

# GLOBE



where shall we go • autumn 2016

Dim Sum  
Decoded

The Fiery  
Furnas Valley

Rock the  
Bouzouki!

Rum  
& Sunshine

*A spirited Caribbean cuisine.*

Please do not  
remove from  
your cabin.



MODE







under  
*amber's*  
spell

Valuable fossils

Precious stories

Timeless treasure

By Richard Varr

**T**HEIR LUMINESCENCE COMES ALIVE with swirling and jagged patterns, revealing traces of prehistoric life dating back 40 million years. Amber stones from the Dominican Republic are both clear and translucent, keenly shaped and highly polished, and many are uniquely blue, creating some of the most dazzling lightweight jewellery in the world.

In a beautiful reversal, the more imperfections there are in the fossilised resin, the more precious the resulting stones often are. Dominican blue amber — strikingly illuminated with natural light — shows off other muted colours, including honey oranges, lemon yellows, earthen browns, reds and greens. And stones with colours streaked together often make striking pendants, beaded necklaces and dangling earring pieces.

“Dominican amber has lots of colour while European amber has a lot less,” explains Carlos Vega with the Dominican Amber Museum in central Puerto Plata. “And it wasn’t too long ago that Dominicans realised they weren’t the only ones that had amber.”

### An Ancient Beauty

Housed in a restored neoclassical mansion and a short drive from the Amber Cove cruise port, the Dominican Amber Museum explains the story of amber and displays polished pieces with a variety of ancient life — insects, creatures and fauna, as well as debris.

“The amber comes from tree sap,” Vega says. “Those trees don’t exist anymore but did during the times of the dinosaurs. The sap used to be like honey, very sweet and sticky. When the insects tried to eat it, they were trapped.” The sap or resin eventually seeped deep underground. “It’s like rock, so we have to polish and clean it. Our blue amber has volcanic ash and that’s why it’s blue.” And because the ash contains volcanic sulfides, insects avoided blue amber, resulting in it having fewer insect specimens today.

No matter which colour, the flowing resin came from extinct trees of the *Hymenaea protera* family, and it managed to trap flowers, pollen, leaves, grass and wood fragments, as well as insects, small animals, lizards and nearly anything else in its path. A closer look at the shining, odd-shaped museum samples reveals amber-coloured and clear-resin stones with termites, cockroaches, millipedes, beetles and crickets. Others entombed a tarantula, snail and a large feather fossil.

“This one is our famous piece,” says Vega, pointing to an amber rock with a curled lizard, now used as the museum’s logo. It’s strikingly similar to the circular logo of the 1993 blockbuster movie *Jurassic Park* and subsequent sequels. Amber resin is key to the movies’ premise: Scientists clone dinosaurs from prehistoric DNA found in fossilised mosquitoes, well-preserved for millions of years.

The movie’s debut played a big role in boosting island tourism and raising awareness of Dominican amber — especially blue amber — hiking sales and popularity of the shimmering, streaked jewellery. While the movie was shot mostly in Hawaii, the Dominican Republic was the fictional setting for scenes set within an amber mine.

### Unearthing the Gemstones

Although Dominican amber was not well known around the world until the last century, it has never been a secret on the island known as Hispaniola, shared by both the Dominican Republic and Haiti today. History reveals Taino Indians offered amber as a gift to Christopher Columbus who voyaged to Hispaniola in the late 15th century. Greedy Spanish conquistadors, however, later discarded any quest for amber, instead opting for gold.

Then and now, extracting the amber is an arduous process. Mines are narrow tunnels cut deep into mountainsides, or simply open, sloping-sided pits sunk into the ground. Miners armed with only hammers, chisels, small knives and shovels often crawl into these muddy passageways, risking their lives as deluges during the rainy season can lead to landslides and cave-ins. Candles are often the only light source, the flickering flames making it difficult to discern amber samples lodged between mundane layers of sedimentary rock.

Estimated to be between 25 and 40 million years old, most Dominican amber is mined within the northern mountain range known as La Cordillera Septentrional and from areas on the island’s east side. Once forested sedimentary basins, these limestone layers speckled with amber deposits were lifted up by tectonic plate movements to form mountain ranges, and thus the mountainside mines.

Despite tedious and dangerous conditions, miners do find exquisite gems with fossils lodged within seemingly perfectly clear resins. Such finds — some even bearing larger creatures like



Dominican blue amber



Taino Indians offered amber as a gift to Christopher Columbus.

grasshoppers and scorpions — can be worth up to tens of thousands of pounds, eventually making it to refining factories and highly polished into jewellery. Shops, particularly in tourist areas, often sell Dominican amber side-by-side with blue-tinted, semi-precious larimar stones found only in the Dominican Republic. Larimar is plucked from the ground 10 km south of Barahona in the southwestern region of the country.

