

Amethyst Hunting in Seoul

This story is about gemstones and buying amethyst in Seoul. My wife and I have been collecting gemstones and making custom jewelry for quite a while now. It is something we like to do together. The last time I was in Seoul on a work assignment, I had taken a tour with some of my team members and their wives. Typical of these Korean tours, you would end up in government sponsored stores selling either ginseng or amethyst. We ended up at a place selling amethyst, the purple gemstone South Korea is famous for. I didn't mind going there as I was always open to learning something new about gemstones. Because I knew very little about amethyst, I usually asked the most senior person there, who spoke English, what made for good quality amethyst? It turns out that colour was the main determinant factor and that the Asians liked a deeper and darker purple, while the Americans liked the lighter purples. I managed to find a very nicely coloured and relatively large trillium cut amethyst gemstone weighing a hefty 9 carats. I liked it because the stone was very sparkly and gemstones of this size are rarely cut in the triangular trillium shape. I was surprised that I could get this stone for a mere \$200 US! In other words, amethysts are cheap compared with the other types of gemstones we had collected. I bought it immediately. Then I showed it to my colleagues and their wives who all said it was a pretty stone, but maybe thinking that I was a real cheap guy for spending only \$200 for the wife and boasting about it! As it turns out, no gemstones I ever got for my wife ended up to be cheap as she has very expensive and specific tastes when it came to jewelry. Of course, she wanted to have this stone set as a pendant in white gold which ended up costing another \$1,900 for a custom design from our goldsmith! So, the math didn't quite work out as expected. But it is a stunning piece of jewelry nonetheless and it looks expensive even though I know the stone is cheap. I kept reminding myself, "Happy wife, happy life"! I think my wife is happy, but I never know for sure.

On my last trip to Seoul, my colleague and his wife also came on the same trip. To protect their identities as this story is about them, I will call them Igor and Natasha! Now Igor was feeling guilty that he never bought Natasha any expensive jewelry of any kind in all the years they have been married. And I did my best to make him feel more guilty by reminding him that Natasha is a beautiful woman and she deserves the best, and that he had loads of money so why was he so borderline cheap! Both of them had heard about the big amethyst which I had bought for my wife and what a great deal I got. They wanted me to take them to this place to see if they could find something special Natasha might like. We ended up going there over the week-end. When we walked into the store, the salespeople looked at us as no one else was there at the time. They wondered where we came from since it wasn't from their normal busloads of tourists. I told the saleslady who spoke English that I was there the last time from a tour and had bought some amethyst from them and that my friend and his wife were here looking for amethyst jewelry. We got their full attention immediately and they knew that we were there to shop unlike the other tourists who may have been brought there against their will. They started to show Natasha all their amethyst jewelry and loose gemstones in their showcases.



I was sitting by myself at another counter while Igor and Natasha were checking out the goods in the showcases. A short, elderly woman, no more than 5 ft. tall, came around the counter, smiled at me (Koreans are so polite), and she pulled out a box which she proceeded to take out several bundles of rolled tissue paper. The saleslady who spoke English came by and she mentioned that this woman was the owner of the store and that she wanted to show me her “private” collection of loose amethyst gemstones. The owner didn’t speak English, but she must have found out from her staff that we were there to buy, so she was going to show me her best stuff. The saleslady also cautioned me that these gemstones were also very expensive, whereas the amethyst jewelry on display typically went for \$20-30 US per carat and we could get a 30% discount from their retail price, these top-end amethyst gemstones were only shown to “special” customers as they cost \$200 US per carat and they could only offer 20% discount. I just shrugged and gestured to show me what they had as I had never seen high end investment grade amethyst.

As the owner unrolled the tissue paper, I could see many large and beautifully proportioned and uniformly deep purple coloured amethysts. I selected two very large gems which were particularly eye catching and I called Natasha over to take a look as she hadn’t found anything of interest yet. She wanted something special for a pendant. One of the stones was a traditional oval cut with the facets cut on the underside and it was the darker of the two stones. The other was an India cut which had additional facets cut on the top of the stone which made it very sparkly. Natasha liked the first stone because of its deeper purple colour, but I told her that everything looks great under these high intensity lights at the counter. So, I took the stone and walked away from the counter into the shadows and asked her what she saw. “Nothing. Just a dark stone. No sparkles at all.” She said. I told her that the clarity of this stone must not be as good as we think since it could not capture enough light through the stone to be reflected back to her. Something like trying to capture light looking through a dirty window. I then tried the same thing with the India cut stone and it clearly sparkled even in the shadows. Natasha could see that it was the better stone.

The owner, the saleslady and Igor were watching us as we did this and it became obvious that Natasha wanted to buy this gemstone. But wait, she was not finished. Natasha also wanted matching stones to be made into earrings to go with her pendant! I thought this might be a problem, but the owner dug further into her magic box and came up with two smaller oval shaped gemstones which matched the intense colour and sparkle of the big one perfectly. Everyone agreed that this was indeed a rare and wonderful set of matched gemstones and that it was meant to be for Natasha to own them! Now it was the time to get into the price negotiations for the stones. They weighed the stones totaling at 30.5 carats with the big gemstone at 18.5 carats! That is one humongous stone! So, retail at \$200 US per carat would be \$6,100 US, less 20%. They offered to sell these stones at \$4,900 US. Now Igor happens to speak impeccable Chinese, while my Chinese is just barely passable, but I managed to say to Igor that I think we could get these stones for \$4,000. The saleslady was listening and she asked us why we “fine gentlemen were not



speaking English”? We just smiled at her. Igor replied to me that he wanted to offer \$3,800 and I indicated sure, why not. Igor told me later that he wanted to offer \$3,500 but he thought that this might be too low. When the owner heard about the counter-offer, she was like any typical Asian woman, “Aiya, how can you offer me such a low price! I cannot make a living at this price! I cannot do it!” Then she gestured, made a few faces of exasperation and stomped away waving her arms as if indignant. Now all this was in Korean, so I guess that is what she said. Meanwhile, the saleslady pleaded with Igor to do better on his offer, first to \$4,000, then to \$3,900, but I have to give credit to Igor. He was tough and repeated, “No. That is my price.” In hindsight, the owner didn’t really have much choice but to accept. There are not many customers who would appreciate and be willing to pay for the best quality amethysts. And she definitely could not let a \$3,800 sale walk out the door. So, the price we negotiated was an excellent deal at 37.7% off the asking price. And everyone seemed to be happy, including the owner. Even though she didn’t speak English, she paid me the ultimate compliment. She pointed to me, then to her eye and gave me the universal thumbs up! After all, I did pick out her best amethyst. What a great time and experience shopping with good friends and learning something new at the same time. Life is full of such memorable encounters. But now, I can’t call my friend, Igor, cheap anymore! Better still, neither can his wife!

When they got back home, Igor had to do what I did and spend a few thousand more to have these gemstones properly set into stunning jewelry. But that is a small price for a happy wife!

Written By: Tony Yep

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