

MIRAGE

IN THE OREGON DESERT

A mysterious search for the Oregon Sunstone

Written and Photographed by Kim Cooper Findling

I waved my cell phone over my head towards the clear high desert sky like the classic fool, hoping for enough coverage to check my messages. We were in the middle of the Warner Valley in southeastern Oregon en route to Oregon sunstone country, but I still hadn't heard back from the miners we were supposed to meet there. Finally, one bar of service, then two—but no message. Not that I really expected one. From the get-go, Oregon sunstone miners had been pretty tough to track down.

A couple of months before, I'd reached High Desert Gems and Minerals via email. A short reply came from a woman named Jessica, who apologized for the delay—she and the company owner, Chris, were in Nevada, busy selling gemstones extracted from their various mine holdings. Of course I was welcome to visit the Spectrum Sunstone Mine in eastern Oregon in March, she wrote, even though it wasn't officially open to the public until May. *Our mine is always occupied by personnel. Just let me know when you want to come out!*



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Oregon sunstones are mineral crystal gemstones—plagioclase feldspar, to be precise. Formed in lava flows from the Steens Mountains 13 to 14 million years ago, they are found primarily in a seven square mile stretch of the southeastern Oregon high desert. The lava spent thousands of years under the enormous lakes of Lake County. Eventually the lakes dwindled, the lava began to decompose, and glimmering gemstones were revealed in the otherwise austere sagebrush landscape of the Warner Valley west of Hart Mountain.

Sunstones turn up in the lore and artifacts of the Northern Paiute tribes, who are said to have believed that the gems harnessed the healing powers of the sun. The miners who followed had slightly different ideas, mainly regarding profit. Tiffany's of New York owned one of the first claims in the valley over 100 years ago, until they realized they couldn't manage the wily desert miners from clear across the country. More localized, if still wily, industry has been in place in the Warner Valley since. In 1970, the Bureau of Land Management set aside a 4000-acre public Sunstone Gem Collection area to maintain some democratic access to the gems, and in 1987, the governor declared the sunstone the official Oregon State gemstone.

Still, the stones remained relatively unknown. Most people hadn't heard of them. I, myself, a lifelong Oregon resident, had never seen one. It was my kind of adventure: a little bit treasure hunt, middle-of-nowhere mystery, and quirk—all totally Oregon.

Jessica and I settled on a date and I booked lodging at a small cabin in the tiny town of Plush—the only cabin available to rent in Plush, in fact. But a couple of weeks later, when I contacted her again before our trip, I got no reply. I called her cell number and that of the mine owner, Chris. Both mailboxes were full.

High Desert Gems and Minerals owns mines all over the American West—gold mines near Mono Lake in California, turquoise mines in Nevada, a tourmaline mine in San Diego County, and several others here and there that shelter opals, chalcedony and variscite. All are in remote locations, and it didn't surprise me that it might be tricky to track these folks down.

We set out anyway. My two children and a traveling companion loaded the car with provisions and set forth into the desert with a spirit of adventure, open to whatever experience came our way.

Summer Lake Hot Springs is north of Paisley, about two hours south of Bend and en route to sunstone country. We stopped for a soak on our way south, and to chat with proprietor Duane Graham. Graham defected from Portland a couple of decades

ago to buy a broken down hot spring resort in the Oregon Outback. An old bath house shelters a pool, and outdoors, a trio of soaking pools give great views of the alkaline Summer Lake.

"Gemstones are really political," he said when we explained the purpose of our journey. The Oregon sunstone wasn't even officially declared a gemstone until the 1970s—purveyors of diamonds and rubies didn't want the competition to be officially sanctioned. Our sunstones aren't on par with truly expensive gemstones anyway, partly because they are so unique. Varieties of sunstones are found in other parts of the United States and in Norway, but the Oregon variety are the only ones that contain metallic copper, called shiller, which functions like tiny mirrors in the stones, flashing at angles, resulting in a variety of appearances. "They also come in all kinds of colors," explained

Graham. The sunstone is remarkable that way—for a single gem from a single source to come in a range of colors and appearances is unusual. This variation is precisely the stone's limitation in the free market—a mainstream jeweler will never find enough matching stones to produce a line of, say, engagement rings.

Before we continued on towards Plush, Graham sent us on our way with some advice. "The public area is pretty picked over, but you can pay to dig at the private mines," he said. "It might cost you a couple hundred dollars, but the mine will buy back what you collect."

