

Rock & Gem



IS IT CALCITE OR DOLOMITE? 10
These carbonates have chemistry. **By Bob Jones**



ASTORITE 16
An attractive pink gem beaming with mining lore. **By Helen Serras-Herman**



A LUCKY ROCKHOUND'S 80-YEAR MINERAL ODYSSEY 22
Part VIII: China becomes a cornucopia of minerals. **By Bob Jones**



LAPIDARY: GEMSTONE JEWELRY BOX 30
A lapidary challenge with pleasing results. **By Thomas Gangi**



THE QUARTZSITE SHOW 34
Rockhounds gather in the Arizona desert. **By Thomas Farley**

ROCK & GEM KIDS 46

FIELD TRIP: UTAH'S "DIRTY DIAMONDS" 50

Gypsum and other minerals from the Great Salt Lake. **By Alice Sikorski**

THE GREAT URANIUM RUSH 58
Find specimens and history in Colorado and Utah. **By Steve Voynick**



REGULAR COLUMNS

Field Notes.....	6
Lapidary of the Month....	8
Bench Tips.....	28
Rock Science.....	48
What to Cut.....	56
Picks & Pans.....	66
Show Dates.....	70
On the Rocks.....	80
Parting Shot.....	82

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ON THE COVER

Alternating magnesium and calcium atoms create the offset effect on the faces of this dolomite specimen, which is crowned with purple fluorite. Quartz crystals ring the base of the piece.

THE QUARTZSITE SHOW

Rockhounds Gather in the Arizona Desert



THE LAST CAMEL
OF THE
HI JOLLY
BORN SOMEWHERE IN
ABOUT 1888
DIED AT QUARTZSITE
DECEMBER 19 1915
CAME TO THIS COUNTRY
FEBRUARY 10 1914
CAMEL DRIVER - PACIFIC
SCOUTS - OVER THE
YEARS A FAITHFUL
TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT
ARIZONA
HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT
1915

This pyramidal monument at Quartzsite's Hi Jolly Cemetery marks the gravesite of Hadji Ali, camel driver and government scout.

Story and Photos by
Thomas Farley

Quartzsite, Arizona, is a town and a meeting place. In winter, it is a gathering place for the clan of RV-driving snowbirds, flea market enthusiasts, ham radio operators, off-road motorists, geocachers, and rockhounds. Especially rockhounds. Quartzsite is rock and gem heaven. Situated in southwest Arizona, Quartzsite is 244 miles east of Los Angeles and 127 miles west of Phoenix. Las Vegas is 213 miles to the north.

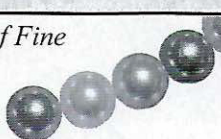


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THE Quartzsite SHOW

The town of about 3,500 year-round residents is bordered on the south by the Dome Rock, Castle Dome, and Kofa mountains. In the heyday of mining in the area, 39 mines operated around Quartzsite—mostly gold mines, with one or two cinnabar and lead mines. A profusion of old mines and collecting sites gave Quartzsite a reputation as a rock-hounding paradise in the mid-1960s.

In 1856, Charles "Charly" Tyson dug a well that would provide water to cross-country travelers, nearby ranchers, and mine workers in the surrounding mountains. He built a small adobe structure and called it Fort Tyson. It eventually became a stagecoach stop on the route between Ehrenburg and Prescott, Arizona. By that time, one building had become several and the compound took on the fuller name of Tyson's Well Stage Station.

Quartzsite owes its present appellation to postal naming conventions. The postmark "Tyson's" served the town until 1895, when mail service ended due to the local postmaster falling ill. A new post office opened in 1896 at another location. The Postmaster General decreed that discontinued place names couldn't be used again, and furthermore that only one-word names were acceptable. "Quartz Site" is what the townsfolk wanted, in reference to all the quartz that could be found at a nearby stamp mill. The postal service combined the words into "Quartzsite".

