

GEMSTONE SOURCE REGION UPDATE: TAJIKISTAN

Gary W. Bowersox



Pictured at left is the Kuh-i-Lal, Tajikistan spinel mine seen on the mountainside behind the exploration field team, composed of Gary W. Bowersox, Derold Holcombe, Zafarbek Kuvvatbekov, and Iskandar Soibnazarov. Also seen in the photo is the Panj river, which defines the border line between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. This trip was a Flag Expedition trip approved by The Explorers Club. At right is a map showing where Tajikistan is located (Graphic credit: Britannica).

In June 2005 and again this year, the author led The Explorers Club Flag Expeditions through 2,000 miles of Tajikistan. The 2023 team visited the country’s gem mining areas and is working with government officials to update the knowledge of mining and production of Tajikistan gemstones, which have been known since 101 B.C. More recently, the ruby mining area was discovered by Lev Rossofsky and his team in the late 1970s.

The visit and the knowledge gained from it have several purposes: to increase the market potential of spinels and rubies from Tajikistan; for updated knowledge on gemstone mining in Tajikistan; to provide GIA’s laboratory with samples of Tajikistan gems and Afghanistan spinels, helping make it possible to test ancient spinels to determine if they did come from the historic Kuh-i-Lal mine (this was not possible before); and to assist the government of Tajikistan in locating new mining partners.

Tajikistan covers an area of about 55,250 square miles, 90% of which is mountains and 50% of which is higher than 10,000 feet above sea level. The glaciers of Gorno Badakhshan reach heights of more than 23,000 feet.

The country’s ancient spinel deposit, known today as Kuh-i-Lal, “the mountain of spinel,” has produced some historically famous spinels found in the crowns of royalty and museums around the world (*Gemstones of Afghanistan* by G.W. Bowersox and B.E. Chamberlin, 1995).

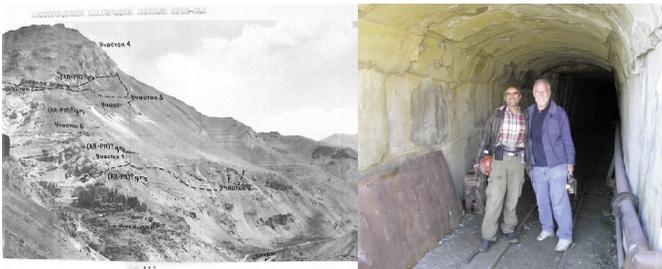
These mines are currently closed while the government of Tajikistan selects a new mine organization to operate them. However, production of ruby, spinel, clinohumite, and scapolite are still available via two Tajikistan government-approved sales organizations. Gems in Tajikistan are largely sold as rough unless one goes to a local retail store.



At left, Iskandar Soibnazarov with spinel inventory. At right, ruby rough shown in the Tajikistan government contract store.



At top left, the author and miners at a Murghab ruby mine. At bottom left is Kuh-i-Lal, Tajikistan rough clinohumite and at right is Murghab, Tajikistan rough ruby.



At left, the Kuh-i-Lal spinel mines with some 408 tunnels. At right, the author with mine geologist Ali Nazar in the mine's main tunnel.



At left is a 6.02-carat faceted Murghab, Tajikistan-mined ruby purchased in the rough by Gary Bowersox, "The Gem Hunter," and faceted by Andy Gulig (Photo credit: Robert Weldon/GIA). At right is an 11.60-carat spinel cut by Larry Winn, set in an 18-karat gold setting with 1 carat of diamonds designed and built by Gregory Crawford (Photo credit: Robert Weldon/GIA).

Tajikistan gemstones are also sold in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangkok, as well as through a few U.S. dealers, including Gem Hunters Corporation.

A detailed report of the 2023 expedition to Tajikistan is being prepared for publication in GIA's *Gems & Gemology* journal. This report includes the publication of laboratory reports on the origin statistics of samples provided to the GIA. With this report and data, the priceless ancient spinels in the crown jewels of Great Britain, Australia, Russia, Iran, Bavaria, and numerous other spinels currently in the world's museums can be proven to be from Kuh-i-Lal, Tajikistan, or other countries.

Many of the rubies of Tajikistan rival the Burmese rubies in color, size, tone, and clarity, but when it comes to current market prices, they're priced much lower than Burmese rubies.

After 2,000 years of mining, one would expect the Kuh-i-Lal mine to be depleted. However, in 1985 a

26,000-carat spinel of good color was recovered from the mine and is now with the Tajikistan government. While future production of the Kuh-i-Lal spinel mine is speculative, there is greater potential in the Murghab ruby area. The ruby mines of Tajikistan were only discovered in the 1970s. The deposits cover a vast area, and new discoveries are being made. The best quality rubies from the Murghab area in Tajikistan are selling for over \$20,000 per carat.

The future growth in commercial mining appears to be most dependent on the willingness of the Tajikistan government to establish a favorable investment climate and mining terms favorable to foreign investors. ♦

About the Author: Gary W. Bowersox, known as the "Gem Hunter," is a renowned gem expert who has spent five decades exploring and researching gems and minerals in Afghanistan and Central Asia. He has chaired eight symposiums on "Gems and Minerals of the Hindu Kush and Central Asia" and authored two books.

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