

Afghanistan's sparkling future

The country was once famed for its gems. Now Sophia Swire is defying warlords and a harsh environment to revive the ancient trade

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Sophia Swire was tasked by the Afghan government to oversee the gemstone industry (ST)

In the evening sun, Sophia Swire is a vision. Rays of light dance upon the diamonds on her fingers and the lapis lazuli at her throat. Aquamarines and turquoises dazzle. Baubles the size of door knockers, these are super-sized gems fit for a princess. And, as we shall see, that is exactly who she is.

The treasures she wears all come from Afghanistan, a country not associated with opulence and plenty. Yet that is how Swire, a 46-year-old British businesswoman who is helping the Afghan government to build up its gemstone industry, sees her adopted country.

“Afghanistan is sitting on treasure,” she says. “I want the world to know that it’s not just a land of mortar shells, suicide bombers and Taliban.”

To the north of Kabul, the capital, are emeralds and lapis lazuli; to the south are rubies and spinels; to the east are aquamarines. The same geological seam that enriches Burma with its famous rubies also endows Afghanistan with hidden wealth. And it’s not just gemstones. A US report last month suggested that the country’s untapped mineral deposits, including gold, cobalt and lithium, could be worth \$1 trillion (£660 billion).

At a time when the world wants the country to modernise, Swire is determined to drag it back to the past. It once had a thriving gemstone industry that was the envy of the world. Its mines — the oldest in the world, dating back 7,000 years — provided the royal blue inlay of lapis lazuli for Tutankhamun's coffin, for example, and the blood-red spinel known as the "Timur ruby" that belongs to the Queen.

As Swire reminds us, Cleopatra used ground-up lapis from the Afghan mountains for blue eyeshadow. "There's no reason why this country couldn't supply the world again. It could build up an industry to rival that of the jewellers of Jaipur in Rajasthan," she says. "And its emeralds are just as good as those from Colombia."

There is a snag. Searching for all that buried treasure without a licence is illegal but lucrative. "In remote areas, villagers simply walk up the mountains and blast them with dynamite or use old ordnance left over from the Russians and Americans to blast gems out of the mountainside," she says. "Any stones are then smuggled out through Pakistan, bleeding the country of revenue."

So the challenge, she adds, is to legalise this industry in a nation where thousands of civilians have lost their lives, 314 members of the British military have been killed and lawlessness is commonplace: "Yet with proper investment it could become a viable alternative to poppy farming, transforming the economy."

For the past two years she has been living in Afghanistan, inspecting mines in far-off provinces and setting up a school in the capital to train students in all aspects of the gems trade.

Working for the Turquoise Mountain Foundation — a charity for the preservation of traditional arts and crafts that was set up by Rory Stewart, the Tory MP for Penrith and the Border — she has seen lives transformed by the school. Its first graduates, eight men and seven women, will leave later this year. Even before they are fully qualified, some are earning up to \$300 (£199) a month as gem-cutters and goldsmiths — more than six times the average wage.

One of 7,000 expats living in Kabul, Swire chooses to lead a quiet existence. She has opted out of the dizzying whirl that is the social life of many foreigners. The international community of aid, security and government workers meets regularly at clubs, discos and swimming pools. "I made a conscious decision not to lead that kind of life," she says, "I went out there to work."

Instead, she lives like a Muslim woman, covering up, avoiding alcohol and rarely leaving the house. Kidnapping is a threat — she ventures out only in a car with a bodyguard: "That can be quite isolating. But it's also simple and quiet. My life is very old-fashioned."

Her talent, she says, has been to know almost nothing except jewellery and business. She started importing fine cashmere shawls during the early 1990s, earning the sobriquet the "Pashmina Princess". After university in Manchester she went into the City, working as a stockbroker at Kleinwort Benson. With the shock of Black Monday in 1987, however, she gave it all up to go travelling.

It was at a friend's wedding in Nepal that she spotted some guests wearing the most exquisite woollen shawls. Tracking their source to a workshop in Nepal, she turned a cottage industry into a global phenomenon. It's hard to imagine but, until Swire started importing wraps in their thousands, British women simply put on cardigans when it got chilly.

"I think I have a sixth sense about what will sell. And I know that people are gagging to help Afghanistan, particularly its women." Already, Pippa Small, the jeweller, has designed a collection for Turquoise Mountain; Swire hopes that other names will volunteer too.

That fateful trip to Nepal saved her from the much-travelled path to Sloanedom and a suitable match. She is eminently well connected: her late stepfather was the 7th Marquess



Mountain landscape of the Hindu Kush, Wakhan corridor, Afghanistan (Michael Runkel)

Townshend, she is related to the Swire shipping magnates of Hong Kong and her brother is the Tory MP Hugo Swire, the minister for Northern Ireland.

Instead, she built a luxury brand that even sold cashmere underpants and baby clothes. "After a while I found fashion soul-destroying", she remembers. "So many people in the industry, especially the buyers, were rude and aggressive."

