

Looking for Jade in Myanmar

by Ken Rock

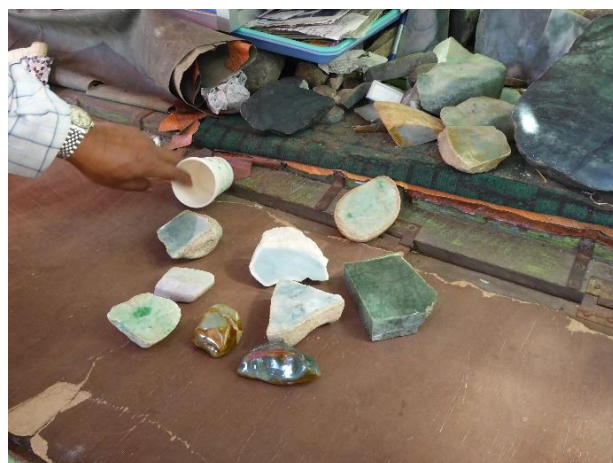
Being a mineral collector always adds an extra fun dimension to travel. I recently had the good fortune to go on an organized group vacation trip to Myanmar that included stops at many pagodas, stupas (pagodas with no doors), Buddhist temples, and working pottery villages. We also did lots of looking at gemstones and jade that Myanmar (formerly called Burma) is famous for—among other things.

Two highlights that I will mention here are an early-morning visit to the famous jade market in Mandalay and a trip to the national gem museum in Yangon (formerly called Rangoon). My first exposure to jade in Myanmar was close to the hotel—even the streets of Yangon have an area where the jade vendors seem to congregate, offering a variety of types and colors of commercial-quality jade.

Mandalay Jade Market

The jade market of Mandalay is the world's largest. It is located in central Myanmar, south of Mogok, the area famous for fabulous rubies. Each year, billions of dollars worth of jade are cut, polished, and traded in this market.

My group was in the area for a boat trip on the Irrawaddy River, but my suggestion for a group visit was rejected for lack of time (and, of course, not everyone is interested in jade). Our guide said that he would take me and other interested travelers to the market the next morning, but only if we would promise to get back in time for the morning's scheduled activities.



Upon arrival, we paid a small admission fee and noticed that the market was almost empty because we had arrived before trading had begun. Our guide chatted amiably with some young guys in the street who, we were surprised to learn, were professional jade buyers.

All photos by Ken Rock.



Buying jade, as it turns out, is always a gamble. The idea is to make an educated guess about the quality of a boulder based on appearance (such as cracks and uniformity) and small “windows” cut into the stone to reveal color—at least in that part of the stone. These folks are experts and do it every day.

The Myanmar government also charges a tax at the wholesale jade markets. But it is not clear to me when this tax is paid or, for that matter, how much of the jade market eludes government taxation altogether.

We did manage to see some jade cutters at work. By the time we left, a few of the stores outside of the jade market were open. Although I am most fond of lavender jade, I found the Imperial Jade the most interesting because having a top color is only part of the game. Another key factor affecting value is translucency. Holding some of the finest pieces up to the light reveals this remarkable property of high-end jade. The bottom line: It’s all about color, uniformity, and translucency—but mostly color.

National Gem Museum

This museum, on the top floor of an older office building in Yangon, is basically one large room that demonstrates the broad range of minerals and gemstones found in Myanmar. About half of the room is dedicated to jade, with the remainder showing many of the ore minerals that are found in all parts of the country.

On the lower floors of the building are government-approved vendors selling both tourist items and low-



value products. A few vendors have some very cool minerals, including very large nongemmy sapphire crystals, chunks of ruby and spinel crystals, and Myanmar’s unique red “mushroom” tourmaline.

A boulder in front of the museum (shown below) is said to be the world’s largest jadeite boulder. ➤

