

SOUTH SEA CULTURED PEARLS



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Adored by kings and queens, worn by the most beautiful and powerful women and men throughout the ages, the pearl has its own special place amongst the most beautiful gems in the world.

The *South Sea Pearl Consortium*, sponsored by *Paspaley*, answers some of the most frequently asked questions about the rarest and largest pearl of all, the white *South Sea cultured pearl*.





WHAT IS A SOUTH SEA CULTURED PEARL?

The white South Sea cultured pearl is at the height of its perfection when it is taken from its shell. It is a gift of nature, as complete and perfect in its own way as an exquisite work of art.

However, this most special gem is also unique, produced by the rarest and largest oysters in the world - the giant silver lip and gold lip *Pinctada maxima*. This rare and solitary oyster only exists on an extremely limited number of shell beds found in the warm tropical seas sometimes referred to as the South Seas – hence the name of the pearl. This area of ocean stretches from North Australia, though Indonesia, the Philippines, to the southern tip of Burma. Its shell produces the most beautiful nacre, a creamy smooth lustrous material, which possesses a subdued opalescence. The size and thickness of the shell and the lustre of the nacre it produces results in the rarest and most sought after pearl in the world - the white South Sea cultured pearl.

Throughout history, the natural South Sea pearl has been regarded as the prize of all pearls. The discovery of the most prolific South Sea pearl beds off North Australia and Indonesia in the early 1800's culminated in the most voluptuous era of pearls in Europe in the Victorian era.

The white South Sea pearl is distinguished from all other pearls by its magnificent thick natural nacre which possesses a subdued opalescence, producing an unequalled lustre – a lustre which does not merely deliver “shine” as with other pearls – but a complex soft, creamy, intangible appearance which changes mood under different





light conditions. It is the beauty of this nacre which has endeared the South Sea pearl to jewellery connoisseurs over the centuries.

As well as its size and voluptuousness, the white South Sea pearl is also famous, due to the thickness of the nacre produced, for the variety of unique and desirable shapes found.

The South Sea pearl has an array of colours from white through silver, and from cream through yellow to deep gold. The pearls may also display a lovely “overtone” of a different colour such as pink, blue or green.

Today, as is the case with other natural pearls, the natural South Sea pearl has all but disappeared from the world pearl markets. The vast majority of South Sea pearls available today are cultivated on pearl farms in the South Sea. The protection of the shell’s natural habitat and the preservation of the natural pearl stocks have enabled the cultured South Sea pearl to be cultivat-

ed under “sustainable resource” conditions. Today’s era of cultured South Sea pearls may well be seen in years to come as the richest pearl period in man’s history.





WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

The *Pinctada maxima* shells exist only in a small area of warm tropical ocean known as “the South Sea”. This area is predominantly in the Indian Ocean around northern Australia, southern Indonesia and the southern Philippines. The North Australian coastline remains one of the few virgin coastlines in the world today and its protection is critical to the future of the South Sea cultured pearl. Without this protected environment the shell will hibernate to ensure its survival, refusing to produce its precious nacre. This solitary and special shell will wait up to half a century until the circumstances are right for it to weave its own special brand of magic and produce the most beautiful of all pearls.

The area of ocean referred to as the South Seas must not be confused with Tahiti and other areas of the Pacific Ocean sometimes also erroneously referred to as the South Sea. This area around Tahiti is home to the *Pinctada*

margaritifera – a black pearl shell which only produces pearls of varying black hues – pearls which are known as Tahitian black cultured pearls.

Unlike the rare white *Pinctada maxima*, the black *Pinctada margaritifera* is smaller and much more abundant than its white cousin and the quality of nacre produced by the shell differs greatly.

Hence consumers will find the black “Tahitian” cultured pearl more readily available and prices generally reflect the abundance of availability. The colours produced by the black shells are not available from the white South Sea shells, and vice versa.





ARE THEY REAL?

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, natural white South Sea pearls reigned as the most prized pearls throughout the world, inextricably linked with wealth and beauty.

Tragically these wondrous pearls all but disappeared within a few decades following man's inevitable destruction of the special environment that housed the world's natural pearl beds.

Today, these natural pearl beds have been resurrected and protected, and thanks to the dedication of companies such as Paspaley, the white South Sea cultured pearl has emerged as an achievable dream. What was once thought impossible in the middle of the nineteenth century is now a reality. Today, these precious gems are being cultivated in the pristine marine conditions in the Southern oceans. It is here that pearl producers ensure that the *Pinctada maxima* have the perfect environment to do what they do best – grow the largest, rarest and most wonderful

pearls in the world. These pearls are as close to the natural pearl as it is possible to be and a gem to treasure for a lifetime and for generations after.





WHY ARE THESE PEARLS SO BIG?

