

AFGHANISTAN GEMSTONE INDUSTRY - THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Gary W. Bowersox

Throughout history, Afghanistan gemstones have been of great value and steadily increasing in value. Today, mostly private families and residents operate mining and it is their main source of income. Over the years, organizations have worked together to develop the legal trade from this country.

For more than seven thousand years, the value and production of Afghanistan's gemstones have increased. Today the country is host to a gemstone industry that is operated by private sector that continues to flourish despite export taxes, civil conflict, government pressures, Taliban actions and the challenges posed by COVID-19. Afghan gemstones are available throughout the world's major markets including North and South America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Gulf States.



FIGURE 1. Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan.

Today, Afghanistan's gemstone industry is primarily conducted by private operators in the form of families, village residents and leaders, police and government officials. Employment generated by the sector allows thousands of Afghans to support themselves and their families. Without the gemstone mining, large numbers of villagers would have no viable source of income.

Over the years, the Afghan Government, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other organizations have initiated various programs to legalize, properly source, and advance the Gemstone Industry of Afghanistan. Some of these programs are starting to be implemented. Of importance, for the first time, the Afghan Government has agreed with USAID and DAI in conjunction with our new incentives to lower the export tax and allow legal sales and export of rough gemstone materials from Afghanistan.

USAID, Afghanistan Competitiveness of Export Oriented Business Activity (ACEBA), together with DAI Global LLC, have planned a Business to Business (B2B) event scheduled for July 12-15, 2021. The event will be conducted in Dubai for approximately 20 Afghan gemstone traders/sellers and international buyers. International buyers from France, Israel, Taiwan and the USA have signed up to attend. There would be more countries represented if it were not for current COVID-19 related travel restrictions, which eliminated people from

major cutting centers such as India, Japan, Sri Lanka and Thailand from being able to participate.

EMERALD DEPOSITS

I spent most of April and May 2021 in Afghanistan including a trip into the Hindu Kush Mountains to visit the emerald miners and the mines in the Panjshir Valley. This was my 50th year of gem-related exploration activities in Afghanistan; being



FIGURE 2. Author on path to Khenj emerald mines in Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan.

over 80 years of age, the mountains appeared to have grown much higher and more difficult to climb! Differences from past visits included that the emerald mine tunnels are now deeper into the mountain, emerald production is higher, and some heavy equipment is used along with mining drills and generators. Housing and facilities are greatly improved with electricity and heat, and well-built houses with TV are available near the 13,000 ft. mountain tops. Figures 1 and 2.

Access to blasting materials is still a problem due to irregular supplies and government regulations. Many miners now produce their own blasting powder by mixing raw materials. Another problem is the hours it takes for the rigorous climb along mountain trails to the mines. In such circumstance, most miners work and reside at the mining sites five days per week and return home on their days off. Figure 3.

The emeralds mines are located approximately 70 miles (118 km) northeast of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and extend from the village of Khenj to Dest-e-Rewat. The elevation of the emerald deposits range from 7,000-14,300 feet (2,135-4,270 meters) amidst mountainous terrain on the eastern side of the Panjshir River. The estimated area of the deposits is approximately 150 square miles (400Km). However, some new deposits have been reported in both Laghman and Badakhshan Provinces.

Production has significantly increased over the last few years with major discoveries of large and high-quality emeralds, many exceeding 100 ct. Due to the gemstone market and world economy, current prices have decreased, but this is far from the major challenge for Afghan miners. Figure 4.

RUBY DEPOSIT

The ruby and sapphire deposits are located close to the village of Jegdalek, Afghanistan, some 30 miles (60 km) south-east of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. The Jegdalek ruby mines have been worked for more than 700 years. During the 1200s, wealthy Muslim merchants sold rubies to Kublai Khan and other famous historical figures. The rubies are found in marbles, which are (essentially pure calcite) with trace amounts of magnesium impurities. Figure 5.

Approximately 75% of the rough production is pink sapphire, 15% ruby, 5% mixed blue and red-to-pink corundum, and 5% blue sapphire. Because it is commonly semitransparent, most of the material is fashioned into cabochons. Only about 3% of the production is facetable but some very fine gemstones have been cut. Figure 6.

