

**Christie's Jewellery Director David Warren has never been content with conventional surroundings, so when the chance to go emerald mining in South America raised its head, he didn't hesitate. He described the experience to a spellbound audience at a recent Swoffers' event at the Old Government House Hotel.**

Through a long and prestigious association with Christie's, jewellery expert David Warren could be totally forgiven for choosing to stay put in his plush St James' office in London, but the draw of 'the wild' proved too strong recently.

Plunging nearly 300 ft underground in a Colombian emerald mine, he had some fleeting second thoughts about the wisdom of his decision to see where the precious stones were found. 'It did seem a bit of a crazy expedition. It was hot, claustrophobic, muddy and dark – and people were working in this environment. There was a strong smell of explosives as we approached the mine face where five miners, black with mud and totally drenched, were at work.'

David's decision to try to find his own emerald meant wielding a 50lb jackhammer, which had to be held almost horizontally. 'My working life in London usually means pontificating over the merits of some of the world's most valuable and historic emeralds and now, here I was, dirty, hot, breathless and tired, digging for nature's treasures. I was almost overcome with excitement.'

The scarcity of these beautiful green gems makes them 20 times rarer than a diamond so the chances of actually finding an emerald in the mine were extremely slim. Luckily, though, David uncovered a beautiful specimen of 3.5 carats. 'I was dumbfounded. I can hardly imagine the emotions of coming across a major find as they did at a new mine in 1998 where production peaked at 28,000 carats a day.'

Colombian emeralds are recognised as the best in the world. David explained that miners are not paid a salary, but receive a share of the profits. 'It is not too surprising that they are thought to pocket some of the smaller ones to try to eke out a better living,' he said.

The trip to the Colombian mine was an adventure in itself. 'We set off in a small plane and literally had to find a spot to land, 11,000 ft up in the Andes. We arrived at the small village of Quipama. 'The chickens run free and are famous for containing emerald crystals which they eat accidentally.'

It was then a bumpy ride along rough tracks through semi-tropical valleys to the main mine at Muzo. Emerald mining is a costly and dangerous business. The rewards can be spectacular. The stunning green jewels have featured in some of the world's most beautiful pieces through the centuries and were incorporated in jewellery hundreds of years BC.

David's role as Jewellery Director at Christie's enables him to view and handle exquisite pieces. Particular favourites are a 16-carat stone from Muzo in a tiara made in the late 1800s. He also loves emerald jewellery made for the Indian market and recently handled the sale of an emerald bead necklace from the 17th century. It changed hands for £350,000.

While in Colombia, he interviewed Victor Caranza, the most influential emerald mine owner in the world. 'He owns or has an interest in some 60 per cent of the whole Colombian emerald business.'

David also has a closer link with South America. His wife is Colombian and the couple return there at every opportunity. 'It is the most beautiful, exciting, amazing country. People have misconceptions about it and think it is dangerous but, in my experience, it is no worse than many other places. I would urge anyone to go there and explore because, for me, it is the most wonderful part of the world.'

His expertise with Christie's has seen David work in many parts of the globe but he is still hoping that, one day, he will be asked to set up a base in the South American spot which has claimed a big part of his heart.



David Warren with Swoffers' Directors, Shauna Clapham and Matthew Henry.

