

This report forms part of a series of simple yet informative reports that describe field trips undertaken by GIA Field Gemologists in order to obtain specimens from mines producing a variety of gemstones throughout the world.

Concise Field Report

Volume 2 - part 1 Melos and their Pearls in Vietnam (May-June 2009)

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Figure 1: A view of Ha Long Bay Vietnam (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)

Introduction

For many years, while visiting Hanoi, I (VP) enjoy walking in the old town around the Hoan Kiem Lake. There in this part of Hanoi is a small street in which is located a low profile old house. It is a tunnel type house. It starts with a long corridor, something typical in Hanoi old town, leading to a small office. There a lady and her daughter are living and running what looks to be a quiet antique business. However, the reasons behind VP's regular visits have nothing to do with Vietnamese antiques or with the delicious tea offered graciously by the hosts to their visitors. In fact the lady and her daughter are known to collect and trade in one of the most beautiful and mysterious pearls: melo pearls (Mikkelsen, , Scarratt, 1992, Scarratt, 1994, Traub, 1997, Hurwit, 1998, Traub, *et al.*, 1999, Sciaguato, 2004).

In May 27th 2009, VP and his traveling companions (Jean Baptiste Senoble and Kham Vannaxay (France), Lou Pierre Bryl (Canada), David Bright (USA)) were visiting the *melo pearl lady*, who again took time to discuss with the group her favorite pearls and showed three interesting pearls including one she obtained recently from a Cat Ba Island fisherman. The pearl was not the largest or the best VP had seen but this time he had some information about its origin.

That origin was interesting as Cat Ba Island (Figure 2) is the largest and the most southern islands of the famous Ha Long Bay, a scenic marine wonderland composed of more than 3000 jungle covered islands (Figure 1): One of the world's most beautiful and romantic marine landscapes, a wonder celebrated in the movie "*Indochine*" and a UNESCO World heritage site since 1994. The numerous islands of the bay extending about 150km long to 30 km wide from Haiphong to the Chinese border form an incredible limestone maze which was for centuries a natural marine defense for Vietnam: A place to hide and to be hidden, a place of legends and beauty. There the Vietnamese navy hid, attacked and then defeated the Chinese and the Mongols, more recently it was used by the Vietminh in North Vietnam as a place to hide from the French and the Americans.

Now it is a place dedicated to tourism and fishing. Pearl merchants are using its evocative name as a selling argument for melo pearls, but VP being familiar with the bay for many years, had some doubts about the fact that melo pearls could be found in the Bay.

The melo pearls are produced by mysterious orange sea snail¹, the "*melo melo*" living on the coasts of South East Asia from Vietnam to Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Burma. Before the 1990's very little was known or published about them. But one thing was obvious: the snail obviously lives in warm waters and Ha Long Bay, if it could be confirmed as a *melo melo* rich area would then be probably the snail most northern biotope.

¹ **Class:** *Gastropoda*, **Order:** *Neogastropoda*, **Family:** *Volutidae*, **Genus:** *Melo*. **Species:** *M. melo*

During the May-June 2009 GIA Laboratory Field Trip to Vietnam, after visiting Yen Bai, Luc Yen, Quy Chau and Quy Hop ruby, sapphire and spinel mining areas (report in preparation), VP and his traveling companions had two spare days before taking the plane to the south in order to visit the southern sapphire deposits. A visit to Cat Ba Island for a short Melo pearl hunt was something much more motivating than waiting in Hanoi.

