

5/3/09

Hi, Family and Friends

As promised to some of you, here is a summary of the trip that Laurie and I took this past April 12-24 to Namibia with Doug Coulter and Colin Corser of Geodite Minerals (<http://www.geodite.com/minsafari.html>.) In summary, this was a fantastic trip, extremely well managed by Doug and Colin. While this was billed as an African Mineral Safari (complete with that logo on our hats), it also included plenty of other delights including two days in the Etosha game park. Our group totaled 10 people.

April 10. Laurie and I traveled to NYC to make the April 11 flight to Johannesburg late in the day. Our 24 hours in NYC were a delight. We stayed in a funky hotel called the POD on 230 East 51<sup>st</sup> street. It's called this because the rooms are truly tiny with shared bathrooms but at half the cost of other hotels. Right around the corner was a whole block of great little restaurants.

April 11. We walked (in the rain) all over town getting up to Central Park and lunch at the Tavern on the Green (a true treat), through Broadway and down to Grand Central Station. I wanted to see the GCS again having been through there many times as a student 40+ years ago. Then, off to JFK airport to meet with our group and start the journey.

April 12. The flight on South African Airlines took 17 hours. I swear, if riding in economy class for 17 hours were listed in the CIA's version of "enhanced torture techniques" it would be prohibited under the Geneva Conventions. Of course those techniques don't include free beer and wine and decent movies. We arrived in Johannesburg at 7 PM and headed for a classy hotel called Le Chateau where we checked in and immediately headed for the bar where Doug went over his plans for our trip. Rodney's website has some nice pictures of this hotel. Laurie and I took a long walk around the community surrounding Le Chateau the next morning and remarked on the extraordinary security arrangements not only surrounding the whole community but redundantly protecting each home within. The rolls of barbed wire and electric fencing made me feel like being in a luxury prison. From this limited experience and what our hosts at the hotel told us, white South Africans are feeling very insecure.

April 13. Midday we flew to Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, formerly called Southwest Africa. We piled into our van and headed for the town of Usakos and the Banhoff hotel. Usakos is a tiny town, which reminded me of some western movie set. The Banhoff is a very comfortable place with a nice outside patio and pool and an inside bar which could have been the set of Crocodile Dundee. While the town is not a center of mineral mining, the proprietor, Jaco Smith, is a dealer with a fair sized room full of very excellent specimens. I spent \$300 on a nice diopside on shattukite, bright schorl cluster, topaz crystal and aquamarine cluster.

April 14. We pile in the van (trailed by a luggage trailer) and head for Tubusis and the aquamarines, schorls and red garnets to be had. This is a poor mining village in the Erongo Mountains

We arrived in Tubusis and promptly put out word that we were ready to see specimens. Unfortunately, what was on offer was not as good as past trips according to Doug, but Laurie and I were pleased. Within an hour, about 20 villagers gathered around offering specimens. They mobbed us with each trying to get our attention and shoving each other out of the way. It got a bit uncomfortable at times. I got a few minor schorl and topaz specimens. The best piece was scored by Laurie -- nice green fluorite cubes interspersed with small but very blue aquas. I bought a small bag of beautifully red, translucent garnets – a real score for my gem cutting customers. Prices were very cheap and negotiable.

A thoroughly funny thing occurred here. I put my flat of specimens off to the side on the ground so I could have my hands free for further shopping with the assembled miners. At one point, a young boy thrust a specimen in my face. It was mine, taken out of my box, and offered again for sale!!! I immediately went to the box and found it empty. I then went to the young man who had sold me the garnets and asked him to tell the villagers to return my specimens. I had sensed he was a respected figure among the throng. Amazingly, I got every piece back within a few minutes.

He got one of the three Obama hats I had taken to barter or give away!!! Obama is very popular in Africa, so he was totally happy.

After a couple of hours in Tubusis, we headed for Uis. En route, we stopped at a small ranch house where a Doug knows the owner named Harold. Harold was not home, but his daughter let us in the house to look through the minerals scattered in a real mess all over the house on the floor etc. We each made a pile of specimens and told her when we returned we would negotiate a price on each pile with her father. Laurie and I put aside a huge translucent fluorite crystal with incredible emerald green and black zoning, a bag of really nice clear topaz crystals, two very nice aqua specimens, a bag of tourmaline pieces, a really nice quartz crystal pair in the shape of animal horns, and some other pieces. When we stopped by on the return trip, Harold was there and charged us about \$100 for the lot. I didn't even bargain.

