

In the past 10 years, recognising that buyers were not solely Sri Lankans, the gem traders of China Fort have built some 135 air conditioned offices, small cubicles where buyers can examine stones in comfort, without the bustle of the crowd around them. Buyers are given tables where they can conduct business. This is a wholesale trading area for experts who know their stones and can quickly calculate the price at which it is worth buying. The tourist would feel lost here, although it is fascinating to watch the trading take place and realise that business worth millions of dollars is being conducted under their noses.

Why the place is named Chinese Fort is open to conjecture. Until the arrival of the Portuguese in the island in the 16th century, there was considerable engagement between the Chinese and the inhabitants of Sri Lanka. In the 15th century the king of Sri Lanka was kidnapped and taken to China and for several decades afterwards, tribute was sent annually to China from Sri Lanka.

The port favoured by Chinese vessels then was Lo-le (Galle) whereas Beruwala had been used by Arab traders and mariners since the 9th century. The Chinese called the island "Paou-choo" a translation of the Sanskrit "Ratna-dwipa" meaning island of gems. The Chinese were fascinated by the island's gems stones and described those found near Adam's Peak as "Adam's crystallised tears, which account for their singular lustre and marvellous tints."

Beruwala's gem trade dates back to the era when Berbers from North Africa's Barbary States -- Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia -- dominated the seas from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Berber merchant ships called at what became known as Berberyn Harbour later becoming Beruwela. The Muslim traders soon linked up with the gem merchants and the miners of Ratnapura since they had sea access to markets overseas for the stones



Gemming equipment on sale at China Fort

mined in the Gem City.

The business of collecting and selling gems has been conducted from the earliest times by the Arabs of Beruwala and, according to a contemporary account, those gems (rubies, sapphires) "bore in China the designation of 'Mahometan (Mohamed) stones'." Given the history of visits by the Chinese to the island for 12 centuries since the 4th century, it is not improbable that the Chinese established a settlement in Beruwala long before the Portuguese arrived, as a focus for their gem trading. The name China Fort may well have its origins from those days.

Ahzar explained that China Fort, with its 5,000 residents connected with the gem trade, is not just a trading centre but is also the major centre in Sri Lanka for the cutting of rough stones and their polishing. Cutting is done by electrical machinery now, although rough stones that seem to have extra potential are given to cutters who work in the traditional way with a hand operated lathe.

One man, M. Alavi, showed me the skill required as he pulled a bow-shaped pulley backwards and forwards to turn the cutting wheel. He held the stone close to the rotating plate for a fraction of second then whipped it away, dipped it in wa-

ter, dried it, looked at it, and started again. He has been cutting stones for 40 years. His son showed me a cut gem, stuck with wax on a holder, which he was polishing under his father's instructions.

Several of the gem merchants spoke of the risk in buying a rough stone in the hope it could be transformed into a gem. "We only have a 75 per cent chance of success," said one. "We have to recover our losses in the prices we charge for polished gems." I was puzzled how they could identify the potential of a rough stone.

Someone showed me. He dropped a pearl of coconut oil on a rough stone, shone his torch on it and, lo and behold, a hint of a ray appeared.

In his office at his home, Ahzar showed me a chunky rough, light blue stone that I found quite attractive. "It's worthless," he said when I commented it would look nice on a necklace. "For it to be valuable, we would have to transform it into something like this."

He dropped a gem the size of a marble into my hand while a colleague held a specially adapted torch over it. "See the ray," he said as the light picked up the different shades of the stone, an alexandrite cat's eye. It