Tracing A Legacy



A direct descendant of the Cartier family, Francesca Cartier Brickell is tracing the origins of the Cartier legacy, and her findings have led her to Sri Lanka. The luxury brand Cartier was founded by Louis-François Cartier in 1847 in France. His

grandson, Jacques Cartier, who ran the London branch in the early 20th century, frequently travelled to Sri Lanka, jotting down his exploits in diaries that Francesca has inherited. Together with Ayura, a renowned and trusted supplier of stones to some of the most prestigious and established brands around the world, she has been visiting the sapphire mines to which her ancestors travelled over a century ago. Francesca speaks about her experience in visiting the places her great-grandfather wrote about, and the Cartier legacy.

By Keshini de Silva | Photography Isuru Upeksha

Could you tell us a little bit about the Cartier family?
It was my great-great-great grandfather who started Cartier in 1847. I obviously didn't know him but I did know my grandfather, Jean-Jacques Cartier, and he ran the London branch until it was sold by the family in 1970s, just before I was born. So he told me many stories about the family and the firm from his time in the business.

As one of the pioneering families in the industry, how is the Cartier family legacy reflected today?
I can't comment on their strategy today, but I would say that they appreciate, as most luxury firms do, the value of heritage and the families behind the firm, and I think they stress that quite a lot. Interestingly, they have been buying back a lot of the old pieces made when the firm was under the family management, with which they have kind of created a Cartier collection. So I think they have really appreciated the value of the old even though they are involved in taking the business into the new.

Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and what drove you to study the Cartier legacy?
I studied English at Oxford University and I went on to work in finance in the city of London. I spent some time working in Asia and Singapore as well. I've been interested in my family for quite a long time and my grandfather told me some wonderful stories. He also shared with me some wonderful letters and diaries, and I became increasingly interested in the family history.

Initially I thought that I would just write about it for my children, so it would be passed down, but the more research I've been doing, the more fascinated I have become with it. I even ended up leaving my job in finance to devote my time to this and also to bring up my children.

Your great-grandfather constantly travelled to Sri Lanka in search of precious stones. Why is that?
It was my great-grandfather, actually, Jacques Cartier, who travelled to Sri Lanka. So there were three Cartier brothers in the first few decades of the 20th century and it was really these three brothers who made Cartier into an international name.

The firm was started by their grandfather, but it was a small business and they decided to take it global. So one brother stayed in Paris, one brother went to New York and the other brother, the youngest, my great-grandfather Jacques, went to London.

Being in London at the time of the British colonies, the most important of which was India in terms of clients, the Maharajas, it was his job to travel to India. And on the way to India he would come to Sri Lanka to buy sapphires and precious stones. He would then go to India and buy other precious stones and meet the Maharajas and take them big items of jewellery. But also important is what he would take back from the trip. From the east, from Sri Lanka as well as India, he took back ideas for a new type of jewellery. So he kind of brought the ideas of the east back to the west. The fashion at the time in the west was very simple – maybe diamond jewellery, maybe pearl pieces, maybe one-coloured gemstone pieces. But in the east he had seen all these bright colours together. So he brought back the idea of mixing colours in gemstones and kind of made that fashionable tutti-frutti style for which Cartier became fashionable.

Is there a famous tale about your great-grandfather in Sri Lanka that you would like to share?
I particularly loved the fact that he describes things beautifully. He describes these sapphire mines and walking over some swamped paddy fields to get there – how, when he got there and looked down, he saw the mine was well timbered to prevent landslides and how the workers dug and passed the buckets up. It would take 100

buckets to get one small stone. And yesterday, I went to visit the mines of Ayura and it was basically exactly the same. I could have written the same entry as if nothing had changed.

That was really fun to see!

I Will Prepare A Lecture About My Trip Through Sri Lanka. I Think It Will Be Fun To Compare The Old And The New…

Your grandfather taught you the origins of certain pieces and about the 'Cartier style'. Could you explain this?
Well, I found it very interesting when I started learning more about 'Cartier' in Cartier pieces – the older Cartier pieces – that is, when it was under the family management. There is such a huge diversity in the pieces they created, not only in terms of the types of jewellery. Well, there were necklaces, tiaras, brooches, and also cigarette cases, vanity cases – all sorts of things, even watches. So there was a huge variety of objects. And even within the jewellery, there are a lot of different styles such as the 20th century Bellabox style, Garland style, the modern Art Decor, the colourful tutti frutti style – such a huge variety of Cartier styles, and yet if you speak to an expert, they'll be able to pick out a Cartier piece from amongst other jewellery quickly. So it's recognisable even though they are all so different.

