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THE JEWELLERY EDITOR

A luxury magazine edited by Maria Doulton.

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Know your opals

Rachael Taylor unearths our ongoing fascination with opal jewellery, and what sets Mexican, Ethiopian and Australian opals apart.

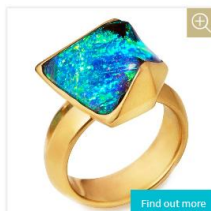
14 May 2016 | by Rachael Taylor



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These white gold earrings by Tayma are set with Australian Bushfire opals, diamonds and rubellites (\$21,000).

The kaleidoscopic play of colour trapped within [opal jewellery](#) has made them a source of fascination for centuries. Three of the most sought-after types of [opals](#) are Australian, Mexican and the Welo - but what exactly is it that sets them apart?



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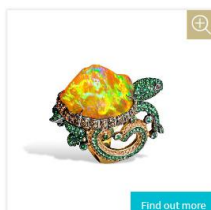
Katherine Jetter's Pyramid Stacked ring is set with a 9.37ct asymmetrical Boulder opal in yellow gold (\$10,800).

While the Bedouins may have believed that opals were filled with lightning, it is in fact another natural element that gives them their bewitching rainbow effect: rain. Opals were formed when heavy seasonal rainfall drenched arid ground, seeping into the rocks below and drawing dissolved silica downwards. When the dry season returned, most of the water evaporated, leaving behind silica deposits in the cracks that would become opals.

Australia's rugged Outback provided the perfect geological spot for opals to form, and since it started producing them commercially in the 1890s, it has become one of the leading sources. "This particular opal is very magical, and becomes a different gem in different lights," says Marie Walshe, founder of British [jewellery](#) brand Sorrel Bay. "It moves from milky white to transparent to luminescent blue, and has mesmerising flickers of light particles."

Australia also produces rare black opals from underground mines at Lightning Ridge, which offer a magnificent play of colour. Black Australian opals with strong flashes of red are called Bushfire opals; so named as they resemble the burning embers of a bushfire.

Fieri colourings are what make Mexican opals, or Fire opals as they are also known, stand out. These red-orange gems get their colour from fine traces of iron oxide, and their warm glow is believed to promote feelings of courage and stamina. While many Fire opals found in Mexico do not have the play of colour that we associate with opals, when they do the result is positively volcanic. French jeweller Lydia Courteille, who has worked with both types of Mexican opals, describes the gems as "a source of energy, like vitamins".



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Lydia Courteille has used Mexican Fire opals many times in her work, including this turtle ring (POA).

The draw for Navlakha's customers will no doubt be the enigmatic shimmer that all precious opals have - whether they hail from Ethiopia, Australia or Mexico - which makes it seem as if they belong to another, more magical, world entirely.

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