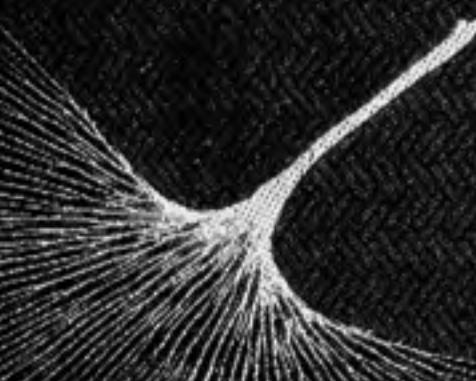


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Rhapsody in Blue

Thomas Jirgen's passion for rare stones took him from Munich to the Dominican Republic, where he discovered a gem as mesmerising as the Caribbean Sea itself. By Elisa Vallata

When German jeweller Thomas Jirgens speaks of his craft, he does so with such ardour and poetry that it's impossible not to feel captivated. "It all started with my love for gemstones as a child," he explains, "with the fairy tales surrounding the magic and mystery of precious crystals, which enabled a magical

weapon like the sword Excalibur to become invincible for the person with the pure heart wielding it. Legends like this fascinated me as a young boy."

Three decades into his career now – with the workshop and showroom of his eponymous firm, Thomas Jirgens Juwelenschmiede, just off Munich's high-end shopping destination Maximilianstraße

– Jirgens remains very much intrigued by the metaphysical power of gemstones. "Every single one of them has a different vibration," he says. "This aspect resides in each of my jewellery pieces." However, it's not exactly their energy or supposed life-enhancing properties that have made his creations so distinctive and desirable. "My jewellery pieces are pure, architectural



Clockwise from far left: white-gold, diamond-encircled Larimar Islands rings; Aqua Rocks earrings; Caribbean Island bracelet, set with Brazilian Paraiba tourmaline and diamonds

"My jewellery pieces are pure, architectural and timeless. Their geometric and yet organic shapes are meant to enhance women's natural beauty"

and timeless. Their geometric and yet organic shapes are meant to enhance women's natural beauty." Along with their sophisticated design, what strikes most clients about Jirgens' creations are their stunningly vibrant hues and chromatic combinations.

Colour is, in fact, at the heart of Jirgens' ready-to-wear collections and bespoke

pieces – all of which are influenced by the four seasons, which, he says, are "a never-ending source of inspiration". Whether it's an intense blue, reminiscent of a Maldivian lagoon, or a velvety shade of grey, echoing the silver face of the moon, the vast selection of precious gemstones from all over the world – all carefully chosen by the jeweller himself – covers the entire spectrum of the rainbow, meeting any customer's taste and needs. "Every person has their own favourite colour range, mostly affected by the colour of their hair, complexion and eyes," he says. "What someone loves usually suits the person best. For my ready-made earring creations, for instance, eye colour is the most important factor in selecting the gemstone. This should emphasise >



Left and below: measuring and cutting raw larimar on Hispaniola; below right: a rare red-tinted larimar stone that Jirgens is turning into one-of-a-kind earrings



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and enhance the eye colour and not outshine it.”

A highly attentive aesthete, who places great importance on the compatibility between jewellery and physical features, Jirgens is also a spiritual artist who considers his craft almost therapeutic. “Stone-cutting is meditation, and cutting beautiful gems is a prayer,” he says. So it’s not surprising that, last winter, in the midst of a pandemic that forced Germany into a long and bleak second lockdown, Jirgens found solace in one of the most beautiful and rare gemstones on the face of the Earth, a gemstone that, he says, “relaxes and opens the mind, raising the spirit over fear of the future or harmful illnesses”: larimar.

A blue pectolite, also known as the Atlantis stone, larimar can only be found in the Dominican Republic, on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, where Jirgens spent three months sourcing and selecting the best finds from a mine in the mountains of Bahoruco.

The beauty of the stone radiates from its intense colour, which captures all the different shades of the Caribbean Sea, with its beige sand and intricate coral reefs. “The most coveted is an intense sea-blue colour – azul, as the Spanish call it – like the blue sky reflected in crystal-clear water on a sunny day,” Jirgens explains. “The highest-quality larimar will also feature what the locals call *riñóns*, white crisscross lines reminiscent of the surface of water rippled by waves.”

