

Diamonds of the Sea



THE DIAMOND SHOP INTRODUCES NEW GENERAL MANAGER DAN ROBINSON WHO IS BACK IN AUCKLAND AFTER LIVING IN FRENCH POLYNESIA FOR THE PAST 14 YEARS. HE BRINGS WITH HIM HIS LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE TAHITIAN CULTURED PEARL ...

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The 'new look' Diamond Shop fresh from its recent renovation has a 'new face'. New Zealander Dan Robinson, the new General Manager is a most welcome and interesting addition to The Diamond Shop staff. Director Win Charlebois says, "We are very fortunate to have Dan come aboard with us. After living in French Polynesia for 14 years Dan has returned to Auckland - married with two sons. Dan is a talented retailer and is very focused on customer service. He managed Tahiti's most successful pearl retail business and has a Gemmological Institute of America advanced degree in pearls.

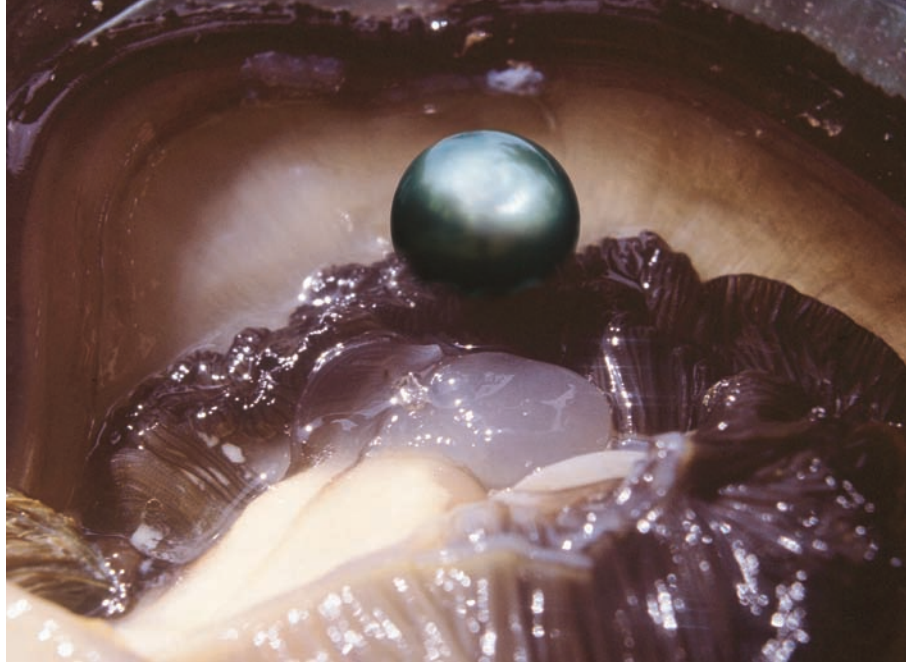
Dan comments, "My love of pearls, especially the Tahitian cultured pearl has increased over the years that I have had the pleasure of working in our industry. I personally believe that the Tahitian cultured pearl is the most beautiful of nature's creations. The colours and hues reflect the lagoons of the many stunning atolls of the Tahitian islands and this is the place where my wife and sons were born."

"So Dan brings a lot to the table regarding our involvement in the pearl business" comments Charlebois. "He has a Bachelor of Arts degree from Auckland University majoring in the Italian language as well as speaking fluent French and Tahitian which is very useful in our pearl business."

One might ask why pearls are involved with a business called The Diamond Shop. Director Charlebois explains, "Although we have our retail shop - The Diamond Shop - which specializes in diamonds, we also carry a wide selection of high quality Tahitian cultured pearls. Parallel to retailing the finest pearls in New Zealand we have established a growing export business in Tahitian cultured pearl jewellery. Before exporting the pearls we add value by designing and manufacturing rings, pendants, enhancers and special pearl clasps for strands. We have become New Zealand's largest importer of Tahitian cultured pearls and we now export our jewellery range to Australia, Fiji, Hawaii, South Africa and Canada with other markets being approached as we grow."

Director Charlebois and his wife Linda are not 'Jonnie come lately' in the pearl business. They had the pleasure of spending a year in the beautiful islands of Tahiti aboard their yacht in 1976 while sailing to New Zealand. During this time they witnessed the early stages of Tahiti's pearl farm development and fell in love with these paradisiacal Polynesian islands and their people. "We feel extremely lucky to be able to return to Tahiti on a regular basis for our pearl business," explains Linda, "as our love for this special place and its gorgeous pearls continue after all these years."

