

THE GEM PALACE

Jaipur, Spent ten days working at India's famed Gem Palace on M.I. Road with the Kasliwal family.

With seven generations of jewelry making under their belts, the Kasliwals are uncommonly experienced and unfailingly generous with their time and talent.

I worked with five family members and watched dozens of others, many of whom have followed their fathers and grandfathers in this business, as they went about their duties ... goldsmithing, enameling, gem cutting, polishing, stringing and setting. What an education!

The reputation of the Kasliwal family as jewelers has long been recognized by connoisseurs. They have raised the craft of jewelry making to an art. Each piece, whether a slim gold bangle or a 40-carat diamond is made entirely hand.

Their first royal appointment was from the Maharaja Jai Singh II. He invited the family to come to Jaipur, the city he was creating in 1727, from Agra. Almost a century later, they established The Gem Palace in 1852.

In the last century, it held two royal appointments, one from Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India and the other from the Governor of Bengal. Among its more famed clients have been the late Diana, Princess of Wales, Jackie Kennedy, and, India's Prime Minister Nehru. President Bill Clinton stopped in during his trip to India as did the Prince and Princess of Japan, many maharajas, and countless counts.

Yes, the store is exclusive. But, its doors are open to all and one can find items from as little as \$1.00 (US) to a mind-bending \$100,000 million.

A dollar? Yes.

Pappu Kasliwal tells the story of the simple figures of deities and animals in the glass cases lining the hand block fabric-covered walls of the main showroom. "My father said he wanted everyone to feel welcome here Aristocrats and backpackers alike. So, he made sure to have things which cost very little.

"He taught us to never look down on a person who only had a few rupees to spend. He told us to treat them with the same respect as the wealthy wearing diamonds and pearls.

"Those were very good lessons," says Pappu. "Because, now, some of the wealthiest people in the world come in wearing jeans and carrying backpacks. No one can tell who's rich and who's not!"

Jewelry from The Gem Palace workrooms can be found in boutiques in India's top hotels, and stores in Paris and New York. But the original Gem Palace remains a must-see when in Jaipur. For the dedicated and die-hards, nothing gets in the way of a visit.

When I was there, it was 101 degrees. Definitely Rajasthan's off-season!

Still, Goldie Hawn and her son spent an afternoon there. Upstairs, Paris-based designer Marie-Helene de Taillac and an executive of the Metropolitan Museum of Art sat at low tables in the design studios working on future collections. Other designers, collectors, and people simply looking to capture a piece of history came and went.

Now cooler breezes begin to blow and the real season gets under way!



At the Polo Bar in Jaipur's famed Rambagh Palace



Pappu Kasliwal examines a pearl necklace with a coworker in the stringing room.

Munnu Kasliwal in the design studio checking details of a golden bird flask prior to its enameling.



The roof of The Gem Palace.



Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India.

(Click highlighted thumbnails for larger view.)