



Sea Glass Heaven

It's beautiful, unique, environmentally positive and can be found on several Australian beaches; so what exactly is sea glass and why aren't we using more of it? Lauren McKellar reports.

When it comes to being eco-friendly, it seems like society's levels of interest and compassion are on the rise. Recycling, reusing and making sustainable living choices is very much in vogue, with carbon taxes and offsets, and the popularity of vintage clothing and furniture — and it's a trend that we hope is here to stay. You could say that now, in 2013, our community is more conscious of the environment than ever. But how does this translate into the exciting world of jewellery and beading?

One way in which many artisans worldwide are indulging their creative side while doing their bit for the environment, is by collecting and using a very special material called sea glass.

"Sea glass is nature's way of recycling lost glass bottles and tableware," says Amanda Hilditch from Mornington Sea Glass. "It is hard to say exactly how these little fragments of glass have made their way on to our shores, but whatever the reason, nature has breathed new life into this discarded glassware from previous eras and resurrected them as beach treasures."

While this description is the more romantic version, as Amanda herself is prepared to admit, the scientific explanation is more in-

depth. "A combination of tide changes; currents and wave movements cause both corrosion and hydration of the glass. That, along with the constant pounding of its surface over time against sand, rocks and pebbles, means smooth and frosted shards are formed," Amanda says.

This fantastic mesh of recycled product cum modern-day piece of art has no clear origin date, yet it is clear that sea glass held appeal in the past as it does now.

"There is no record of first collectors, but several people claim that around 1900 many Philadelphia homes would adorn their front parlour window with large jars of sea glass as status symbols to show neighbours how often they frequented the Jersey shorelines," says Richard La Motte, president of the North



American Sea Glass Association.

The reason for this attraction is clear. Sea glass can be stunning to look at, especially when grouped together. Distinguishing features of this unique medium include a frosted look, with a genuine piece being worn and smooth with no sharp edges or transparency. "It has a soft feel, and is gem-like in its appearance," Amanda explains.

COLLECTING AND KEEPING

If you're interested in collecting sea glass, you need to be armed with a jar or bag to house your findings in, a pair of gloves for picking up any dubious looking items, and an unquenchable desire to comb the coastline for hours at a time. Yes, this is an activity that requires a lot of patience and dedication; but if being dedicated to sea glass means meandering down sandy coasts and exploring the rocky outcrops on our beautiful beaches, then we're willing to try for fanatic status.

"The ideal spots are near old amusement parks or hotels active in the late 1800s and early 1900s since they frequently discarded

TOP Many pieces making one whole; an old Coca-Cola bottle turned sea glass treasure. Photo: Celia Pearson, Pure Sea

LEFT An example of some of the stunning sea glass found on the Mornington Peninsula. Photo: Amanda Hilditch, Mornington Sea Glass



Placing sea glass in jars inside your home used to be considered a status symbol. Photo: Brian Hilditch, Mornington Sea Glass

substantial glass items during the glory years when so many unique colours were being made,” Richard says. “Other sites include large river mouths that open to the sea, as glass objects upriver tend to wash down and collect on broader shorelines. In some cases, a few communities used shores to dump refuse but these are usually less prevalent,” he adds.

While this may be true in America, the sea glass hunt in Australia is a little harder on the eye, with many beaches lacking the material entirely. “We would love to say sea glass washes up on every beach and that it is in abundance, but the truth is, worldwide sea glass is becoming more scarce due to environmental laws that have stopped the dumping of rubbish into oceans and the invention of plastics,” Amanda says. “Sea glass is quite difficult to find in Australia compared to some other coastal and riverside locations around the world. We don’t have the quantity of glass or the range of sea glass colours that are found overseas, such as the sea glass mecca locations of the United States and the famed ‘multi coloured’ sea glass of North East England. Incredible individual shards of glass can contain a swirl of two or more colours in the one piece.” She goes on to add, “The main reason being we don’t have the same extensive history in glass-making as these countries. In saying that, however, we see each of our sea glass finds here as incredibly special and unique to Australia and our history.”