The Melo expedition:

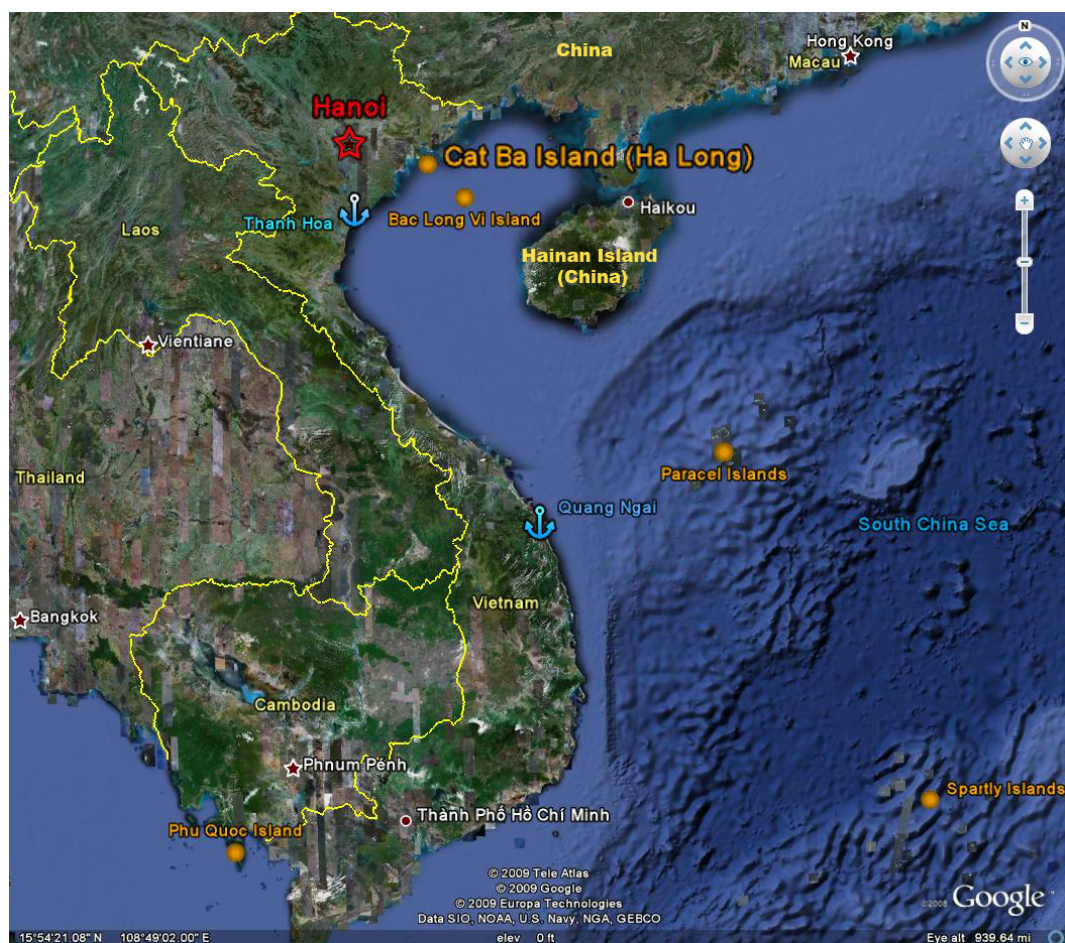


Figure 2: "Vietnam and its islands": The Melo expedition map with the location of the Vietnamese trawler ports and the melo fishing areas.

The best way to go to Cat Ba from Hanoi is without any doubts to go to Ha Long and take the ferry linking Ha Long to Cat Ba (Figure 3). The cruise is cheap and beautiful. On May 31st the party decided to keep this beautiful cruise for our return and to travel first to Cat Ba through Haiphong, the port of North Vietnam. Our plan was to visit first the fish market to see if we could get some information on Melos. We visited Haiphong fish market without being able to find any Melo but we were told that with no doubts we could find many of them in Cat Ba. We left Haiphong to Cat Ba traveling with ferries and by land with our car.



Figure 3: A ferry sailing between Ha Long and Cat Ba Island. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)

Arriving in Cat Ba main town we found a small port dedicated to fishing and tourism (Figure 4). Our first visit was for the Cat Ba fish market (Figure 5) located near the port. We could see a lot of different fish and mollusks, but no Melo snails were on display.