The jeweller’s knowledge of the indigenous population’s idioms originates from his numerous visits to this paradisical isle. “Hispaniola is a Caribbean dream island with magical shores and reefs for diving and waves for surfing and kite-surfing. It’s the perfect place for me as a surfer and water-sport enthusiast. Also, the happy, playful population of Haitians and Dominicans are open-minded and know how to party and enjoy life to the fullest.” It’s these locals who Jirgens relies on for the extraction and cutting of the larimar. The mining is an extremely complex procedure, carried out by hand, using only hammers, chisels and shovels. Excavation takes place underground, deep inside the mountain, in very narrow shafts that can be 300 metres

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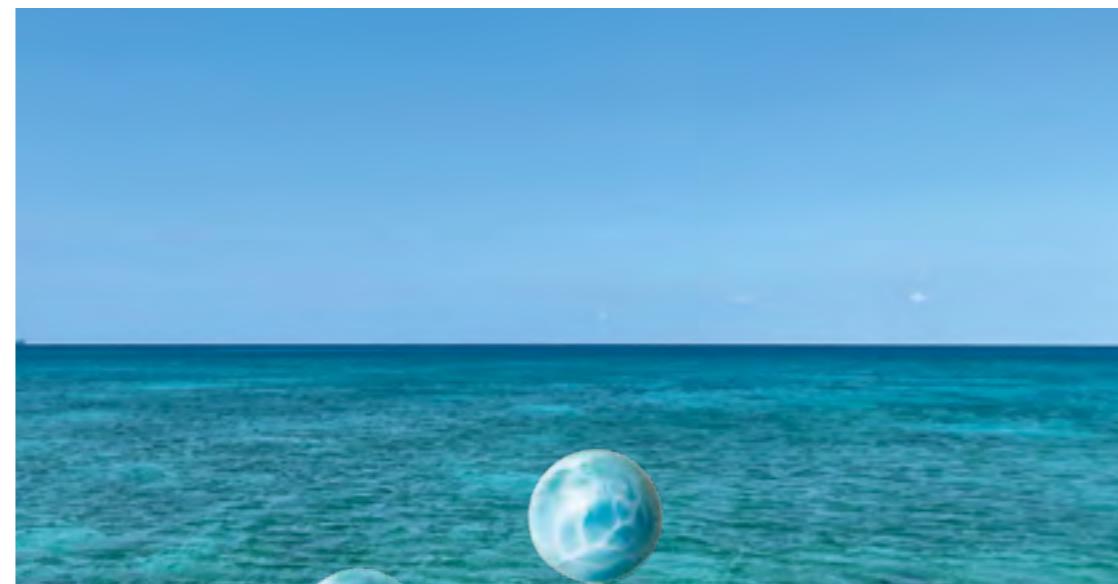
long. It’s a journey that Jirgens himself is not shy to make in order to get a first glimpse at the raw material. “You feel like Indiana Jones in those moments,” he enthuses.

Covered by an opaque, greyish-brown layer of rock, the pieces don’t reveal any truly valuable crystals until they are sawn open. Once extracted, the precious stones are cut by a group of local lapidaries, trained by experienced teachers at the government’s Jewelry & Lapidary School of Bahoruco. There is no one else on Earth who possesses the knowledge and experience to shape this very delicate, opaque material, which cannot be faceted but only cut into cabochons. “I found a teacher in the local school for larimar-cutting who trains young students. His name is César, and he has his own family business with a well-equipped workshop, where his wife and his two sons are involved,” explains Jirgens. “I spent every day for a month with them to create all my designs. As a German craftsman, I went through the roof for the first days because they didn’t seem to possess the same understanding of quality as we know

in Germany. But, after a while, they started competing to be even more precise than me and to show me that they were the best cutters in town.”

Back in his Munich workshop, Jirgens forged the most stunning collection of jewellery out of the beautiful larimar stone, transferring his impressions and memories of Hispaniola into pieces that look like the crystallised ocean. Along with rings, bracelets and pendants set in white gold and combined with diamonds and Paraiba tourmalines, the range includes a selection of minimalist earrings that echo the elegant shapes of surfboards, yachts and spinnakers.

“The unlimited vastness of the ocean and freedom rushes over you when you look at larimar,” says Jirgens. “It gives you a feeling that nothing can fence you in. Especially in these times, I love the idea that it gives you the confidence to be the captain of your own life. Plato’s Atlantis is like the legend of the sword, and through the Atlantis stone, it became more than just a childhood memory for me.” juwelenschmiede.de ♦



The too-blue-to-be-true Caribbean is echoed in Jirgens’ Globes earrings



From top: a peek into a larimar mine’s steep shaft; Jirgens at work in the Dominican Republic; an early stage in the jewellery-making process

