



# The Sea of Pearls

## El Mar de Perlas

*The opalescent black pearl which once captivated rulers and royalty has returned to Mexico*

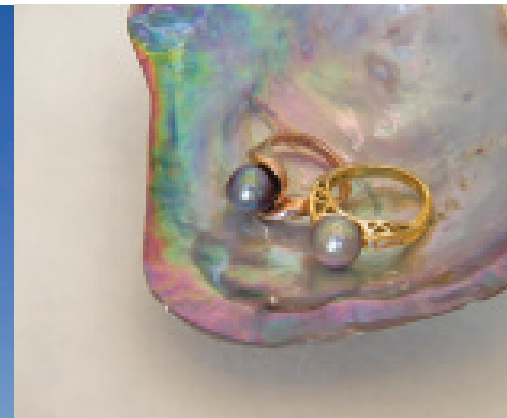
By/Por Diane Selkirk

*La perla negra opalescente que alguna vez cautivó a los gobernantes y a la realeza regresó a México*

“This is probably where the story of the Sea of Cortez pearl would have ended. The pearl merchants left, the divers became fishermen and the shimmering pearls became a faded memory.

I was getting a crash course in luster, nacre, shape and pearl color at a table with an ocean view—just a few hundred yards from where the pearls themselves had been harvested and a short distance from the town of Guaymas Mexico, where our boat was anchored. The pearls ranged in color from champagne to charcoal and glowed with undertones of sky-blue, eggplant-purple and brilliant-green—rich colors typically associated with Tahiti, not Mexico. “But the black pearl started in Mexico,” Perlas del Mar de Cortez co-owner Douglas McLaurin told me as my eyes were drawn to a baroque pearl with peacock shading. He

Estaba tomando un curso acelerado sobre el lustre, el nácar, la forma y el color de las perlas en una mesa con vista al mar, a unos pocos metros de donde se habían cosechado las mismas perlas, y a poca distancia de la ciudad de Guaymas en México, donde se encontraba fondeado nuestro barco. El color de las perlas variaba del *champagne al gris oscuro y brillaban con tonos de fondo* en azul cielo, violeta y verde brillante; colores vibrantes asociados típicamente con Tahiti, no con México. “Pero la perla negra se originó en México,” me explicó el copropietario de Perlas del Mar de Cortez, Douglas McLaurin, mientras



went on to explain that black pearls were once so abundant in the nutrient rich waters of the Gulf of California that kings and queens sent entire flotillas here to collect them.

As I sorted through the pearls, my eyes now drawn to a round steely-blue one with pink undertones, I thought about those early pearl hunters and how they would have sailed through the same fantastical landscape of tropical-blue waters and rust-red cliffs that we had during our months in the Sea of Cortez. Perhaps they too would have spent hours picking their way through pods of sperm whales and dolphins while pulling brightly coloured mahi mahi out of the sea.

The pearl is part of Mexico’s distant history. From 1500 to 1800 the Sea of Cortez was the world’s main source of black pearls. Catherine the Great and Marie Antoinette are said to have both sported gems that came from the region. Ships came from Spain, England, Holland and Russia to trade for the jewels and in response native divers dove for the oysters, killing over a thousand of these creatures just to obtain 3-4 high-quality pearls.

‘Pearl fever’ eventually outstripped the ability of the “Sea of Pearls” to naturally produce. And as supply dwindled, diving for pearls became progressively more dangerous. The divers forced themselves to go further from shore and deeper into the sea’s current churned waters, and they returned with fewer treasures. By 1800 the industry had all but collapsed. And by 1940, when Mexico finally declared its pearl-producing oysters endangered, the Cortez Pearl had already been forgotten by the world market.

This is probably where the story of the Sea of Cortez pearl would have ended. The pearl merchants left, the divers became fishermen and the shimmering pearls became a faded memory. The French Polynesian industry, which now supplies most of the world’s black pearls, filled the void.

Most of the people who remembered Mexico’s pearl oysters, believed they were too depleted to ever make a comeback. But in 1993, when McLaurin and his partners Enrique Arizmendi and Manuel Nava were graduate students at Tec de Monterrey in Guaymas, they were given an assignment to create an aquaculture business that could thrive in a real life setting. These students decided to dream big: They would revive the legendary Cortez Pearl using native species and modern culturing methods.

una perla barroca con tonos de pavo real atraía mi mirada. McLaurin añadió que las perlas negras alguna vez fueron tan abundantes en las aguas repletas de nutrientes del Golfo de California que hasta reyes y reinas enviaban flotillas enteras a recogerlas.

