



## ARTICLE: BUYING GEM ROUGH

### INTRODUCTION

We first learned about Lisa Elser when reading about her “Gem Safari” to Tanzania in 2009 (you can ‘Google’ your way to that article). Her article was titled “Getting Down and Dirty in Tanzania” - and sure enough, there’s a photo of Lisa at the mine, swinging a pick - getting down and dirty all right. But Lisa, a professional cutter, doesn’t dig for her gem rough - she buys gem rough (on site, to be sure) - and she sells gem rough. Needless to say, she cuts gem rough - so she’s someone

with a “front row seat” to the entire process. Happily for us, she’s willing to share her knowledge.



All of us involved with faceting can benefit from her ideas, and her advice about obtaining rough. Her opening sentence says “Anyone who’s ever bought faceting rough has a box...filled with stones that looked like a great idea at some point, but that will never be cut.” - I read that and said “Hey - that’s me”. I’ll bet that’s you, too. Here’s an article that will help you to get smarter about buying rough....

Enjoy the article which begins on the next page...

# ARTICLE: BUYING GEM ROUGH

by Lisa Elser



Buying sapphires in Madagascar

Anyone who's ever bought faceting rough has a 'box of experience.'" The box is filled with stones that looked like a great idea at some point, but that will never be cut.

In my own faceting career I've gone from buying mostly by the piece, to mostly by the parcel and now buy mostly by the piece again. Although my rough buying skills have improved with every purchase, I can still make a mistake now and then.

This article is aimed at hobby cutters, who want to get the most value out of their hard earned rough budget. I'll look at some of what I've learned about buying rough, and ways to minimize what ends up in the "box of experience."

## Being Objective (Avoiding Rock-lust)

It's so easy to fall in love with a stone or a parcel and stop thinking clearly. No matter whether you buy a piece or a parcel, from overseas or a local seller, you have to consider a stone's

- **Type**
- **Shape & Orientation**
- **Colour**
- **Clarity**
- **Size**
- **Price**

## ARTICLE: BUYING GEM ROUGH cont'd



Tanzanian Rhodolite Rough

Type is simply "what kind of rock is this? If you're buying from a trusted vendor with a good return policy, you probably don't need to worry that the aquamarine you thought you bought will turn out to be a topaz. I helped someone sell off part of his collection, and found that two of the prizes were not sapphire and tourmaline. They were synthetic sapphire and synthetic spinel. By this point, several years had gone by and although he approached the vendor, and had the invoices, he was told to go pound sand.



11.25ct Tanzanian Rhodolite

It's a very good idea to learn some basic gemology. As simple a tool as a dichroscope would have told him that the so-called tourmaline couldn't be a tourmaline. Dr. Bill Hanneman sells fantastic, easy to use and affordable gemology tools.

<https://www.mineralab.com/TheWorks/>

**Shape and Orientation** are often overlooked. If a stone has a weird shape, if you can't tell quickly what it should be when you cut it, you may well get poor yield. Think about L/W, depth, and outline. If there's a flat spot, we'll all mentally try to make that the table. Resist that urge, and rotate the stone in all directions. If you still can't see a reasonable finished shape, consider passing on the stone. Don't forget to check for divits and concave surfaces that will reduce the final size.

# ARTICLE: BUYING GEM ROUGH cont'd

**Colour** seems simple, but often isn't. Lots of stones look great in bright light, but be sure to always use the White Paper test. Set the stone on plain white paper in normal light. If it's black, the stone will almost certainly cut too dark. That rich pretty red you see with the flashlight will be a black finished stone. Check also for different axes. Are the colours different when you look at the stone in different directions? How about in different lights?

On tourmaline and sapphire in particular you need to consider how the face up colour will present. Some of that is controlled with cut, but an ugly or black axis will make itself known when you cut the stone.

**Clarity** depends on your own tolerance for inclusions. Obviously anything structural that would weaken the finished stone makes for an easy decision. That said, I've cut quite a lot of grossular garnet that's chock full of inclusions, but so bright that a good cut gives me a near eye-clean finished stone. Always used backlighting and good magnification to look inside the stone. I often use clear nail polish when I'm on the road and don't have immersion fluid with me. Cutting checkerboard designs can mask inclusions as long as they don't reach the surface.



Buying in Tanzania

**Size** matters...and it's relative. A big Tsavorite is substantially smaller than a big Amethyst. You need to decide when a stone is too small for you to cut, and when it's too large to be worth the uplift for buying big. For my own budgeting I figure a 20% yield. In practice as I got better at selecting for shape and orientation my yield rarely goes below 30%. A big piece of rough with a difficult shape will have lower yield. Don't pay for weight you can't use.

**Price** is sometimes the trickiest one of all. When I cut as a hobby, nothing was more precious than my time. I had little enough time to spend cutting after my work and family obligations and wanted to make the most of it. I know some people genuinely enjoy cutting synthetics, but it seems a bit weird to me that people will resent \$20-50 for a high-quality piece of rough but spend days or even weeks cutting a \$5 synthetic.

I strongly recommend that everyone invest in some delicious material. It doesn't have to be insanely expensive but a beautiful bright garnet or even a gorgeous tourmaline can be had for under \$50 by the piece, and you'll have something worth the time and energy you put in. Cut synthetics or found material most of the time if that works for you but have a budget that lets you invest in a few good pieces each year.

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## Overseas or Local - Relationships Matter

Now as a Canadian seller, technically I'm "overseas" for many people but the question really is do you buy closer or farther from the source. I do lots of traveling to buy, and have some excellent brokers in Pakistan, Nigeria, and other countries. I've also worked with sellers based in the US or Europe for stones.

If you're buying close to the source, the prices can look much cheaper per carat than buying from a Western dealer. When you're looking at the deal, be sure to factor in

- **shipping**
- **bank wire or Western Union charges**
- **customs or brokerage charges**
- **return policy**
- **insurance**



Buying directly at the mine

If you're buying a parcel, be sure you know what you'll do with it. I know I can use 200 grams of tourmaline and am prepared for some percentage of that to be mediocre, but if you're cutting for yourself and your loved ones what will happen all that material? You can end up with an expensive price per carat on the things you cut because there's lots of material sitting in the rock box that you'll never cut.

Buying from Western dealers isn't a guarantee of a great transaction, though. Be sure your dealer is willing to work with you and CONSULT on the stone. You're spending hard earned money and paying a good price, so be sure the dealer takes time to help you determine the right thing for your project and budget and that they are willing to take returns without hassle.

Building a relationship with a dealer helps enormously. I consider some of my brokers overseas as close friends, and have met many of them in person. As a dealer, I've got clients who know that I'll send them designs, help them with polishing problems, and give them first dibs on goods when I get them. Find dealers you like, and concentrate on a few key relationships and you'll have a happier buying experience.

## Happy Buying!

At the end of the day, your money and time are important. Be sure you know what you're buying, and that you'll be have fun cutting it and feel you got value for your efforts. Build relationships with dealers you trust, and evaluate your purchases objectively.

For more Lisa Elser's work, please visit [www.lisaelser.com](http://www.lisaelser.com)