To help to combat her frustration she co-founded a charity called Learning for Life to provide schooling for the poor. Today, nearly 20 years later, it has helped to educate more than 40,000 children across Pakistan, India, Nepal, Tibet and Afghanistan.

She sees herself as a "good setter-up of things" and was looking around for something else to do. When a friend introduced her to Stewart three years ago, she leapt at the chance to help. When, a few minutes into their first meeting, he told her, "You're coming back with me to Afghanistan next month," she agreed without hesitation.

From the start, Swire wanted to train both sexes. "This industry is something that females can do very well," she explains. "Once the gems are out of the ground, the women can take over."

Cutting, polishing and setting can all be done by the women with basic training and simple machinery. No wonder that even the most authoritarian fathers have agreed to their daughters learning this trade.

"At first they said the training would make their daughters less eligible and that they would be tainted by mixing with foreigners. But it's true that money talks."

Of course, \$300 a month guarantees eligibility. "It's not a core Muslim value that women should be tied to stove and sink. It's a cultural development," says Swire. She enjoys reminding Afghan men that Khadijah, the first wife of the prophet Muhammad, was a successful trader.

She is particularly heartened by the increasing numbers of young Afghan women entering the job market. Not all are illiterate: education often depends on their ethnic background. Many Ismaili and Tajiki women, for example, have trained as doctors and midwives and can earn \$200 a month. Others are finding jobs with the aid agencies at about \$80 a month. In a

country where many professional men are lucky to earn \$50 a month, these wages equate to riches. This means that many of Kabul's supermarkets serving both expats and prosperous Afghans are stocked with western luxuries such as Italian olive oil. "I can get anything I want there and we all eat well," Swire says.

One of her students is 21-year-old Fareeda, who can now support her whole family. Her father lost a leg to a landmine and cannot work. Now her siblings can all attend school and the family can eat properly. Her sisters might also follow her chosen career.

Careers and women? These are not words we hear bandied about in Afghanistan but Swire thinks that will change as the economy grows. As senior gemstones adviser to the government, she has been compiling a report for the World Bank. She believes that with proper development money — "\$10m over five years" — the industry could be worth \$300m a year.

"For instance, mining techniques haven't changed for thousands of years and the men work in appalling conditions. They burrow into the rock and support shafts with branches and twigs." It's straight out of the Wild West.

"If western powers ever want to leave the country, then we have to unlock its potential and give local people skills." Now she is thinking big: forget sewing circles in Herat and embroidery groups in Kunduz. Bling it on: Swire wants to found the Kabul Rock School.



Swire has turned her back on the expat social scene in Kabul to inspect mines (Jeremy Young)

An experienced traveller, she is used to discomfort. Yet years of backpacking in central Asia could not prepare her for her arrival in wintry Kabul. She slept the first night in an old fort where other charity workers were housed. As she went to bed, servants brought her water to wash with the next day. She was so cold, she spent the night wrapped in her own pashminas with coats piled on top.

"By the morning the bucket had 3in of ice on the top. The temperature had dropped to -29C. I felt my brain freeze. Everything froze. At one point during the day Rory asked me why I was speaking so slowly. I had to explain that I've got quite thick lips and they were freezing. I couldn't move them." Copious quantities of Elizabeth Arden Eight Hour cream — she now never travels without it — were applied.

If the cold froze her bones in winter, it was scorpions that froze her blood in spring. Unknown to her, her home was known by the Afghans as the "Fortress of the Scorpions".

Swire explains: "In the winter they burrow into the mud walls and when it starts to thaw they come out and drop on you." She found them sharing her bed.

The creatures were not half as frightening, however, as the police commander in charge of a lapis mine, who waved his Kalashnikov at her. He couldn't understand what a blonde Englishwoman was doing on his territory. No westerner had visited for 20 years.

"He was shouting and livid with rage. I was miles from anywhere." Eventually, in halting Dari, she managed to defuse his anger, explaining she was trying to make the mine safer for its workers: "I managed to calm him down. I think in many situations being a woman is an advantage."

Such encounters with police chiefs and warlords have only strengthened her resolve: "My life has been one adventure after another. But adventures are sometimes like chocolate, too rich. There's only so much you can take." Her friends compare her to the intrepid female explorers of the Victorian age such as Gertrude Bell, who mapped much of Syria and modern-day Iraq: "Others have made that comparison, but I don't see myself like that."

She felt safe enough from kidnap to move out of Fortress Scorpion to live with an Afghan family. "I don't think I have the same fear gene as most people," she says. "I don't fear running around in a war zone. I am much more frightened of public speaking or not finding Mr Right." A husband and children are the one adventure that she wants more than anything.

But there's no point fretting about what might have been when there is so much to be done. She doesn't see herself as an eternal nomad and hopes to settle down soon. She treasures her trips home, the luxury of hot showers and no scorpions between the sheets. But the Kabul Rock School beckons. Before she knows it, the winter will be upon her. So slap on that Elizabeth Arden — it will be no good if she can't talk properly. Swire means business.