While Quartzsite hosts several rock shows during the winter months, the largest production is the Quartzsite Improvement Association (QIA) PowWow Gem and Mineral Show

in January. In 2017, it featured more than 550 spaces and 272 vendors and was put on by 300 volunteers. Sellers' wares had to consist of 75% gem-, rock-, mineral- or jewelry-related items.

The QIA PowWow, as it is known, started in 1967, with 18 locals selling items to about 1,000 people in a small school building. The event evolved into what may now be the largest public rock and gem show in the country. Over the past 50 years, the entire town has become dotted with rock shops, auction houses, and trading posts of all kinds. While I was there, a venue announced the sale of a pallet of American flag products, 4,000 helium balloons, and more than 10,000 old Playboy magazines. Essentially, if something has been made, it's probably been sold in Quartzsite.

Running concurrently with the PowWow at another site, the Desert Gardens Gem and Mineral Show concentrates mostly on rocks, with a little less jewelry than the PowWow. Then there's the Tyson Wells Rock and Gem Show. And the Prospectors' Panorama.

Quartzsite's popularity as America's largest yard sale and winter retreat probably peaked in 2000. In January 1999, Huell Howser, California travelog producer *par excellence*, took his film crew outside the state for the first time to cover Quartzsite. In a warm and engaging hour, which is free to view online (<https://tinyurl.com/jy3d883>), Howser interviewed many townsfolk, mostly about the history of the community. Then, in 2000, *National Geographic* came to visit. They called Quartzsite Nowhere, Arizona. Until November:

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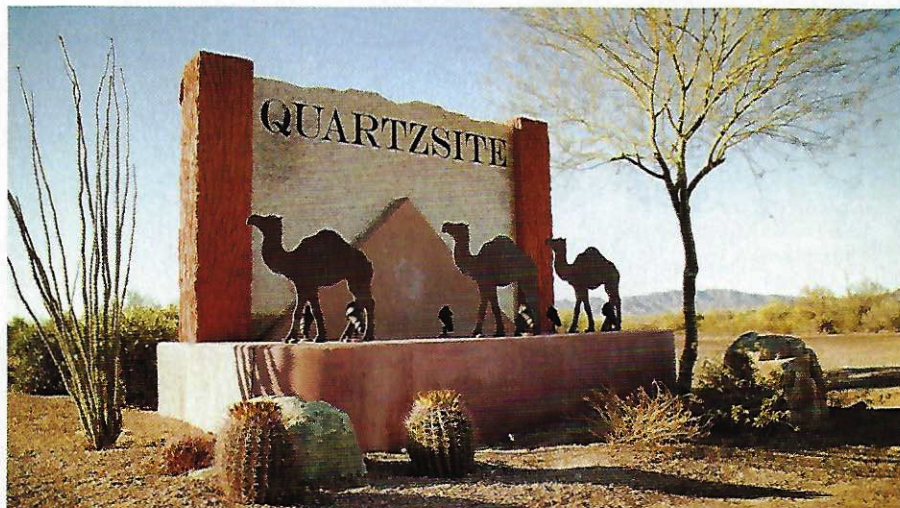
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Quartzsite lives the legend of Hi Jolly and his camels by incorporating Egyptian imagery throughout the town.



Don Buford, of the Dust Devil Mining Co., offered rough and cut Oregon sunstone and beads for sale.

SOME QUARTZSITE TIPS

- If you want to get a motel room in Quartzsite, book it a few months early.
- People also stay in Ehrenberg, Arizona, or Blythe, California, about 18 miles and 22 miles away, respectively. Parker, AZ is about 40 miles north on I-95, but the road crosses many washes and could be impassable in a rainstorm.
- Many sellers and restaurants take only cash, so be prepared. The only bank in town is the Horizon Community Bank.
- Take a notebook to keep track of purchases, vendors and details.
- Bring sunscreen and a cap for sunny days; a raincoat and a heavier coat in case rain and wind come up.
- Don't forget your loupe and a camera.
- Arizona is on Mountain Standard Time. Most things get going around 10 a.m.
- Look out for pedestrians while driving at night. They are everywhere and all dressed in black. Bring your patience—you're among friends.