Despite this, Amanda encourages everyone to give sea glass hunting an attempt, as you truly never know what you may find. We have plenty of ship wrecks and river mouths that could yield some unexpected sea glass gold. It is recommended you go on the hunt during low tide and on a beach that isn’t necessarily known for its cleanliness. Think beaches that house rocky outcrops and bays with wharves or boat houses where glass items can easily go astray, and locations near old rubbish removal sites or tips.

When you commit to a location, try and comb every inch of it. And just because you didn’t find something today, don’t cross it off as a “no go” zone — today’s fine, clean sand could be next month’s sea glass playground.

“The best time to search is during the autumn and winter months when shorelines are buffeted by storms more frequently,” Richard shares. “Also, check the moons, since full moons help create greater tide changes, which wash broader sections of beaches — the ideal days being just after Perigean Spring tides. Always look for areas where stone or gravel has collected, especially near jetties or other shoreline outcroppings. Examine



VALUES AND VARIETIES

There are many different types of sea glass, with some of course carrying more value than others. “By far the most rare colour of all is orange since so few items were ever mass-produced in orange,” Richard says. Amanda agrees, but does add that red seems to also be a very popular choice.

“Red is often seen as most coveted by sea glass collectors, the reason being a very limited amount of red bottles and glassware were ever produced and gold chloride was the best method to produce the colour,” Amanda explains. “Turquoise, yellow, black, teal, pink, aqua, cobalt and purple are also highly sought after. Not surprisingly we find a lot of black glass here in Australia — black glass was used to make beer bottles in the 1800s. Colours such as soft blue, sea foam, green, browns and white are also more common here.”



both the high and low tide lines carefully and bring along a small child with good eyesight — they are lower to the ground!”

It is also important to go on the hunt equipped with a strong sense of patience, as Amanda stresses, “Have patience and a sense of humour because we are at Mother Nature’s whim. We couldn’t count the number of times where we have raced down to the beach with such expectation thinking we had the perfect

beachcombing conditions only to get there to find the entire beach covered in seaweed or all the sand washed away. This unpredictability makes it all the more exciting when you come across something special.”

Despite the hardships, it definitely is a rewarding activity. “Be aware that once you start looking you will most likely become addicted. The most common question asked in our family is ‘when’s low tide?’ Amanda laughs. “Our family is also known to have missed pods of dolphins and the occasional whale because our heads are stuck so far in the sand and seaweed. Constant reminders to look up and admire the view are needed!”

THE SEA GLASS STORY

Once you have started your sea glass collection, the options for incorporating them into unique product ideas are inspiring. Drill a hole through larger pieces for a unique pendant; glue similar colours around a mirror for a frame with a difference; stick on pendants to create unique key rings; add wire to design your own range of wine tags; or simply place them in a jar, layering colour upon colour until you have a veritable rainbow of sea glass collections scattered around your house.

“The most elegant options are bezel set, which is also the most costly,” Richard says, as the members of his association have a penchant for turning their sea glass into treasure. “Many do intricate wire wrapping designs and some get creative with epoxies and glue. The drill and hang method is popular, but some ardent collectors prefer not to have their original pieces drilled or defaced. The drilled pieces seem to sell well to the budget-minded audience and younger collectors. Some also actually set pieces with other gems for unique combinations of precious gems with sea glass.”

With all these intriguing suggestions, it really does seem as if the sky is the limit for those looking to start a sea glass jewellery hobby. The sea glass future is a bright and shiny one, whether you’re looking to develop a hobby, help the environment or simply release your inner child and stumble upon some hidden beach treasure. ●

For more information on all things sea glass visit morningtonseaglass.com.au or seaglassassociation.org.

TOP Sea glass comes in a variety of colours. Photo: Celia Pearson, Pure Sea Glass

LEFT A collection of sea glass from North East England, with a few Aussie gems thrown in the mix. Photo: Amanda Hilditch, Mornington Sea Glass



Sea glass doesn’t just look great as jewellery; check out this beautiful piece of art from Mornington Sea Glass. Photo: Amanda Hilditch, Mornington Sea Glass