



From left: 30-carat cabochon-cut Ethiopian brown opal from Wollo; 35-carat cabochon-cut Ethiopian white opal from Wollo. Photos: Francesco Mazzero.

Report on Ethiopian Opal

By Eyassu Bekele, Eyaopal, ICA ambassador to Ethiopia

Opal was found in the provinces of Shewa (at the end of the last century), and Wollo (in 2008) in Ethiopia. This last find has proved to be plentiful, and often of excellent quality, with much of the production consisting of white opals in a full spectrum of colors including red. In addition, Ethiopian opals display numerous features rarely seen or absent in opals of other world deposits. Opals from Shewa are mostly unstable, except the white to yellow-brown opaque variety. Opals from Wollo are very stable and are often hydrophane (absorbency). The degree of absorbency of the Wollo opals is variable: it ranges from zero to near 50%. Some do not absorb water as other absorb water as high as half of the dry weight. The jewelry industry should use the low hydrophane opals only. The huge quantity of precious opal mined in Wollo supplies the market sufficiently with the ones of very good quality.



From left: Map of Ethiopia; location of the opal regions. Photo: Francesco Mazzero

The Wegel Tena area, in South Wollo, within a few months, became the major precious opal producer in the world, far above Australia, the previous major producer.

The opal producing area is growing as new deposits are discovered with time. In 2013, the opal-producing area is about 20 x 25 km large. Geological observations indicate that the producing area may grow even larger.

The Office of Delanta Woreda Water Resource, Energy and Mines in Wegeltena released that the production of precious opal was 15 tons two years ago and 25 tons last year. In May 2013, 20 mining cooperatives count more than 4000 registered miners. In June 2011, the Ministry of Mines released that Ethiopia exported 14000 kg of opal over 11 months to 27 countries.

The recent gem shows displayed millions of carats cut from Ethiopian opal.