

Afghanistan

the calm before the storm

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Exploring Afghanistan in 2021 has become increasingly difficult. Just read the State Department Guide lines, before departure "Do not travel to Afghanistan due to COVID-19, crime, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping, and armed conflict." And, now we have withdrawn. At the time of this travel, the advice included:

"ON APRIL 27, 2021, THE DEPARTMENT ORDERED THE DEPARTURE FROM U.S. EMBASSY KABUL OF U.S. GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES WHOSE FUNCTIONS CAN BE PERFORMED ELSEWHERE. TRAVEL TO ALL AREAS OF AFGHANISTAN IS UNSAFE...."

"TERRORIST AND INSURGENT GROUPS CONTINUE PLANNING AND EXECUTING ATTACKS IN AFGHANISTAN. ... AT LOCATIONS FREQUENTED BY U.S. CITIZENS AND OTHER FOREIGN NATIONALS."

"THE U.S. EMBASSY'S ABILITY TO PROVIDE ROUTINE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES TO U.S. CITIZENS IN AFGHANISTAN IS SEVERELY LIMITED, PARTICULARLY OUTSIDE OF KABUL."

I know you're asking yourselves why anyone would go to Afghanistan. For me, it's an affection for the people of Afghanistan. I've been traveling there and exploring the remote mines for 50 years and have a strong attachment to the gem mining industry. I have a three-year contract with USAID/DAI "to advance the Gemstone Industry of Afghanistan and increase its exports of gemstones." However, like scenes from a James Bond movie, I was met at the Kabul airport by armed guards and driven in an armored vehicle to a fortified compound where I stayed and worked for two weeks. If I was to go rogue, and head to the emerald mines in the Hindu Kush Mountains, it had to be unofficial and on my own. Doing so was a sleight of hand transition. Upon my departure from the heavily guarded compound, I was escorted by guards in an armored vehicle back to the Kabul airport. Inside the airport my USAID/DAI mission was completed, and we said our "goodbyes." Moments after they left, an Afghan friend drove up in his dusty vehicle, and we were off to the Hindu Kush Mountains.

The secrets to successful Afghan missions into remote areas, is being inconspicuous while traveling, who you know, and what they know. I've had several decades to build trust among gemstone traders, miners, Afghan government officials, spies, and even some members of

the Taliban. On this trip, a few friends knew that I wanted to visit the emerald miners and their mines in Panjshir Valley. I had trepidations about climbing to the mines at 13,000-feet, as I've edged past 80, and knew this wouldn't be a walk in the park. But I needed to see the mining operations first hand and hear miner's opinions, including their views about the future. I wanted to assess their living conditions, mining practices in the mines, and the levels of emerald production.

It was important to explain to my Afghan friends, and their friends, the importance of the USAID/DAI funded program. I emphasized the value of advertising and promoting their emeralds in my USAID-sponsored newsletter, and I also invited Afghans to bring their gem products to a Dubai Conference Sale. There they would meet international buyers, including a first for Israeli buyers that were unable to participate in the past.

On arrival in Panjshir valley, I was able to meet friends, including a few that I had not seen for twenty years. It was a happy gathering, like a school reunion. I knew trekking up to the Khenj emerald mines at 13,000 feet plus would be a challenge, as I live at sea level a block from Waikiki Beach in Honolulu, Hawaii. I had little time to adjust to the two-mile change in altitude, and I underestimated the difficulty of the climb. One of my friends told me there were horses available. That sounded like a good idea, as I had often ridden horses into the remote areas of northern Afghanistan, sometimes for months at a time.

A horse was located in the village and brought to the base of the mountain. The horse had a saddle but no stirrups, unlike a western saddle. It brought back memories of how many times I had fallen off these horses when the blankets and ropes slipped. I didn't get far on my mount, before realizing the grip of my legs would no longer keep me in the saddle. I was sliding around on the blanket under me and out of balance as the horse plodded up the steep mountain trail, sometimes lunging over boulders. I clung to my steed, wondering how long before I tumbled onto the trail and worse. I said to my friend, "I'm getting off this horse before I start eating the rocks." At near 10,000 feet, I suffered from lack

of oxygen as I climbed higher. My friends were patient with my slow pace up the mountain. I was exhausted, and with another 1,000-feet to the top of the mountain, the horse trailing behind me now looked pretty good. I was pulled up the last 1,000 feet by a rope fashioned from four neck scarves, and tied to the horse's saddle!

Arrived, I sat (collapsed) next to a cool spring in a miner's yard, sipping delicious cool water while catching my breath. The snowcapped mountains were as stunning as I remembered. The big change since my last visit was the introduction of modern mining equipment. New houses had been built, and an indoor diesel fuel drip system installed to heat the homes and water. Satellite TV dishes sprouted from rooftops. Each house now had a plastic, full size outdoor toilet. The miners capture water gushing from springs near the mountain tops for drinking and mining activities. Unchanged was the transport system for food, clothing, supplies, building materials and mining equipment. Everything was still carried up the arduous trail by hand, horse or donkey.

The production of emeralds had been good for the past two years, with recovery of a few stunning crystals over 100 carats. The key problem: restricted sales due to COVID-19 and the contraction of world economies. The looming concern was instability after the departure of the US and NATO forces.

At night we sat on the floor of my friend's home, sipping tea and chatting mostly about politics in Panjshir Valley, and more broadly, the whole of Afghanistan and the situation with the Taliban. The miners were worried about their families and ready to take up arms to fight. My take away from Afghan miners is that a tribal war is likely soon after the departure of the US and NATO forces.

I returned to Kabul with a heavy heart, for many of the gem miners I've known as friends for decades. I realize that climbing 13,000-foot Mountains is best for men decades younger than me. The three-year USAID/DAI contract has given me the opportunity to expand opportunities for sales of Afghanistan gems, while leaving the mountain climbing to younger adventurers in the Explorers Club.



Miners homes and emerald mines above Khenj Village, Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan. Photo: Gary Bowersox



Gary Bowersox, second from right, with miners, emerald mine at 13,000 feet, Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan. Photo: Shaiq Habibi



View to North, Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan. Photo: Gary Bowersox



Mner watching emerald bearing tunnels Khenj Village mines in Panjshir Valley