Consult the Quartzsite Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Web site, www.quartzsitetourism.com, for information on events, lodging, campsites, restaurants, attractions, and other local amenities.

Keep abreast of Quartzsite happenings with the *Desert Messenger*: <http://MyQuartzsite.com>

Pick up these publications in Quartzsite:

- Quartzsite, Arizona, Visitor Guide
- Quartzsite EZ-Guide (a map of vendor spaces for the four major shows)
- QIA PowWow Gem and Mineral Show Guide
- The Quartzsite Nugget and Winter Visitors Guide
- Where IZZAT Business Map (\$2, absolutely vital for navigating Quartzsite)
- *Desert Messenger News* (community paper)

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THE Quartzsite SHOW

"Then, like a mob of chattering starlings settling into a too-small tree, the snowbirds start landing in November. By mid-January, the mechanical car counter at the Interstate 10 exit is ticking off 26,000 vehicles a day. Within weeks 175,000 RVs cram inches apart into 79 trailer parks, onto front yards, and spill out seven miles on either side of town. Every year more than a million people reset their internal navigation and drive from Everywhere, North America, to this western Arizona dot on the map. Luxury motor homes, fifth wheels, cab-over campers, trailers, and converted school buses plunk down on the same patch of land."

—"America's Largest Parking Lot", by
Cary Wolinsky, *National Geographic*,

January 2001

My visit started on Wednesday, Jan., 18, 2017. There were many empty RV parking spaces in town and space looked plentiful on the BLM land outside of town, but since few venues charge for admission or parking, there's no real way to keep count of visitors. The BLM did tell me that approximately 28,401 people stayed at their free and pay areas in fiscal year 2016. And the Arizona Department of Transportation says traffic on Main Street now averages 12,400 vehicles in each direction over the course of a year. The city Web site claims 2,000,000 annual visitors. Whatever the statistics, the rock shows continue to draw vendors in record numbers, with waiting lists common.

Wednesday was ideal for the PowWow: bright sunshine and short sleeve temperatures. I regretted not bringing sunscreen and I later bought a hat from the Quartzsite Gem & Mineral Club. The PowWow is located just off Main Street at 235 East Ironwood Drive. Follow the cars. The parking lot doesn't seem obvious, but keep moving along and you'll find it; everything funnels to the main lot. Two tractor-pulled shuttles take visitors to any entrance they like. Drivers give everybody time to get on, including those with walkers. The shuttle, parking and admission are all free.

I came simply to look around, this being my first time in Quartzsite. Listing everything I saw would be like reciting a lengthy gem and mineral guide. There was Bruneau jasper, lapis lazuli, malachite, and Oregon sunstone. One booth

sold "Hot Rocks", with a Geiger counter next to them in case you had doubts. Another vendor had more than 100 sample boxes filled with different rocks and minerals, all arranged in alphabetical order—21 boxes under "C" alone. That assortment included Terlingua, Texas, fluorescent calcite, Coontail quartz from Magnet, Arkansas, and coyote teeth from British Columbia. And that was just one seller's table.

A dinosaur sculpture greeted me on one aisle. On the next, oil paintings on marble. As I wandered, I came across Timothy Harned's tables. He owns Bustin's Glass and Minerals. I last saw Tim at the 2016 Logandale Fall Festival in Logandale, Nevada. The promoters had advertised a Rock and Gem Faire at the event, but Tim turned out to be the sole vendor. It was good to see and talk to him again. Again, Quartzsite is a meeting and gathering place.

The QIA building is the PowWow's center. It holds a limited number of dealers, display cases, and the kitchen and dining hall. Food is sold throughout the day, with all proceeds supporting the QIA and its many community causes. The dining hall is a great place to reconnoiter with your group, study the vendor list, and then plan what to see next.