"How many will we find?" asked the children, as I pon-

FROM TOP: Onsite at the Spectrum Mine. | Oregon sunstones from the public collection area.
PREVIOUS SPREAD: The entrance to the Spectrum Mine.



FORMED IN LAVA FLOWS FROM THE STEENS MOUNTAINS 13 TO 14 MILLION YEARS AGO, SUNSTONES ARE FOUND PRIMARILY IN A SEVEN SQUARE MILE STRETCH OF THE SOUTHEASTERN OREGON HIGH DESERT.

dered shelling out a hundred bucks to dig through rock. "Do we get to keep them?" I still hadn't heard from Jessica, and so responded, "I don't know. We'll just have to see."

There is no quick way to get to Plush, Oregon, and why be in a hurry anyway? After a satisfying and utterly authentic eastern Oregon dinner of hamburgers and tuna melts at the Pioneer Saloon and Restaurant in Paisley, we journeyed on south, then west over the Warner Mountain Range into the Warner Valley, arriving at our cabin well after dark.

In the morning, the bright light of the sun rising over Hart Mountain roused us early. The Warner Valley is beautiful and peaceful, surrounded by rimrock and capped by blue skies. Downtown Plush consists of the Hart Mountain General Store and Saloon (saloons being popular in these parts) and several homes and empty storefronts, many of which are for sale. We asked the older gentleman behind the counter at the store for directions as a grey-bearded and suntanned man in faded camouflage entered the store and headed for the ancient coffee machine in the corner.

"This is one of the miners from out there," indicated the storeowner, and then told the man we were headed to sunstone country.

The miner regarded us for a moment, stirring creamer into

his paper cup. "Spectrum's open," he said. "Other than that it's just me out there, running my equipment."

I asked him how long he'd been mining for sunstone. "Two years," he said. "I bought two claims, 45 acres."

"How's it working out?" I asked tentatively, wondering how he'd take the question.

"We're all fishermen out there," he said, pausing before the punch line. "We're all liars." Then he smiled. "I'm enjoying my retirement," he said, and wandered out of the store.

By the door, a glass case held a few dozen pieces of sunstone jewelry. Earrings in yellow and pink and red and even blue and green glimmered under hot lights. "Can we buy some?" my daughter Libby asked. Sunstone, I'd read, sells for \$100 to \$300 a carat; maybe up to \$500 a carat for a really nice stone. Small paper price tags hanging from the jewelry in the case displayed penciled-in prices from \$50 to \$200. Just as I was about to herd my party away from the sparkly objects and outside, the miner popped his head back in the door. "Take lots of water," he said.

North of Plush, the Warner Valley opens up. Wide flat acres of sagebrush and rabbitbrush dominate the landscape. The long, table-top expanse of Hart Mountain and rimrock slice of Poker

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Jim Rim track the eastern edge of the valley; the Warner Range is hillier to the west. Above is endless sky.

I always love the desert for its ability to clarify. It's difficult to keep any city-type problems in your mind out here. Today, it was pushing 60 degrees and sunny, with a chilly wind tracking off of Hart Mountain. The paved road terminated after 10 miles; another 15 on gravel and we arrived at a small parking area with a few picnic tables. This was the public collection area; within the boundaries marked by orange plastic posts, we could collect whatever we wanted. For the best luck, an interpretive sign directed, we should venture to the far edges of the designated area.

I recalled the words of the miner in the store: "Most of the good stones are under basalt. You won't get through it without at least a pick." Serious miners use heavy equipment, like excavators, to break through the rock layer. Assuming we'd be meeting up with the Spectrum miners, I hadn't even brought along a shovel.

"Go look in the dirt for something shiny," I instructed my children, pointing to the desert landscape just beyond the parking lot and feeling like I was sending them on a wild goose chase. But within minutes, my daughter Libby came galloping back, thrusting a small hand at me in which rested three small stones in varying yellows.

We stayed for over an hour, wandering and peering at the desert floor. The children gathered dozens of pebble- to rock-sized Oregon sunstones, tucking them into their pockets, as my traveling companion and I breathed in the crisp dry desert air and gazed at the impressive mass of Hart Mountain on the horizon.

"Yes," I said to my daughters, to their delight. "You may keep them."

There is no cell service in the Warner Valley, but from the sunstone collection area I had enough coverage to check my messages. Still no word from Jessica. Using the directions provided by the miner back in the Hart Mountain Store, whose name I never asked, we ventured towards Spectrum anyway.

