## NOTTING HILL &HOLLAND PARK

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MAGAZINE

# CLEAR

FROM ROCK TO RUNWAY: A CRYSTAL'S JOURNEY INTO LUXURY FASHION

### AUTUMN Laales

LOCAL ARTISANS AND INTERNATIONAL DESIGNERS STYLE THE SEASON

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### Mamonak in the Rough

Diamonds may be a girl's best friend, but Victoria and Matthew Forster of Venusrox in Notting Hill explain why there's more than meets the eye when it comes to gemstones and crystals. *ELIZABETH FINNEY* reports

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THE FORSTERS DESCRIBE "the beauty of nature" as the greatest art, and looking around their crystal showroom, it is impossible to disagree. The space has clearly been made for its tenants, with sleek white walls and floors, and personal touches of home-made mirrored furniture. Stones of all different shapes, colours and sizes are meticulously placed on every surface. Initially, I'm quite overwhelmed by the magic of the place. "We travel and hand-select everything," Victoria tells me animatedly. "That, for us, is fundamental to what we do. We take so much care to source them, but, ultimately, it's about appreciating the beauty of nature."

I had done some homework in the Natural History Museum before meeting the Forsters, where I spent hours being entranced by the 5,000

strong collection of stunning natural gems, crystals, metals and meteorites. There are approximately 4,000 different known minerals, each with its own set of unique physical properties. These orderly arrangements of pure substance are, quite simply, as close to magic as we're going to get. The slightest change in the environment, pressure, temperature or components can have extraordinary and exciting results.

The intrigue and inaccessibility of these natural experiments, happening within the earth's surface, earned specific minerals and gemstones a high value early on in the timeline of human craft. Jewellery adorned with precious metals and gemstones continues to be a universal sign of wealth, luxury and beauty. Certain stones have been assigned different meanings

throughout history, with their supposed properties of healing or protection elevating their status for use in jewellery for both the wealthy living and the dead.

"We've been using them for thousands of years; even in this country they would put garnets in the handles of swords," Victoria explains. "Often when ancient remains are dug up, they'll have a small bag of stones. We've been carrying them as talismans for ages." For example, the Greeks believed that amethyst had healing powers and that it was a strong antidote to intoxication, while the Romans associated moonstone with the lunar deities.

believing it to be born from solidified rays of the moon. Amethyst was also found in graves of Anglo Saxons in England, while the Chinese have been using jade as a source of

protection for centuries.

Ancient Egyptians, whose descendants are still prolific in their use of minerals, would wear lapis lazuli to draw out impure spirits or peridot to protect them against bad dreams. "The ancient Egyptians were far more attuned than we are," Matt explains. "We seem to have lost the intuition to nature. They were using all sorts, for example, stibnite, which is actually a toxic stone, was used for medicinal purposes."

Fast forward to 2015 and we've seen an explosion of gemstones hitting London's luxury boutiques and high-end stores. The kaleidscopic array of shoes dresses and statement jewellery, adorned ▶

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▶ with crystals and gemstones, is both popular and beautiful, and Notting Hill is one part of London that is home to a handful of jewellery designers who are investing in these glamorous rocks. Pippa Small, based on Westbourne Grove, uses stones such as watermelon tourmaline, tanzanite and fire opal to create eye-catching yet dainty designs, and Brooke Gregson on Westbourne Park Road draws inspiration from astrology and geology to create intricate and evocative designs. The exciting thing about the work of these designers is that each piece is unique, because the formation of their eclectic stones of choice rarely gets repeated.

The idea that minerals and gemstones are more than merely beautiful rocks can be traced back centuries, with some notable cornerstones. An interest in the energy and vibrations within precious materials is growing in popularity, and with celebrities such as Katy Perry, Angelina Jolie and Victoria Beckham feeling the benefits, my curiosity for the subject is sparked. "People don't have to be into energy, they just have to love the piece," says Matt. "We put in the hard work to make sure that the energy is right, and therefore they can just be enjoyed as beautiful pieces of art."

Rosh Mahtani, the designer behind poetic jewellery company Alighieri, says she specifically sources peanut pearls and meteorites for their obtuse desirability. "The peanut pearls often get discarded because of their imperfections, making them harder to source." Rosh sees her work as natural art, describing them as "mini sculptures", all of which will be exhibited at London Fashion Week this September. Like the Forsters, she hand selects every individual stone for her work, travelling far and wide to find stones that are as unpredictable as possible.

Designers have come a long way in terms of sourcing their stones, though Matt and Victoria have cut an admirably broad path in this field. Precious metals and diamonds, forever favoured in popular culture, are mined on an industrial scale with an enormous amount of investment behind it; in comparison, up to 90% of coloured gemstones and crystals are mined on a much smaller scale, often involving just one or two people with their own tools. It seems that Matt and Victoria's heavily inked passports and glittering book of friends in the field are vital to ensure the best quality stones. South America, Tanzania, South Africa, China and India – it's tough trying to find a place where they haven't been exploring.

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"We travel as far as we need to," says Matt. "Some places are too dangerous but we try to get as close to the source as we can." They speak fondly of the people they've met, describing them as friends rather than contacts. "You meet some great characters," Victoria tells me. "Really fabulous, interesting people from all over the world." Matt adds: "A lot of it isn't particularly glamorous; it's certainly hard work. It's an intensive thing, but it's something we feel we have to do."

Matt describes one acquaintance who goes to great lengths to get his hands on precious stones. "He has a window of four months to go to the Himalayas to mine quartz. He's not old, but he is so weather beaten and you can tell that he works hard," he explains. "We also have gold nuggets that we get from a world-renowned

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prospector within his field." At this point, Victoria keenly cuts in: "He's a treasure hunter! It's so cool!" The treasure hunter in question works in deserts across Australia and the US, spending weeks at a time with nothing but his tent, car and metal detector. Proof that sourcing these precious minerals is no luxury, Victoria tells me that gold hunters have to be extremely careful when out alone for extended periods of time with their metal detectors, as the beep can send them mad.

Though not from London, the pair describe how Notting Hill simply made sense to be the home of Venusrox. "I've always had a thing for Notting Hill. It's slightly quirky and full of fabulous, interesting people; All Saints Road, in particular, is fantastic." Victoria, who makes all the jewellery by hand, talks me through her extensive collection of wearable treasures. "I never take them off," she says. "My children think it's great because they can always hear me approaching!" Whether you're interested in gemstone meanings or not, Victoria looks light and elegant in her plethora of beads and stones. With gold nuggets for courage, green tourmaline for health, smoky quartz for protection and aquamarine for clarity, she is well and truly safeguarded.

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Clockwise from top left: Venusrox crystal, photography: Christian Banfield, schmick, tv: Pippa Small jewellery, pippasmall.com; Alighieri jewellery, alighieri.co.uk; Venusrox crystal, as above; Alighieri jewellery





