

Photo courtesy True North Gems



SEEING RED—AND HAPPY ABOUT IT: Nick Houghton sits atop a glacier in Greenland, where True North Gems is hoping to begin production of rubies.

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Starting out with stones

His interest and background in creating jewelry led Nick Houghton to a career in mining, which has most recently taken him to Greenland in search of rubies

by JESSICA KIRBY

Nick Houghton didn't expect to be hunting rubies in Greenland—fate just sort of took him there. A studied gemologist from England, Houghton has a background in designing, manufacturing and creating jewelry. He trained and apprenticed just outside Birmingham, England, but left in 1982 to see the world—starting with Bermuda.

"I went for work and fun but ended up staying," he said.

In Bermuda, Houghton worked in jewelry management, purchasing and manufacturing. After 11 years of island life, he said, it was time to for a change of scenery.

"We wanted to see more of the world," said Houghton. "There is plenty of it out there."

Landing on the West Coast

In 1993 Houghton and his wife, Nina, moved to British Columbia, having vacationed previously in Vancouver.

"We'd visited and it hadn't rained," said Houghton, jokingly. "We came to Vancouver with just a couple of suitcases, no jobs and no regrets."

After his first week in Vancouver, Houghton went back to the bench, manufacturing jewelry for Brinkhaus Jewellers. Within a year he was diamond brokering.

But part of Houghton's long-term vision was to open his own business. In 1994 Houghton started his own diamond broker company, and in 2000 he entered into a partnership with a diamond-polishing factory based in downtown Vancouver.

"Ray and David Cohen shared their knowledge; it was a fantastic learning experience," he said. "In this industry you never stop learning. The person who thinks he knows everything is probably going backward."

Inviting prospects

There were some economic ups and downs with the company and Houghton took over the space after an amicable split. Not long afterward, in 2001, True North Gems made an emerald discovery in Yukon and was looking for secured premises in downtown Vancouver. Houghton had such a place, and his career with True North Gems was born.

The company was under the stewardship of then-president and CEO Andrew Lee Smith, who had a background in gold. Because of his gemology roots, Houghton was asked to be on the company's advisory board. He later became a director and eventually took over as president and CEO. Back in 2004, the company explored and defined a ruby deposit in Greenland that surpassed the sapphires on Baffin Island and the emeralds in Yukon.

The colour of the stone

The find was, and is, first class, so True North shifted its focus to rubies, which now take up 85 per cent of the company's attention. The deposit has been sampled and drilled and the production permit has been applied for.

"We are in regular discussions with government representatives and local authori-

ties in Greenland about sourcing local employment and supplies," said Houghton. "We obviously can't source processing equipment locally, but food, energy and 85 to 90 per cent local workforce are definitely possible. We've also been strong believers in opening a sorting facility in Nuuk."

Values in the industry

Learning to bridge into mining and getting up to speed about what is required in the industry was a challenge, Houghton said. The biggest change in the industry over the years has been the awareness of environmental requirements, which have changed considerably and for the better, Houghton added.

"People cannot just go in and do things. People are realizing that the industry has changed," he said.

There has been a quantum shift in the precious gem industry because of the need for traceability, and the honesty of these products has to be accountable. Houghton said that although diamonds get all of the attention, coloured gems have their share of ethical dilemmas attached.

"Recent reports state that Burma produces 80 per cent of the world's rubies, though the country is under embargo," said Houghton. "Whereas only three per cent of the world's diamond production is considered blood diamonds, 80 per cent of rubies are produced under harsh and unfair conditions."

Houghton said his company is able to answer all the questions that concern consumers.

"We see the desire for product awareness—how they are extracted, where they come from—and we can offer a solution to that," said Houghton. "As we can control 100 per cent of the process, True North Gems can extract the rough from the ground and take it through to a polished stone, offering seller and buyers peace of mind." **M**

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Drilling down

Favourite quote: You will never fly unless you jump.

Hero: My dad. He fought through a lot, got back up, and fought again.

Personal mantra: I like to enjoy life. It is all about laughter—if you can't do something that makes you happy, quit and find something that does.

Biggest accomplishment: I don't know yet. It might be bringing ethical rubies to the world market, but I still get a kick out of designing jewelry—it's in my roots.