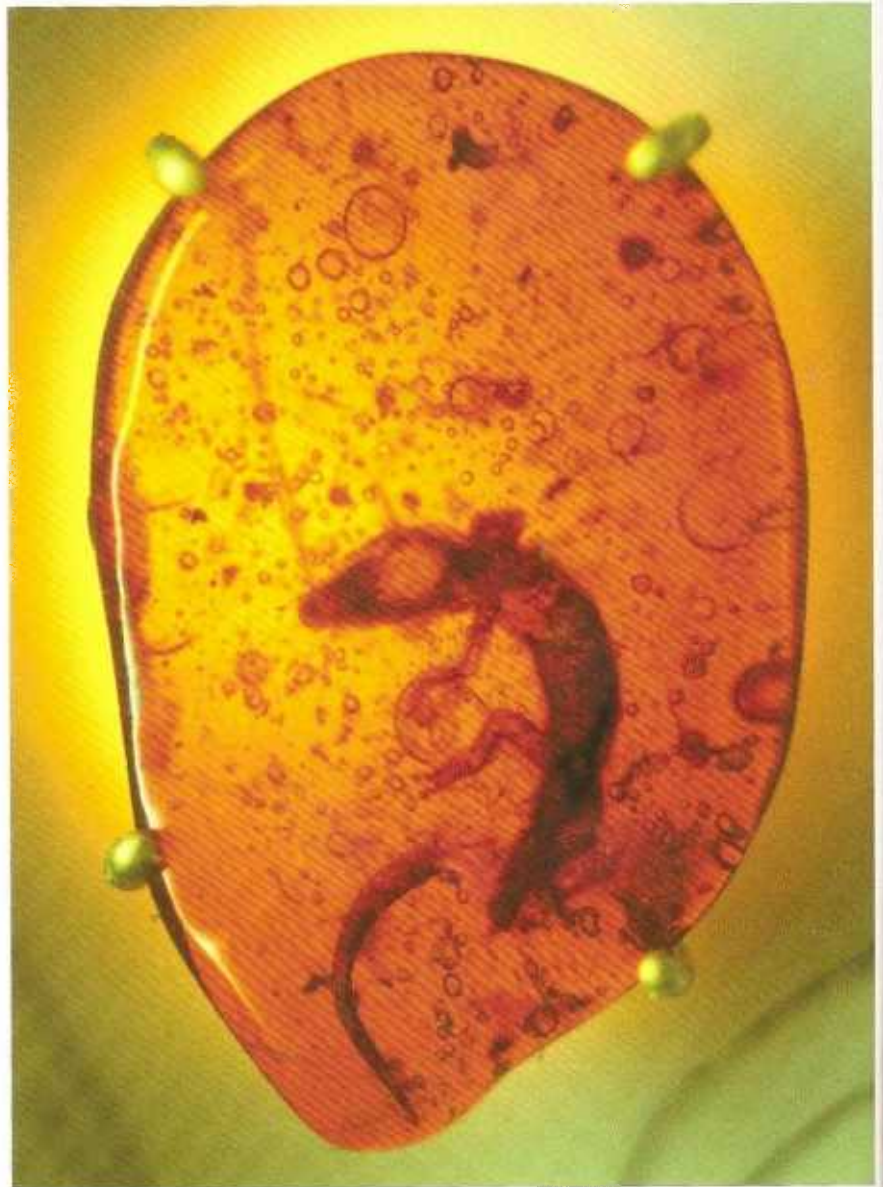
Amber specimens have not only captured the attention of jewellers and collectors, but scientists as well. Insects and other creatures caught within amber's sticky grasp were immersed quickly, freezing them in active poses — a moment in their day-to-day existence millions of years ago — thus giving scientists clues as to what their now-extinct world looked like. A typical sample could also include pollen, seeds, leaves, flower petals and pistils, lizard eggs, parasites, larvae and lichens.

Processing amber into fine jewellery includes trimming the pieces with a jeweller's hand saw or high-speed saw. To show as much of the biological specimens as possible, coarse and fine sandpaper are used for reshaping by hand or with an electric sander. Dominican amber is then polished to eliminate surface oxidation using a polishing compound, either by hand or with a cotton buffing wheel. A final hand-polishing removes the compound.

#### Globally Admired

In Europe, amber dates back to the ancient Greeks, with traces emerging in archaeological sites as far back as 11,000 B.C. Amber is found worldwide, including locations such as New Jersey, Arkansas and Alaska in the United States; in Mexico; China; New Zealand; Japan; Scandinavia and elsewhere. The most popular through the millennia, however, has been Baltic amber found in and around the Baltic Sea, particularly in Estonia, Russia's Kaliningrad enclave and neighbouring Poland and Lithuania.

"Amber is the region's gold," says Polish tour guide Jacek Skibiński during a visit to Gdansk's Amber Museum, housed in a medieval prison tower. "When you go to the beach after a storm, the waves drag the amber from the bottom of the Baltic Sea. It looks like a piece of wood, but when you pick it up, it's very light."



Baltic amber differs from Dominican amber in that it comes from pine trees, is often darker and opaque, has fewer biological specimens, and contains a small percentage of succinic acid which was used as a healing agent for cuts and wounds.

"In ancient Greece, it was used as medicine," notes Skibiński. Churches burned amber as incense, since it emits a resinous smell.

When shopping for amber jewellery, whatever the source, customers should keep the following in mind. Since it often looks like plastic, there are many imitations. To avoid buying the fake stuff, be wary of street vendors and instead shop in reputable stores — if your cruise visits St Petersburg, you'll find an exclusive range of Baltic amber on board. And how can you tell the difference between what's real and what's not? "Real amber floats in saltwater and fake amber sinks," advises Vega. That's good advice to know when looking to buy your own beautifully finished 40 million-year-old nuggets of natural history. ♡