The PowWow this year was held Jan. 18-22. The Desert Gardens Rock, Gem, and Mineral Show ran concurrently, but lasted through Feb. 28. This venue is on the other side of Interstate 10 at 1050 Kuehn Street. It has no parking lot shuttle service. A walk around Desert Gardens was similarly staggering, especially because of larger material. This is the place to find big pieces of rough rock. Need a spectacular garden rock? You'll find it at Desert Gardens. This venue was less busy than the PowWow and had a more relaxed feel. You should visit both.

But the appeal of Quartzsite extends beyond the rock shows to dedicated rock and gem shops and clubs that operate throughout the winter. The Quartzsite Roadrunner Gem & Mineral Club is one of the largest and most organized rock clubs in the country. Membership is only \$15 per year, and they are active from October through March. It holds field trips every Tuesday through the season and twice a day during the PowWow. Non-members pay \$2 per trip. During this year's PowWow, the Roadrunners went to find bacon rock, desert roses, geodes, apache tears, and

THE Quartzsite SHOW

green, banded rhyolite, among other things. Round-trip mileage ranged from 40 to 162 miles over a variety of roads, many of them rough (<http://qrgmc.org/index.html>).

The Quartzsite Metal Detecting Club consists of coin shooters and gold prospectors. Membership is a terrific bargain at \$20 per person. This lets you in on the club's 14 claims, encompassing 280 acres of gold-bearing ground. The club is most active from November through mid-March; however, you are free to prospect in summer if you can stand the 118°F heat. If you are a coin shooter, you can participate in their many winter season hunts for \$20 each (<http://quartzsitemetaldetectingclub.com/>). I stayed in Quartzsite for three days, but with so many club activities, a week would have been a better choice. And then there are the stores.

Quartzsite is peppered with brick-and-mortar and pop-up stores selling rocks, gems and minerals. Quartzsite's business and souvenir map reveals retail shops like Gem World, T-Rocks, Sunwest Silver, and the less obvious Hardies Beads and Jewelry. That last store is a Quartzsite institution. While mainly selling collecting supplies and beads, they have an outstanding rock collection installed on their interior east wall. Their museum contains quite a few specimens from the Quartzsite area, including gold in quartz.

Gold prospectors should make certain to stop in at Blake and Lisa Harmon's Miners Depot, on North Central Boulevard. Miners Depot is a

desert prospecting store and the unofficial clearinghouse for gold information in the Quartzsite area. Inquire about the metal detecting club. As with everything in Quartzsite, hours are seasonal (www.minersdepot.com).

While shopping, don't miss a chance to visit the Tyson's Wells Stage Station Museum. Admission is free, and enthusiastic volunteers will tell you the history of Quartzsite as a stage station and a supply depot for nearby mines. Speaking of which, outside in back is the original assay office of the Mariquita mine. The many items speak to the everyday life of miners. The volunteer I spoke with was also a member of the metal detecting club. He discussed at length the many mines surrounding Quartzsite. Be sure to notice the museum ceiling made of saguaro ribs.

Other winter shows include the Prospector's Panorama (<http://prospectorspanorama.com/>), the Tyson Wells Rock and Gem Show (www.tysonwells.com/rock---gem-show.html), and the Gold Show (<https://quartzsitegoldshowcom.wordpress.com/>). These links have information for the 2017 shows. Keep checking back for 2018 show dates.

Quartzsite doesn't take itself too seriously. The square dance club is called the Cactus Dodgers, a propane supply company is called Passmore Gas, and one street is named, well, No Name Street. Camel references abound, and you should know the story of them and of Quartzsite's most famous citizen before you visit.

In 1857, the War Department directed Edward Beale to pioneer a wagon trail from New Mexico to California. In his company were about 75 camels, acquired from North Africa and the Middle East. This constituted a great experiment as to the worthiness of camels to serve as pack animals in the great Southwest. On this journey as packer and guide was one Phillip Tedro, born in present-day Turkey and later a Syrian countryman. After converting to Islam, Tedro called himself Hadji Ali. The men in Beale's company had difficulty pronouncing the name, however, and instead called him "Hi Jolly".