Dan Robinson is very happy to be back in New Zealand and although he is sure that he and his family are going to miss his wife Brigitte's home island of Moorea; he points out that part of his decision to head home is thanks to The Diamond Shop and the continued contact he will have with his favourite gem, the Tahitian cultured pearl. ▶



Dan imparts some of his knowledge on how these beautiful pearls are created and what produces their wonderful and varied colours:



Above: A diver checks on the oysters.

The most common question that I have encountered since I began selling Tahitian pearls 13 years ago is “How come the pearls are not black?”

This is a very good question and in fact the name ‘Tahitian Black Pearls’ is really a misnomer because not many of these pearls are black at all. A better name would be more simply “Tahitian Pearls”, a name that evokes images of paradise. Their colours come from the outer edge of their inner shell which looks like a rainbow; colours that include intense greys, vivid greens, lagoon blues, deep eggplant and the gorgeous ‘peacock’ just to name a few.

The reason they are called ‘black pearls’ is because the actual oyster that produces them, the *Pinctada margaritifera*; has a black lip of mantle tissue (which is what secretes those fabulous colours) inside the shell. It is therefore known as ‘the black-lipped oyster,’ hence the name ‘black pearls.’ However the colour can be any one of the multiple hues or a combination of those that are found inside its shell.

Another often asked question is, “What makes the many different colours of the pearls?” The scientific answer is – no one knows. The layman’s answer that I give is “Nature produces unique and different examples in most of God’s creatures for reasons unknown - just another wonderful mystery of life.”

One could even argue that the name ‘Tahitian Pearls’ is another misnomer because the pearls are not actually produced in Tahiti but are created in the outer islands of French Polynesia and mainly in a large archipelago known as the Tuamotu islands. This chain of 78 islands are situated 500km north-east of Tahiti and cover an area of over 2,000km making them the world’s largest chain of atolls. Despite the vast spread of

the archipelago, it covers a total land area of only about 885 km².

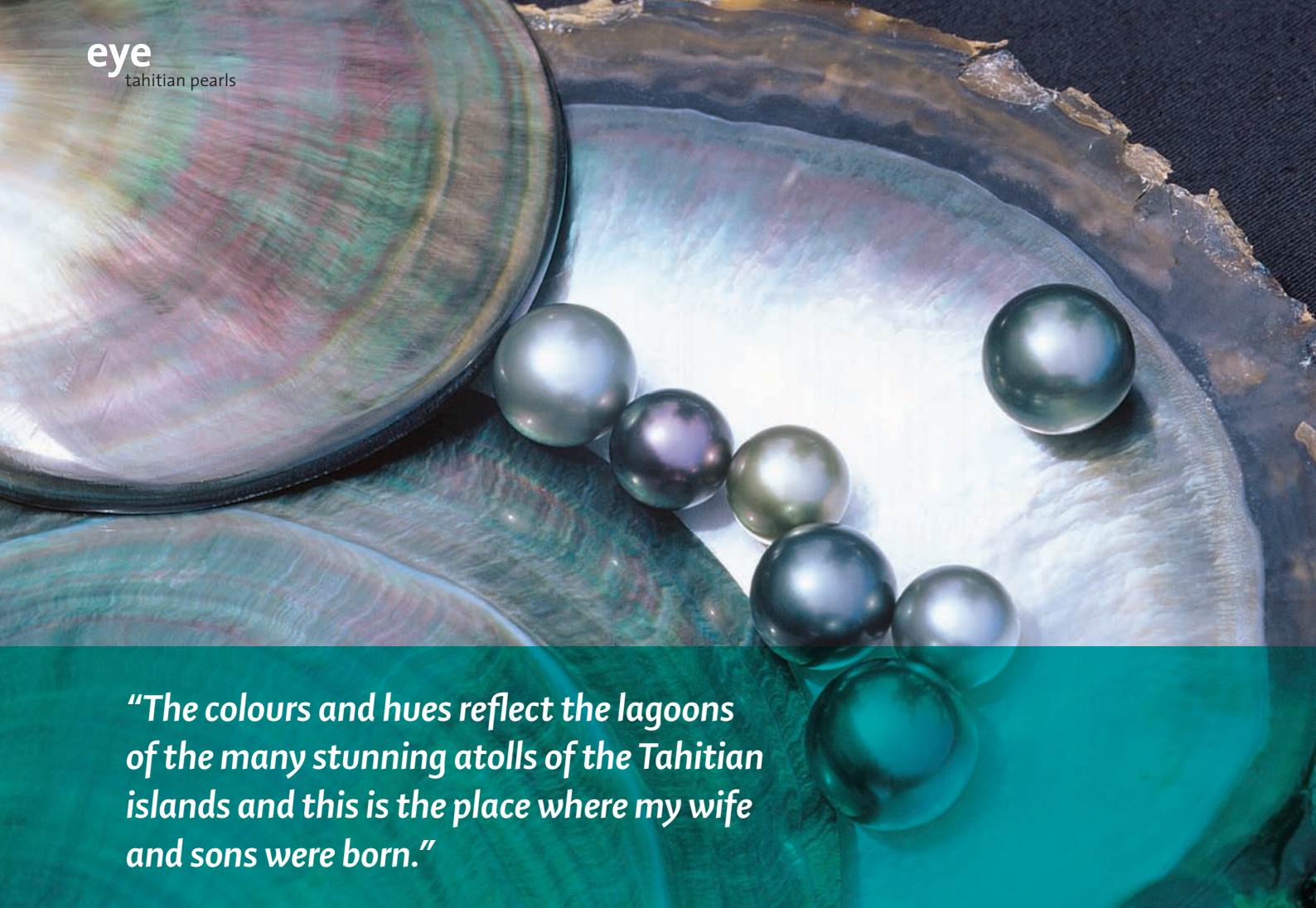
These large atolls or coral rings that enclose spectacular blue lagoons serve as the home of the black-lipped oyster. The reason that these oysters thrive in these lagoons is because of the ideal conditions and nutrients that this large aquarium provides for them. The water temperature and salinity are more stable and the calm lagoons provide a perfect ecosystem for the oysters to be farmed.