We arrived in Uis late in the day for a two-day stay. Uis is another tiny town reminiscent of a small 19<sup>th</sup> century western town. We stayed at the White Lady Inn, which is a luxury facility in the middle of nowhere. We planned to take the long trip to the Brandberg quartz area the next day. Before dinner Laurie and I walked the 4 blocks to the food store on the other side of town to get some \$\$ from the ATM. We met three young men offering small and lesser quality Brandberg crystals. We totally enjoyed bargaining with them and bought most of their offerings, maybe 30 crystals in all including a few enhydros.

On the way back to the Inn, before dinner, we spied a sign for minerals (“Ring the bell”) in the yard adjacent to the Inn. We rang and were greeted by a fellow named Monte van der Smit a fellow about our age who has rooms full of top quality specimens. I could not resist a large and very heavy (it came home in my carry on back pack) specimen with a huge, showy center vug of beautiful diopside crystals from Kaokoland, a huge topaz crystal filled with rainbow colors, a 5 inch perfect crystal-clear Brandberg crystal with vivid smoky and amethyst phantoms and a huge water inclusion and two bi color beryls (aqua base with heliodor caps – very unusual). Laurie got some nice pieces too but I neglected to record them in my notes.

April 15. We neglected to use our mosquito net. I was devoured during the night. I need to charge Laurie for my services because, while I am being eaten alive, she never gets a single bite. Up early and to breakfast in a pleasant ramada around the pool. One of the gardeners had laid out 10 flats of minerals, but these were of very poor quality. No sales.

Then, into the van for the long and rough 2 hour ride to buy directly from the miners at the Brandberg quartz location. We had spotted a German fellow who had been in Uis for several weeks and who periodically went to buy at the mining camp. We decided that we had to beat the “German” to the site. He became a bit of an evil character in our imaginations. So, we left early with the “German’s” truck still safely parked in the driveway.

The Brandberg Mountains are truly impressive, a giant eroded block of granite towering over the desert. But, the crystals are mined in a smaller set of mountains called Goboboseb. You can google them and get a bunch of websites with pictures. The trip there was fun – we saw a huge herd of Springboks, a kind of antelope named for their ability spring very high into the air. We were not disappointed when we saw a cluster of them go nuts bobbing up and down in incredible leaps seemingly straight up in the air. We also marveled at the ability of our van to take the constant beating of a truly bad road.

We arrived in the mining camp, which is a collection of shacks where the miners, mostly very poor, live. Within minutes at least 20 of them had gathered with their wares. Unlike Tubusis, these miners were very well organized. They arranged themselves in a semicircle and waited patiently for us to browse. The specimens on offer ranged from small and inferior to extremely fine crystals with deep amethyst and smoky phantoms. Also, some very nice prehnite specimens, some with amethyst crystals. We bought bunches at prices which are about 1/10 of those in Tucson. What a delight.

I gave my last Obama hat to the wife of one of the miners who is a long time friend to Doug.

About the time we were finishing up in the mining camp, the “German” showed up in his rental truck. He did not approach us but stayed in his truck taking some pictures. We all felt a bit smug about beating him to the prize.

Doug then led us to a home site around a bend in the mountain. Here, a white man and his family lives and sells specimens that he buys from the miners. He had some very nice prehnites for sale, but they were pricy and too large for my aging back. He did have two pet meerkats one of which was very friendly and permitted me to hold and photograph it. What a total treat. I love these little mammals.

Then back to Uis and a gas refill at the store. This time at least 20 young men awaited us with offerings mainly of Brandberg crystals. Oh, well, what the heck. There went a bunch more \$\$.

Just a note on bargaining. The miners and the young men selling in places like the gas station are very poor. They do start high in their asking prices but will generally sell for 1/3 of their initial price. After a while, however, bargaining became a moral issue with me. I have so much compared to them and simply could not push too hard when really good specimens were offered.

