

A SEABOURN CLUB PUBLICATION | VOLUME 29 NUMBER 2

HERALD

WILD NEW ZEALAND
ROMANTIC SINGAPORE | HOT MATÉ | CARIBBEAN TREASURES

A high-angle photograph of a beach. The left side shows the golden sand, and the right side shows the turquoise ocean. A white, foamy wave is crashing from the top right towards the center. In the bottom right corner, the tail of a colorful kite surfer is visible, featuring purple, red, and yellow sections. The text 'UNIQUE TREASURES' is overlaid in the lower half of the image.

UNIQUE
TREASURES



of the **CARIBBEAN**

Each of the islands has a special something found nowhere else, a remarkable handicraft or material that can make an artwork singularly precious.

by Richard Varr

There's an expression for every mood — frowning, laughing, with piercing stares and even a smart-aleck grin — emblazoned across brightly colored masks hanging on the walls. Underneath the faces, ornately patterned pottery pieces line the display cases along with figurines of cats, butterflies, lizards and elephants, all decorated in a collage of cool blues, golden-toned yellows and muted earthen-red hues.





Mopa mopa

Left: Mopa Mopa Aruba Photographs: Mark...

THE CREATIVE SWIRLS ARE NOT MADE FROM PAINT, BUT INSTEAD TINTED AND SHAPED FROM DELICATE LAYERS OF TREE RESIN.

Walk into any store in Aruba selling the island's unique mopa mopa art and you'll find these colorful, traditional designs created with what seems to be a hand-painted precision and beauty. Surprisingly, however, the creative swirls are not made from paint, but instead tinted and shaped from delicate layers of tree resin in a traditional handicraft process dating back more than a millennium.

Mopa mopa lacquerwork is just one example of the unique art forms, souvenirs and treasures of sorts found only on certain Caribbean islands. Some are natural, like the shiny larimar and amber stones found in the Dominican Republic. Others, like the smooth, blue glass beads of St. Eustatius, highlight the Caribbean's extensive colonial history. While barnacled cannons and sunken doubloons are an exciting find, if you stroll an island boulevard and look closely enough you may run across small treasures and cultural items found nowhere else.

ARUBA ART

The process of forming mopa mopa's colorful layers stems from the Quillacinga Indians of northern Ecuador and southwestern Colombia. They picked the leaf buds from mopa mopa trees, boiled them to form a gummy resin and then added mineral or vegetable dyes for color. Unique to this handed-down art form over the generations is how the gum is processed — pulled into thin sheets by workers using their hands and mouth. Resin layers are finally stretched onto wood and then trimmed with a knife.

"They say the masks scare off bad spirits in the house," says Maria Lopez, whose family owns several Aruba art stores. "The Quillacinga tribe explains that you're supposed to choose the first one that 'speaks' to you — that was made for you."

LUCKY DJUCU

Also unique to Aruba and neighboring Curaçao are decorative djucu nuts, often

Blue larimar



threaded into jewelry and keepsakes. Round, smooth and fitting in the palm of your hand, brown and black djucus grow on trees in Venezuela and wash down rivers into the southern Caribbean Sea. They're swept away by ocean currents all the way to island beaches after weeks afloat.

The locals say finding the nuts will give you luck. Jewelers and vendors selling from kiosks string them together to create necklaces, bracelets, earrings and other unique pieces. Djucus are also known as "lucky stones," as some believe they not only bring good luck but good health as well. Thus they're often found in casinos, worn by gamblers as good luck charms on chains around the neck, with some set in gold.

GEMS OF HISPANIOLA

The Dominican Republic boasts two unique Caribbean treasures — blue larimar and brown-tinted amber stones. Jewelry items studded with larimar, often shining with a brilliant cerulean radiance, are quickly snatched up at Dominican ports of call. The rare, blue-streaked mineral is mined in a lushly forested mountain region in the Barahona province, the largest known deposits in the world. Often set in silver and gold, polished larimar fragments add flair to rings, earrings, bracelets and pendants.