PEGMATITE DEPOSITS—AQUAMARINE, KUNZITE (SPODUMENE), MORGANITE, TOURMALINE AND OTHER GEMSTONES

Eastern Afghanistan is part of the global Himalayan pegmatite belt stretching 1,860 miles (3,000 km) from Iran to



FIGURE 3. Miners' houses.



FIGURE 4. Mohammad Irshad with a 10,000 ct lot of Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan emeralds weighting 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds).



FIGURE 5. Rough ruby weighing 2,280 ct from Jegdalek, Afghanistan.



FIGURE 6. A 32.32 ct ruby carved by Bart Curren and made into a pendant by Gregg Crawford.

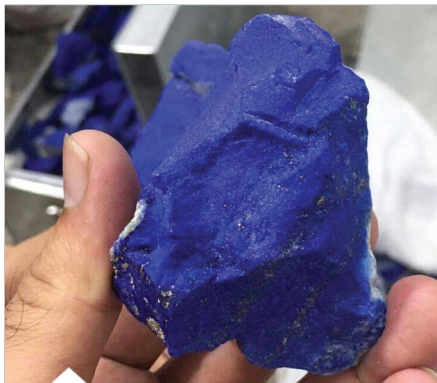


FIGURE 7. Fine color Lapis.



FIGURE 8: Purple spinel.

Myanmar (formerly Burma). A large volume of rough aquamarine, kunzite, morganite, tourmaline and other gemstones have been mined in Kunar, Laghman, and Nangarhar provinces of eastern Afghanistan. Not only is a majority of the material facet-grade, large specimens, including kunzite have been recovered.

Access to this sparsely populated region of Afghanistan is difficult even during peace-time conditions. There are very few roads and travel to the mines is on foot along narrow gorges and rocky trails.

The aquamarines are blue, the kunzite pink and the morganite is usually a peach color. However, the tourmalines from this area are found in various shades of pink, green, light blue, indigo blue (indicolite), and rare electric polychromatic (bicolor) types, namely greenish-pink and blue-green.

LAPIS LAZULI DEPOSITS

More than eight centuries ago, the Egyptians and the Chinese were famous for their lapis carvings, and this continues today in many parts of the world. Lapis table tops, vases, and jewelry are still very popular. The "blue mountain," as the mountain lapis lazuli has been called, is situated along the right side of the Kokcha River in Badakhshan, Afghanistan. The altitude of the lapis lazuli deposits ranges from 6,000 to 17,000 feet (1,830 to 5,180 meters). Figure 7.

The steep slopes of the upper valley of the Kokcha River in the eastern Hindu Kush consist of grayish-white dolomitic marble with nests (deposits) of light to dark blue lapis lazuli in the upper sections of the mountain. This has been known for more than 7,000 years.

OTHER BADAKHSAN DEPOSITS

Recently, I have been seeing gem quality emeralds and spinels from the Badakhshan province. I will continue to monitor this development for the future supply of these gems. Figure 8.

CONCLUSION

The author's chats last month with many longtime Afghanistan friends indicated that yet another tribal war is in the making. War is a common topic of conversation in Afghanistan. However, currently tribal leaders, old warlords and their next generation of sons are busy with meetings and passing out guns in the countryside as the Taliban continues to take over additional territory.

With the USA and other NATO countries cutting losses after 20 years by pulling out of Afghanistan, the Taliban will attempt to topple the government and return to power. Looking forward, the risks are clearly elevated for instability that can result in curtailment of the mining and shipment of gemstones.

Thus, the calm before the storm! Regardless of the outcomes of competing forces for control of Afghanistan, the government having control will attempt to expand gemstone production to generate revenues and export earnings. So, stay tuned in! ♦

All photos by Gary W. Bowersox. For more information you can reach Gary at MrGary77@aol.com. For additional information on the Gemstones of Afghanistan go to www.TheGemHunters.com

Gemworld International, Inc., 2640 Patriot Blvd, Suite 240, Glenview, IL 60026-8075, www.gemguide.com

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