Though Beale completed the journey "without an accident of any kind whatsoever", the troupe of camels was abandoned (*It Happened in Arizona*, by James Crutchfield, Falcon Press, 1994). Speculation has it that the camels' sensitive hooves, although perfectly suited to loose soft sand, could not endure the Sonoran Desert's often rocky surface. The 2014 AAA Arizona and New Mexico TourBook adds, "The camels adapted well to their new environment but were never used successfully, partly because the sight of them caused horses, mules and cattle to stampede".

Hi Jolly bought a few camels from the company and returned with them to Arizona, where he engaged in various pursuits, including mining and acting as a government scout. He became an American citizen, married in Tucson, and finally settled in Quartzsite. At a certain point, he released his camels into the desert. He died in 1902 and is buried in



Wide aisles easily accommodated people on the first day of the 2017 PowWow. The short-sleeve weather was spectacular.

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Quartzsite lives the legend of Hi Jolly and his camels by incorporating Egyptian imagery throughout the town.

Quartzsite's cemetery. In 1935, the state government built a pyramidal monument to Hi Jolly. According to the 2017 Quartzsite Visitor Guide (<https://tinyurl.com/hmqnyn7>), it is the town's most visited spot. The legacy of camels echoes throughout Quartzsite in postcards, sculptures, maps and guidebooks.

At any show, you'll find miners who mined their own material and then fashioned it into polished stones, cabs or jewelry. It is this direct connection that makes buying more personable than purchasing a rock through eBay or from another secondhand source. Two of my talks with vendors were memorable.

Karen Britton, of Britton Apache Turquoise, has been mining and working variscite and turquoise for 29 years in Lander County, Nevada. Her late husband, Lee Britton, had even earlier ties to turquoise and turquoise-like rocks. He first staked a Lander County claim in 1974. Their most famous property was the Apache turquoise mine. Karen mentioned a *Rock & Gem* article, written by Mark Hatch, in which he described how he produced a stunning necklace starting with Apache mine rough ("Make an Apache Turquoise Necklace", January 1971). I read the piece later, and it was indeed a tribute to the black-included stones Britton regularly mines. I bought a cabochon from Karen, partly as a collectible and partly to support her continuing efforts.

After the show, I read up on the Apache mine. Two writers noted that Apache Mine material once thought turquoise has now been identified as variscite (*Minerals of Nevada*, by Stephen B.

Castor and Gregory Ferdock, Nevada Bureau of Mines and Geology Special Publication 31, 2004). What impressed me on that Wednesday, however, was Karen's dedication to her beautiful rocks. She soldiers on with no Web presence, appearing only at shows like those in Quartzsite. Besides talking to this veteran, I was also struck by a young couple just making their presence known in the rock business.

John Keady and Chelsea Thompson operate Rockchuck Gem and Mineral Gallery in tiny Schurz, Nevada. It's just north of Walker Lake in Mineral County on Interstate 95. The pair create cabs and jewelry, notably using turquoise and variscite from different Nevada locations. They also mine their own Hellsfire agate. Keady is a stonemason by training. I vaguely recalled seeing a rock shop sign near Schurz, but I had never investigated it. Now, the shop had come to me.

The last time I had passed Walker Lake, I'd stopped to read different informational signs. They were installed on impressive monuments made of local stone. It turns out that Keady built one of them. What were the odds I'd meet the builder of something I noted on a lonely road to Reno? And what were the chances I'd run into two such young and creative people almost 600 miles from their home? As I said before, Quartzsite is a gathering and meeting place. For people you've already met, and for people you have yet to meet. ♡

Thomas Farley is an ardent rockhound living in Las Vegas. His Web site is <http://thomasfarleyblog.com>.