Figure 4: A view of Cat Ba sea front and port. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)



Figure 5: The fish market in Cat Ba (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)



Figure 6: Melo shell tourist souvenirs in Cat Ba. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)

We moved then to the port and walked on the sea front where many restaurants, hotels and tourist shops are located. Immediately we could spot in the different tourist shop several Melo shells proposed as souvenir for tourists: mello boats, mello horns, mello lamps were common and cheap (Figure 6). Of course many “pearls” were on display but most of them were just cheap imitations. No mello pearls were visible but that was not a surprise.

We found our first living mello while studying the content of the fish tanks located at the entrance of the numerous sea food restaurants on Cat Ba sea side (Figure 8). Only one restaurant was proposing some mello dishes. The restaurant owner who was also the cook was very friendly and proposed to cook the sea snail for the group with green bananas and spices (Figure 9, Figure 10). The lunch was more interesting for the discussion we had with the cook than for the quality of the meal: If the spicy green banana sauce was nice, the mello sea snail turned to be a chewy tasteless meat. We were then not surprised to have found only one restaurant proposing mello snails among the numerous Cat Ba restaurants. The cook was quite surprised of our interest for Melos. We explained to him the reason of our visit and he was even more surprised to learn that mello snails could produce some beautiful pearls. He told us that despite the fact that he spent nearly 50 years here and use to prepare and cook thousands of Melos during his life, he never heard or saw any mello pearls. He was buying regularly Melos among other fish and sea food from fishermen on the port. If we wanted to learn more about the mello, the best way was to visit one of the fishing boats at anchor in the port (Figure 11).



Figure 7: Waitress from one of the Cat Ba restaurants showing a large melo shell. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)



Figure 8: Live melos seen in Cat Ba restaurant fish tank. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)



Figure 9: VP selecting a melo for lunch at Cat Ba (Left) and witnessing melo cooking with green bananas (right). (Photo: J.B. Senoble, 2009)



Figure 10: Gemologists Lou Pierre Bryl and Jean Baptiste Senoble “enjoying” a melo lunch in Cat Ba. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)



Figure 11: Cat Ba port with local boats and two trawlers from Thanh Hoa. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)

After lunch we moved then to the port and hired one of the small rowing boats navigating inside Cat Ba harbor taking people and supplies to and from the boats (Figure 11). Two trawlers from Thanh Hoa were present in the harbor. He visited them and met there some friendly Vietnamese fishermen repairing their fishing nets (Figure 12).



Figure 12: VP's team visiting one of the Thanh Hoa trawlers and getting information from the fishermen. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)

Thanks to our translator Hoc and to a melo shell we took with us, we could start a discussion with them. They told us that melo sea snails are commonly fished by trawlers from Thanh Hoa as they live in sandy and rocky areas at depths of 20 to 30 meters and they are in fact a bi-product of fishing. The Thanh Hoa fishermen told us that they were waiting here for the storm to stop before to return to Thanh Hoa, they came here as they got a lot of fish and as their stock of ice was going down. For this reason melo snails fished sometimes far away are commonly brought to Cat Ba island by fishermen from all around Vietnam and particularly those of Thanh Hoa and Quang Ngai. It seems that in Cat Ba there is a good market for those sea snails which are then reported to be exported to China by dealers buying them from fishermen. The Thanh Hoa fishermen confirmed to the group that as Thanh Hoa and Quang Ngai have a lot of trawlers their fishermen often catch a lot of melo snails. They also told us that the high melo fishing period was around April. They added that melo are mostly found around the Sparty and Paracel islands (Figure 2) two groups of islands located off the costs of Vietnam and which are the subject of a territorial conflict with China and Vietnam. Another area rich in Melo was reported to be the sand banks around the Bach Long Vi Island (Figure 2), a small isolated island located halfway between Haiphong and Hainan Island. The seamen said that Melo snails are not as common as before and that large snails are become rare. It seems that the past 20 years of intense trawler type fishing is probably the reason why Melo pearls appeared suddenly in the market and it seems that as the stocks of *Melo melo* are going down the supply for these beautiful pearls will probably not be the same in the future.