La perla forma parte de la historia lejana de México. Desde 1500 a 1800, el Mar de Cortez fue la mayor fuente de perlas negras del mundo. Se dice que Catalina la Grande y María Antonieta lucieron estas hermosas perlas. Venían barcos de España, Inglaterra, Holanda y Rusia en busca de las joyas y, como consecuencia, los buzos locales se sumergían a buscar las ostras, matando a miles de criaturas para obtener sólo 3 o 4 perlas de alta calidad. La ‘fiebre de las perlas’ terminó por quitarle al “Mar de Perlas” la capacidad de producir naturalmente. Y a medida que la oferta disminuía, bucear para buscar perlas se volvió cada vez más peligroso. Los buzos se veían obligados a alejarse aún más de la costa y a sumergirse en aguas más profundas y agitadas por las corrientes, para volver con menos tesoros. Hacia 1800 la industria estaba casi colapsada. Y hacia 1940, cuando México finalmente declaró en peligro de extinción a sus ostras productoras de perlas, la Perla Cortez ya había sido olvidada por el mercado mundial.

Probablemente éste hubiera sido el final de la historia de la perla del Mar de Cortez. Los comerciantes de perlas se retiraron, los buzos se convirtieron en pescadores y las brillantes perlas se volvieron un vago recuerdo. La industria de la Polinesia francesa, que hoy suministra la mayoría de las perlas negras del mundo, llenó el vacío. La mayoría de las personas que se acordaban de las perlas de México nunca pensaron que las volverían a ver. Pero en 1993, cuando McLaurin y sus socios Enrique Arizmendi y Manuel Nava estudiaban un posgrado en Tec de Monterrey en Guaymas, se les asignó la tarea de crear un negocio de acuicultura que pudiera prosperar en un medio de la vida real. Los estudiantes decidieron soñar en grande: revivirían la legendaria Perla de Cortez utilizando especies autóctonas y técnicas modernas de cultivo.

La especie que querían cultivar, la poco común *Pteria Sterna* u Ostra Concha Nácar se consideraba demasiado frágil para el proceso de injerto y nunca había sido cultivada con éxito. Pero se convencieron de que podrían revivir a la perla. Así que los tres fundaron su propio proyecto de cultivo y aprendieron todos los

They were called audacious dreamers and received a C- on their project. The species they wanted to grow, the rare *Pteria Sterna* or Rainbow Lipped Oyster was considered too fragile for the grafting process and had never been successfully cultivated. And no oysters of any type were being successfully cultivated anywhere in the region. The students were told their business would fail.

McLaurin says that maybe they were simply stubborn and wanted to prove their teachers wrong, perhaps they wanted to see for themselves the gems that were once coveted by the wealthiest women in the world. Regardless, they convinced themselves they could bring back the pearl. So they funded their own farming project and learned all the complicated steps required to grow pearl oysters and waited for nature to do her part. Two years later they triumphed. Their oysters contained pearls.

The charm in this fairytale is the pearl itself: During harvest in July and August when they open the oysters which have been growing for four years. Just a fraction contain pearls and only a tiny proportion are gem quality. The rest are destroyed.

Called by leading gemologists, “*the most beautiful pearl to have been cultured*,” Cortez Pearls differ from Tahitian pearls in their vibrancy and orient (the glowing undertones), and in the fact that they are the only fair-trade certified pearl in the world. And they also come with a story of romance and survival.

History of Perlas del Mar

<http://perlas.com.mx/en/>

Quote from the book “Pearls”

by gemologists Hubert Bari and David Lam, a book where the authors state (on page 86) the following about the Sea of Cortez Pearl: “*It is perhaps the most beautiful pearl to have been cultured up to now.*”

Bari, Hubert and David Lam. Pearls. Skira, 2010



pasos complicados para criar ostras perleras y esperaron a que la naturaleza hiciera su parte. Dos años después, habían triunfado. Sus ostras contenían perlas.

El atractivo de este cuento de hadas son las propias perlas: durante la cosecha en julio y agosto, cuando abren las ostras que han sido criadas durante cuatro años. Únicamente una parte de ellas contiene perlas. De ese número, sólo una mínima proporción son gemas de calidad. Las restantes son destruidas.

Llamadas por gemólogos líderes “*las perlas más hermosas que se hayan cultivado*”, las Perlas Cortez difieren de las perlas de Tahití en cuanto a su intensidad y a su oriente (el tono brillante de fondo) y en que las rodea una historia de romance y supervivencia.

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Diane Selkirk writes for boating and travel magazines as she and her family travel the world by sailboat. So far their route has taken them from Vancouver, BC down the Pacific Coast of Mexico and to French Polynesia. Along the way she’s seeking out interesting people and stories to share with readers, which YTM will be publishing in our next issues.