So I was trying to ask my grandfather, what is it that makes this Cartier style? What are the fundamentals of this style? And I think I asked him to describe it in a word and he couldn't really do it in a word. There are so many contrasting elements to it.

It was very modern at the time. Some of the pieces still look incredibly modern today and yet also very classic and timeless. But I think at the root of it all is this fundamental understanding of symmetry and proportion, because all of the designers, my grandfather, and great-grandfather were classically-trained artists. It's not like today where you can design a piece of jewellery on the computer. They spent three years studying art before they went into the process of designing jewellery.

I think they really understood the clear lines of what was pleasing to the eye, and I think that's what comes across in all the Cartier pieces.

Why did you decide to travel to Sri Lanka?
I have these wonderful diaries belonging to my great-grandfather, and I have read them many times. I know them all by heart really, so I have always wanted to come out here and retrace his steps.

What has been your experience so far?
It's been wonderful. It's been very varied. I've been to quite a few places and have seen different parts of the country. I don't know what I had imagined. What's interesting is that some parts seemed to be exactly as my great-grandfather had described them – you know, the tea plantations, the rubber plantations, the mining – not much has changed. And then other parts like Colombo – I was really surprised by how modern it is. I am basing my comparison against a 90-year-old entry. So it has been a real mixture. It's been wonderful.

Did you find what you were hoping to find?
Yes. I don't think I had a specific view on what I was hoping to find, but it was very special to walk around the places he'd walked around. To think my great-grandfather had stepped here. And I think I have a better understanding of him as a man, having seen what he's gone through. He was a designer, as well. So I think I understand where some of his ideas came from – more now than I could have before. It's one thing reading about it, but it's actually another thing seeing it.

We went to Kandy and Nuwara Eliya and then from there we did the walk from Horton Plains, early in the morning. And then we came back here and went to Galle, where we visited the Ayura mine.

Are you planning on travelling to Sri Lanka again? Is there anything else that you hope to explore?
I'd love to come back. My family is furious that I have come without them! But I would love to come back and do more studies. I've been here for five days and it's been amazing, and Ayura has incredibly fitted in as much as possible in the

itinerary. Still, I haven't made it up to the very north so there are places that I haven't visited. I would like to come back and do it properly. It takes quite a bit of time to get to places, with the traffic. It doesn't look that far when you are looking at the map from England, but it takes some time.

You have lectured on Cartier's heritage in many countries. Are you planning on delivering any lectures in Sri Lanka?

Yes. I would be very open to it, if there was interest. But I will prepare a lecture about my trip through Sri Lanka. I think it will be fun to compare the old and the new, because I have also got photographs of my great-grandfather's trips and now mine. So it will be quite fun to put them together.

You are conducting primary research of the Cartier family. Do you have plans for your findings?

As I said, I initially just started so the story would not be lost, so that the story would be there for my children and the next generations. But now there is a lot of interest in it. It just grew organically and I wasn't really trying to promote it or anything, but people seemed to ask me to lecture and that's how it all started. So now I think what I was writing for my kids is going to turn into a bit more than that. And I am planning on writing a book.

What has been your experience in working with Ayura?

Well, it's interesting because Ayura is a fourth-generation firm as well, because Adhil's family has been in the mining business for four generations. It was interesting for me because it was the same with the Cartier family, so it's intriguing to know that they were around at the time that my great-grandfather visited Sri Lanka.

It has been really helpful as well, because they have shown every step of the process. So I saw the mine and the stones being sieved and this morning we were looking at them being cut and later we will be seeing them being polished. So it has been great to be seeing all that in one trip.

How do you find Sri Lanka in comparison to the Sri Lanka of your great-grandfather's diaries?
I think, from what I have seen, it is totally beautiful. I think Sri Lanka probably has more competition from other countries in the world for gemstones now, but there is still that pride about earning a Sri Lankan sapphire. When my great-grandfather came, that was the ultimate, and I believe that's still the same, although these other industries and mines have sprung up.

Final thoughts?
It's been a really wonderful trip. And my great-grandfather loved it. He wrote in his diary how this was the most beautiful country that he visited. And the people are so kind and I found exactly the same thing.

He had a driver riding around and he mentioned how knowledgeable he was and how he knew all the roads, and the Ayura team and myself had exactly the same experience. He also talked about how the food was delicious and how at the time you had to be careful as in India but that generally it was safer in Sri Lanka as it was all much cleaner. I think that was the case for me, too. All the way he met people who were very kind and very knowledgeable about gemstones and the market – and I found the same thing.