The sign at the entrance was hand-lettered and decorated with a rainbow burst. Welcome to the Spectrum Mine, it read. *Oregon's first and oldest sunstone mine, est. 1972. A dinosaur*

of a backhoe appeared next as we traveled the narrow gravel road, looking long past its functional days. Another backhoe and conveyor belt, as well as a smattering of old trailers and small makeshift buildings, marked the entirety of the structural existence of the Spectrum Mine. Quirky signage was installed here and there—the "Bear's Den" indicated a giant pit, a strange tight bunch of tired birch trees was labeled the "Shady Silver-leaf Sunstone Grove," and it was directed that "All adults must be accompanied by a Miner."

I saw no sign of life. My daughter Maris thought she saw someone inside a dilapidated Airstream trailer labeled "office and gift shop," but it turned out to be her own reflection in the mirror. We explored the premises for a half-hour, peering into vast rocky holes, examining an ancient sofa recliner deteriorating in the desert sun, coming across various quirky statuary and detritus, and pondering the isolated, oddball and eerily forsaken peculiarity of the whole place. I tried to imagine staying here for any length of time, digging through the earth in search of treasure. I remembered what a sunstone jeweler I'd talked to back in Bend had said—"It takes a special kind of person to mine the desert. Anybody who wants to live out there—well, there's just a lot of characters."

As we showed the kids how to filter rough rock through the mesh holes of a pallet of mining screens we came across, I half-expected someone to finally appear. No one did. Taking nothing with us, we went on our way.

Hart Mountain is a massive fault block mountain, on top of which is 422 square miles of protected wildlife area—the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge. There is also a natural hot springs. The waning hours of the afternoon revealed a beautiful sky, brilliant blue with wispy clouds. All four of us sunk happily into what is essentially a very inviting, perfectly hot mud hole on top of the world (Hart's highest peak is over 8000 feet). The kids followed the hot water source down a trickling stream to a small concrete pool surrounded by a rock wall, emerging

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Hart Mountain General Store and Saloon | Sorting trays at the Spectrum Mine.



positively covered in mud and as utterly happy as the proverbial pig.

Three gentlemen had just pulled into the parking lot in a mini van as we caught up with the girls; within minutes, the conversation turned to sunstones.

"We didn't even know what a sunstone was," said John, of Eugene, who was traveling with his two grown sons. This was their first time out in this part of Oregon, and they looked relaxed and excited with discovery. "We ended up with about 150. Do you want to see them?"

I did. John laid the stones on a piece of paper across the hood of my car. They were beautiful in a rough kind of way: mostly yellow in color, chunky and glinting, larger than the ones my girls had collected. John and his sons had visited Spectrum Mine just hours before we had, where they had encountered a temporary resident miner named Jacob. "He said they weren't really open, but that we could dig for a fee. He asked for \$30 for an hour and a half, but I only had \$29 in my pocket."

Jacob had told them that since the gemstone industry cracked down on the Chinese in 2009, who had been making fake sunstones for years, Oregon sunstones were getting more popular. The mine is slammed during the summer months, he

TIFFANY'S OF NEW YORK OWNED ONE OF THE FIRST CLAIMS IN THE VALLEY OVER 100 YEARS AGO, UNTIL THEY REALIZED THEY COULDN'T MANAGE THE WILY DESERT MINERS FROM CLEAR ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

said. Diggers can keep what they unearth and hire a gem cutter, locally out of Lakeview, for \$10 a carat or so, or for much cheaper if you ship them to a faceter in China. Sunstones sell well on eBay, Jacob said, sometimes going for \$80 for the biggest specimens.

John's wife's birthday was coming up, and he and his sons planned to present her with the 150 sunstones in a vase. The trio drove away, towards French Glen, without trying out the hot springs.

On the way back to Bend the next day, I received an email from Chris, the Spectrum Mine owner. It would be fine for me to come out and visit, he wrote.

Jessica was in Mexico, which is why she hadn't responded. I replied to his email, thanking him, and inquired if he might be available for a phone interview. The email bounced back, undeliverable.

As we cruised north past Summer Lake, the sky glowed a tourmaline blue and the alkaline lake reflected opalescence. The girls were sorting and resorting their sunstone cache in the backseat, picking through favorites and admiring beauties. "I can't wait to show my friends my sunstones," said my daughter Maris. "I bet no one else has seen one." ▲



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