Figure 13: Live fish storage area in Cat Ba port (Photo: Lou Pierre Bryl, 2009)

The Thanh Hoa fishermen confirmed to the group what we already suspected after our lunch at the restaurant: Melo snail are not really one of the most sought after sea food delicacies. It is a cheap poor fishermen dish or something to eat with friends with a lot of beer while playing card.

After the visit to the Thanh Hoa fishermen, we returned to the port to spend the night. We returned to the restaurant where we had the Melo lunch and had some additional talk with the cook who invited us to come to visit the next day his supplier for melo snails and other sea food. On June 01 we then had another visit in the port. The group visited this time an area composed of many small floating houses in the center of the port surrounded by fish nests where sea food are stored before to be sold (Figure 13). There the group saw a net full of Melo snails bought recently from fishermen from Thanh Hoa and several melo shells (Figure 14, Figure 15 and Figure 16).



Figure 14: J.B. Senoble and Lou Pierre Bryl witnessing fishermen weighing melos in Cat Ba port. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)

On the way back to the restaurant with our hands full on melo shells and living snails we were obviously a discussion subject on the port. Few minutes after our return at the restaurant we were joined by Mr. Duc, a Vietnamese man in his fifties, presenting himself as a former Vietnamese navy diver. He was curious about our obvious interest in Melo snails.

After a short discussion with the restaurant cook and our translator Hoc, we were told that Mr. Duc said that he saw a few years ago a beautiful pearl in a melo snail he collected while he was working as a diver in Ha Long Bay. The find happened in 1994 near Trinh Nu, the “Virgin” island. He was collecting some wood at low tide to prepare some fire with Mr. Tchi, a local fisherman who just found two large melo snails. Mr. Duc said that he was very surprised by the size of the sea snails as they were as big as his hat and weighting around 8kg. They were very big for the area where usually melos are rather small. That surprise was not his last as when the fisherman prepared the snails to cook them a beautiful orange pearl appeared. Mr. Duc reported that the pearl was about 2 centimeters in diameter and had several colors as if somebody had painted it (Note from the author: This is probably meaning

that the pearl had possibly a visible flame structure), the pearl was glowing, Mr. Duc added. The fisherman, Mr. Tchi kept the pearl, but Mr. Duc was not sure if he still has the pearl.



Figure 15: Details of the melos being bought. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)



Figure 16: A Vietnamese fisherman presenting a live melo in Cat Ba. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)



Figure 17: Mr. Duc telling the group his melo stories in Ha Long Bay and studying a melo shell. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)

That story was interesting as if it is true it means that melo pearls can indeed be found in Ha Long Bay and not only from snails which were fished far away. Nevertheless Mr. Duc told us that he never saw or heard about any other melo pearl in Ha Long Bay during the 6 years he was active there as diver and since his retirement in 2002. It gives an idea about the true rarity of such pearls as he saw thousands of melo snails. He confirmed to us that melo snails are now rare and usually small in the bay while they are common in sandy areas with strong currents particularly around Back Long Vi island, in the Spartly and Paracel archipelagos, around Phu Quoc island and along Cambodian coast where he also dived frequently when he

was an active Navy diver from 1989 to 2002 (Figure 2). But if melo snails are common, he saw only one pearl.

We left then Mr. Duc and the Cat Ba cook to return to Hanoi. It has been a nice short visit, full of surprises and nice encounters with friendly Vietnamese people that increased our interest for these fascinating pearls: It was interesting and educative as even if we could not see there any melo pearl, we were able to get a better idea about how rare and special melo pearls are truly.



Figure 18: A melo pearl seen at the melo lady's house in Hanoi. (Photo: V. Pardieu/GIA Laboratory Bangkok, 2009)

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