Pearl farming in French Polynesia is fairly new, only starting in the late 1960s. Most pearl farms use the system of buildings over water because it is closer to the oysters, which makes them easier to handle.

This is where all the hard work takes place. Firstly, baby oysters are required, and in order to procure a sufficient quantity of them (called spat), special spat-collectors are immersed in the lagoon, which serve to collect larvae from other oysters. Unlike other countries like Japan and Australia, where oysters are bred in tanks, French Polynesia’s are still 100% natural stock.

Eighteen months later the baby oysters are transferred into special nets in which they will remain for another 18 months. During this period the oysters are pulled up and hand cleaned every few months which is very labour intensive, but absolutely necessary to the survival of the oyster and quality of the pearls. French Polynesia has developed the most successful oyster husbandry pearl farming techniques in the world which attributes to a very low mortality rate.

Three years is the perfect time required to graft oysters because at this stage they are sexually mature and the oyster is large enough to undergo the surgical operation that will start



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Dan (pictured above) invites those who want more information regarding these fascinating gems of nature to go and visit The Diamond Shop to view and try on their exquisite pearl range.

You can contact Dan by email at: dan@thediamondshop.co.nz or visit The Diamond Shop's website at: www.thediamondshop.co.nz

the pearl formation process. Grafting involves a surgical operation where an incision is made into the gonad (ouch!) of the oyster into which a nucleus and a small piece of mantle tissue from the black lip are delicately implanted. Interestingly enough the nucleus used is a round bead (calcium carbonate) taken from the Mississippi Big Toe mussel shell farmed in the USA heartland and forms the basis of all cultured pearls throughout the world. The oyster is then put back into the warm lagoons for a period of eighteen to twenty four months during which it secretes layers of mother of pearl around the small bead. Constant surveillance is crucial as I have been told by more than one pearl farmer that the oyster's biggest predator is man! The divers also have to have a good set of lungs due to all the underwater inspection that is necessary to ensure that the oysters remain in a healthy state.

After five years it is harvest time and nervous anticipation sets in because one never knows what kind of pearl will come out of the oyster. Most people think that when you open the oyster you find a nice round pearl. Unfortunately this is not the case. Only a very small percentage of pearls will be round (the most valuable shape) and of A quality (having an almost blemish free surface). This is why Tahitian pearls are a lot more valuable than the common white pearls. Not only

are they rarer but the pearls are also a lot bigger, averaging 9 to 10mm and even reaching over 17mm in some rare cases. Probably one of the most important pearl characteristics to consider when purchasing a pearl is the 'nacre thickness'. Tahitian pearls have much thicker 'nacre' or mother-of-pearl layers which affect the longevity and durability of the pearl. This is also what gives the pearls another important quality known as the lustre and orient, the mirror-like iridescence and deep glow from within those thick pearl layers.

The Tahitian government who controls and x-rays all pearl exports now require a minimum 0.8mm nacre thickness to ensure quality. No other country in the world has quality control standards approaching Tahiti's which ensures their second largest industry a bright future.

One last interesting fact to consider is that the Tahitian pearls are the only 'gem' to come out of a living being and are actually still living themselves because they contain a small percentage of water. The best way to see how a pearl comes alive is by putting it on your skin. The way each colour glows and radiates warmth on your skin tones is the only way to appreciate the true beauty and lovely vibrant colours that are unique to Tahitian pearls. This is why I love Tahitian pearls and why I have given them a new name; 'the diamond of the sea'. ◀