Classified as a silicate pectolite mineral, larimar deposits vary from gray to white. But rare Dominican blue larimar got its brilliant hues when copper compounds leached into bubbling volcanic magma during the stone's formation, as hot volcanic gases pushed the blue pectolite

toward the surface through fissures in sedimentary rock. Erosion eventually washed out some deposits, naturally polishing the stones tumbling downstream along the Bahoruco River. It's certainly easy to spot the polished blue-tinted gems on the beaches when sparkling under the Caribbean sun.

Lightweight amber brings to mind the fantasy of the Jurassic Park movie series, where dinosaurs are cloned thanks to DNA sucked in by biting mosquitoes that were preserved inside hardened tree resin for 240 million years. What's not fantasy, however, is that some Dominican amber actually has well-preserved ancient critters including insects, scorpions and lizards that were trapped by the sticky tree resin as it dried to rock-hardness.

Other stones show off erratic swirls of natural beauty that reveal prehistoric flora — leaves, seeds, flower petals and pollen. Miners extract amber deposits like these from once-forested sedimentary rock layers that were lifted up during tectonic plate movements that formed the country's La Cordillera Septentrional mountain range.

IT'S CERTAINLY
EASY TO SPOT THE
POLISHED BLUE-
TINTED GEMS ON
THE BEACHES
WHEN SPARKLING
UNDER THE
CARIBBEAN SUN.



Amber

Refining factories buff and polish the raw stones to make warm, honey-hued bracelets, pendants and necklaces, to name some of the more popular amber jewelry. Perfectly clear resins with well-defined insects and other specimens, for example, can be worth tens of thousands of dollars. And like blue larimar, rare blue amber is a precious find, tinted possibly by ash from the extinct tree species *Hymenaea protera* as well as through other processes.

Since the translucent stone can look like honey-colored clear plastic, jewelry made with fake amber abounds. Shoppers wanting the real thing are urged to avoid street vendors and buy from reputable stores. A simple test will determine whether amber is authentic — namely, placing the gem in salt water: If it floats, it's real; if it sinks, it's not. It's that simple.

Not interested in owning larimar or amber jewelry? You can see both raw and polished pectolite stones at the Larimar Museum in Santo Domingo. Rock-chip hues span a wide range of earthen colors — shades of gray, white, green, red and brilliant tones of blue, often streaked with contrasting colors as well. Santo Domingo is also home to the Amber World Museum which, along with the Dominican Amber Museum in Puerto Plata, displays remarkable amber fossils zigzagged with flora and insects.

BLUE BEADS

On the small Dutch island of St. Eustatius, not far from St. Maarten, the dormant volcano known as The Quill dominates the sky. But look down and you

Blue beads of St. Eustatius



might discover historic treasure: Blue beads washed up on island beaches are considered a lucky find.

“They were used by the people of St. Eustatius 200 to 300 years ago, so you can feel history in your hands,” says Walter Hellebrand, a Statia native and the island’s Monument Director. “I deemed them such an important part of our culture and heritage that I included them when designing the coat-of-arms of our island. So they’re a part of one of our national symbols.”

The glass beads were used for barter and thus once considered currency. Made mostly in Amsterdam, they were traded in Africa and thus involved with the slave trade. They’re usually no more than an inch long, like a glass tube shaped into a pentagon or, less often, a rounded cylinder. They got their brilliant blue color from cobalt used during the glass-making process.

Once plentiful on the island, blue beads are now hard to find. “It’s becoming more and more of a rarity because so many have been taken off the island,” explains Hellebrand. Yet many longtime residents have collected blue beads over the years and have strung them into necklaces and other ornamental jewelry. “In the ’70s, they found them by the handfuls,” he notes.

If you’re lucky enough to find one, Hellebrand urges you not to take it home, lamenting the local museum’s blue bead collection was stolen. “They’re part of our cultural heritage — taking them means our heritage is leaving the island,” he warns. “If I can change one person’s mind, it’s worth it.”

If you do pluck one from the sand, a local legend says it means the bead found you; you’re destined one day to return to this tiny, beautiful island.



FEATURE VOYAGE

Seabourn Odyssey visits St. Maarten (gateway to St. Eustatius) and other uncommon island destinations on **14-DAY CARIBBEAN GEMS IN-DEPTH** voyages departing February 1, February 15, February 29 and March 14, 2020.