Back to the White Lady Inn for dinner. While having a beer and awaiting dinner, Doug stopped by to say a fellow was offering some high end specimens out of his car trunk. Laurie and I went over to him and, indeed, he had a few. I bought two including a huge, fat Brandberg totally translucent and pure deep amethyst and a whole vug carefully sawed out of the parent rock and filled with two clear, translucent Brandbergs. Oh, wow. How my \$\$ was disappearing.

April 16. Off to Omaruru and the home of Heinz Malsahn who has a show room and shipping container full of exquisite Erongo schorl and aquamarine combination specimens as well as some nice Okorusu fluorites including some genuine, small fluorite scepters. Unfortunately, Heinz's prices were too steep for me to buy much, but I did get some nice smaller pieces. Laurie bought a bunch of specimens including topaz and some deeply colored sodalite. Before heading to Heinz' place, we stopped to draw funds from an ATM in town. Guess who was behind us in line – The "German". Turns out he is a totally pleasant fellow.

We lunched at a beautiful old mansion built by a wealthy trader at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While there, some vendors came by the gate. Laurie bought a beautiful plate of schorl crystals with one bright blue aqua (about an inch long) smack in the middle for a reasonable price.

Then on to the town of Otjiwarongo and the Otjibamba lodge and game preserve. This was the nicest of many nice places that we stayed with beautiful grounds, a nice bar and great restaurant.

A note on eating in Namibia. Food is very cheap and good. Wine is \$5 to \$7 a bottle AT DINNER. Beer is excellent with several local brands available and 80 cents or so a bottle AT THE HOTEL. The water in every place we stayed was pure. Most restaruants offered excellent wild game including Oryx, Ostrich and kudu. All of it was really tasty.

April 17. For the first of our non-mineral treats, we headed for the morning Cheetah run at the Cheetah Conservancy about an hour from the lodge. This was an incredible treat. For \$35 each, the Conservancy stages a morning run of 4 semi tame cheetahs. These beautiful large cats act just like the wonderful house cats in my life – put a piece of string on a stick and wiggle it around and my cats would chase it forever. Well, the conservancy has rigged a square of land with a long wire along its border. Along the wire at very high speed runs a rag that acts as the equivalent of the string on a stick. The Cheetahs pursue this rag at their full speed in an endless chase. One of them caught the rag, tore it off the line, and refused to surrender it to the handlers hissing at them all the while. All of this was with us watching with no barrier and no more than a few feet away. On the way to and from the conservancy, we saw many warthogs and baboons browsing along the side of the road. What a treat all of this was!!!

Back in the van and off to the Okorusu fluorite mine on the way to Tsumeb. At this huge mine, we were met by Roy Verburgt, the mining engineer who took us to the specimen storage shed and then for a tour of the mine. The mine permits collection and sale of the specimens the proceeds of which go to the miners' benefit fund. By this time, my backpack and luggage were groaning with weight, but this did not stop me from buying 10 or so nice specimens.

After many thanks to Roy, we headed for Tsumeb and the luxurious Makalani Hotel about a block from the old mine head frame.

April 18-19. The Tsumeb mine is closed and the one rockshop in town is abandoned. In the morning, we took a side trip to the giant Hoba meteor outside of town. Later, in town, Rodney and Ray Lahti found a shop with a disorganized bunch of flats in the back. We found them there and joined the rummaging. I found a great descloisite specimen, and Laurie scored some nice topazes, but we did not have time to really look. The town also has a very nice museum with some good Tsumeb specimens on display. Rodney got a tip that a collection was for sale somewhere in the town, but we did not have enough time to really search for the address given for the collection.

At 1 PM we climbed back into the van for trip to the Etosha national park and two days of animals. The park has 3 lodges for tourists. We stayed at Okaukuejo. The lodge is an island of luxury in the middle of a million acres of African wildlife. It is the opposite of a zoo – the people are in the (luxurious) cage watching the animals outside. The lodge is on a major water hole where the whole drama of African wildlife plays out. As game comes to drink, lions, hyenas and jackals hunt, kill and eat. We watched it all in safety and only 100 yards from a luxury bar and restaurant. Rodney got a great shot of a mischievous jackal teasing a warthog and, at one point, sniffing its behind. A small, sharp pleasure was given to us by jackals roaming through the compound. One fellow walked back and forth through the bar. These animals are about the size of our coyotes but with very pretty black markings on their backs. On the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, we piled into the Van for a morning drive of about 50 kilometers around the park. Saw bunches of giraffes, zebras, etc.

