor of Desert Diamonds What Women Want in Abu Dhabi. “Often they buy six pieces at once. The way they see it is that they could spend AED 20,000 and buy one piece of jewellery or they could spend AED 20,000 and buy six pieces that behave like the real thing and are guaranteed to remain that way for life.” Cowley also offers a bespoke design service – adding an extra element of personalisation and exclusivity to the product. Moore had a client who ordered a 12 carat desert diamond for her daughter’s wedding ring.

This is all well and good, but as Jef Van Royan, a senior scientist for the Diamond High Council in Antwerp, told *Wires* magazine: “If people *really* love each other, then they give each other the real stone.” His words will resonate with many women; Naomi Campbell would surely have none of it. Part

of a diamond’s appeal is its exclusivity and rarity after all. However, natural diamonds are actually in abundance. De Beers and the London Diamond Company tightly manage the distribution of their vast stocks to perpetuate this myth and keep control of world diamond prices and production.

Conceptually, however, the simulant market is not attempting to pass itself off as the real thing, as the synthetic one does. Desert diamonds have carved out a reputation as jewels that pose and perform the same way as real diamonds do, but are unique luxury objects in their own right. Moore says many of her clients are proud to discuss their stones’ pedigree, especially regarding their heritage. “Clients like to have something special that reminds them of this region,” Moore says. “They are designed to invoke the exotic glamour of the Middle East.”

Ultimately, it comes down to glamour. It’s about women looking and feeling good. And feeling good about what they buy. There is no doubt that a genuine diamond will remain the ultimate symbol of glamour. But luxury is becoming innovative and women will always want something special – and these are no ordinary diamonds. ❀

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