The white South Sea cultured pearl is the largest and rarest pearl in the world. It is produced by the largest oyster shell, the silver and gold lip *Pinctada maxima*. This shell when it is presented with perfect natural conditions coats a small nucleus inserted by man, with dozens of skins of pure thick and lustrous pearl nacre over several years. The size of the

shell is an advantage when producing these pearls, but it is the thickness of this nacre that creates the largest of all pearls - the white South Sea cultured pearl.





WHAT MAKES THEM THAT SHAPE?

White South Sea pearls are cultivated pearls that are only helped by man in the sense that man provides them with the best and purest environment in which to grow. Once the shell has been seeded with a small round nucleus made of mother of pearl, the oyster shell is left to do what it does best - produce stunning pearl nacre and lots of it. As a result the shapes and sizes of the pearls are all different and formed entirely by nature herself. Some emerge perfectly round, some teardrop shaped, some semi-round, some baroque shaped – each one different, each one unique. That is the beauty of the pearl that sets it apart from other gems that are cut and shaped by man. As a result a perfect pearl strand can take years to complete. To find the perfect pearl to make up the strand is no easy task.







WHAT DO YOU DO TO MAKE THEM THAT COLOUR?

Nothing! South Sea cultured pearls are natural in colour. The name “white South Sea pearl” is actually a misnomer. White South Sea pearl is the name given to the pearl made by the *Pinctada maxima* shell, which is white. However although the shell is white, South Sea pearls can be many shades of colour. The shade can vary enormously from the warmer white-pink tones through to silver tones and finally to a truly golden hue. Each shade from the stunning range available has its own appeal and is a matter of personal taste.



WHY ARE THE PRICES SO DIFFERENT?

The South Sea cultured pearl is the only pearl whose qualities are identical to the natural pearls of old. As such they must be evaluated by the same criteria as natural pearls. As with natural pearls, South Sea pearls are created in a wide range of qualities. The quality of the nacre is paramount. Quality of nacre can only be dictated by the mother shell and nature herself. It is the quality of the nacre that determines the beauty or lustre of the pearl. Regardless of whether a pearl is natural or cultivated,

the finest quality nacre is extremely rare and pearls of this nacre are very valuable.

The value of a particular South Sea cultured pearl ultimately depends on the fineness of its nacre. Size has a bearing on value as fine quality nacre becomes rarer in the larger size pearls. Shape and colour also have a bearing on value but these two factors are mainly “fashion” or “preference” driven.





HOW DO I CARE FOR MY PEARLS?

White South Sea cultured pearls are made up of layers of sumptuous natural pearl nacre and require the same care as you would give your finest silk gown. Pearls love to be worn and take on the warmth and glow of the wearer's skin. However, the following tips will ensure that your white South Sea cultured pearls keep on looking and feeling wonderful to wear.

- Put pearls on after applying make-up, perfume and hairspray.
- Don't allow pearls to rub against more abrasive jewellery.
- Wipe pearls gently with a soft cloth occasionally before putting away.
- Never store pearls with other pieces of jewellery. Keep them wrapped in a soft cloth.
- Have pearl strands re-strung by a reliable jeweller every year or two depending on how often they are worn.
- To clean pearls rub them with a cloth dipped in a well diluted mix of alcohol and warm water or in a weak solution of soap and water. Then dip the cloth in clean water and rub this over the pearls, finally dry with a clean cloth. Never leave pearls wet.
- Finally white South Sea cultured pearls are remarkably resilient and should be worn and enjoyed every day.



WHAT DO I LOOK FOR WHEN BUYING A PEARL?

It is a combination of five “virtues” that should be looked for when buying a pearl: lustre, size, shape, colour and complexion.

- The lustre of the pearl is what gives the pearl its iridescence and its depth. Lustre is created by nacre, and varies with the fineness of the nacre. It is one of the most important factors to take into consideration when buying a pearl. The lustre of a pearl should always be bright, never dull. Without lustre it does not matter how big or how perfect its shape or what its colour is – it is the lustre that makes a pearl a gem quality pearl. White South Sea cultured pearls have a thick, creamy nacre and are noted for their rich, silky lustre.
- The shape of the pearl is also important. Perfectly round and tear-drop shapes are extremely rare and therefore highly sought after; this does not mean that other shapes do not have their own unique charm and value. Baroque pearls, for instance, are one of the most popular shapes because of their uniqueness, size and casual character. White South Sea cultured pearls come in many shapes including round, semi-round, circlé, oval, baroque, drop and with many variations, each one unique.
- Other points that are to be considered when choosing a pearl include the complexion of the pearl or “skin”. These pearls are produced by nature and therefore will have their natural flaws, however the more flawless the surface of the pearl, the greater the value.





- The size of the pearl is also reflected in the price – the white South Sea cultured pearl being the largest rarest pearl of all.
- The final point to consider is the colour. From luminescent white to sparkling golds, the stunning range of the white South Sea cultured pearls must be seen to be believed and premium prices are paid for pearls displaying unusually beautiful orient of coloured overtones such as white pink, silver pink and deep gold.



South Sea Pearl Consortium
Email: sspc@sspc.net
Website: www.sspc.net

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