April 20. We left the park and the daylong drive to the coast. On the way, we stopped again in Uis for a fill up. Again a swarm of young men with Brandbergs swarmed us. And, again, some \$\$\$ left the wallet. At Hentiesbay there were no rock buying opportunities beyond a few beach vendors with poor wares. Doug took us there to see the vast colony of seals about an hour north of the town. This was a truly spectacular site with thousands of seals lounging on the rocky shore and swimming in the high surf. They also stank to high heaven. The upper shore was covered with seal bones and bits of fur. Jackals hunt baby seals along the perimeter of the herd and eat their catch right there. Kind of gruesome.

April 21. On to the port town of Swakopmund a couple of hours away. Arriving in Swakopmund in early afternoon, we settled into a nice hotel in the middle of town (I neglected to record its name), and then fanned out across the city in search of rock shops. The first place Laurie and I found was a place called the Bargain Corner, which seemed to be a cross between a thrift shop and hardware store. There were also 3 cabinets full of specimens. Laurie's main purchases were 3 slabs of beautiful pietersite at a tiny fraction of the Tucson prices. My beauty was a 4 by 4 inch plate of medium sized diopside crystals at a very low price. The owner said it was from Tsumeb, a truly excellent find, but later the owner of a real rock shop identified it as from Kaokoland.

We then headed for a very nice and high end rock shop called Stonetique. After browsing for a hour, I bought several exquisite large brandbergs including a cluster, a very nice diopside, and a perfect and huge orange garnet the size of a small lemon. Laurie purchased a couple more beautiful pietersite slabs and the rest of the orange garnets. While a high end shop, the prices still were 1/3 of offerings of similar materials in Tucson. Then on to the Desert Gems rock shop. This was a fairly pricy shop but I still managed to get three beautiful aquamarine clusters.

In the late afternoon, we wandered through a large area set aside by the city for street vendors. Not much of interest to us there (a ton of crafts) with the exception of 5 Himba women selling wares and charging for pictures. The Himba are noted for daubing their hair, faces, and whole bodies including clothes with red mud. From a distance, they look like red boulders in the red rock country of Moab.

April 22. Laurie and I took a long walk along the beach before breakfast. Then into the van for the trip back to Windhoek. At the edge of town, Doug stopped at the home of a businessman and collector who sells the lesser specimens that he gets along with the better ones he keeps. And what fine rejects they were!! I got a truly beautiful 6 by 6 inch specimen of diopside and malachite on a shattukite matrix along with some smaller diopsides. Wow.

On the way to Windhoek, we stopped at an intersection of the road leading to Spitzkopje Mountain off in the distance. At this place, perhaps 40 women in small stands sell specimens from all of the country. We paused there for an hour happily buying lesser but very cheap specimens of aqua in schorl, topaz, garnets, etc. Truly fun. Google Spitzkopje and you will find a site with some pictures of these stands.

Then on to the Hotel Christoph, Windhoek.

April 23. The last day of the tour. Doug, Colin and I head for the Ministry of Mines for mineral export permits. I needed a permit because Laurie and I were leaving separately after our own three-day extended stay in Windhoek. No bureaucracy here. The ministry process was quick and easy. Interestingly, no one asked for the permit at the airport.

April 24. Doug and company left for the airport leaving Laurie and me wondering why on earth we had decided to stay an extra three days. It turns out, there is very little to do immediately outside of Windhoek, and because the town is so small, there are not three days of things to do in town. Nevertheless, we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly between wandering around town, reading by the pool and dining at the incredible Heinitsburg castle just up the street and a fantastic outside restaurant overlooking the city. We also found a rock shop not visited by the group before they left where I got some genuine Tsumeb diopases at a high price but the real thing.

April 27. To the airport. In my case, the carry on backpack had 45 pounds of my best specimens and the check in bags had another 65 pounds. Laurie had somewhat less but enough to totally torque her back out of whack by the time we got home. Almost all of our specimens arrived home intact.

A wonderful trip and highly recommended. You can get a hold of Doug at the website mentioned in the first paragraph for information about future tours. This is probably the best tour for a mineral lover available.

John Scully