“Alam pul, Khatum! Shatot pul, Khatum! Poliz stashon Aliabad, Sinkanderpur, Khatum! Gilgit - Skardu Road bilkul bandh hai!” My head was reeling as I stood carefully listening to a man from the Northern Areas, reciting in Urdu a litany of destroyed bridges and police stations in the Gilgit area. Five days of sectarian violence had been touched off by a disagreement over the wording of a passage in a school text-book!

Once again I had returned to Peshawar, Pakistan in the sweltering heat of June, having planned a trip to the cooler Northern Areas as I had done innumerable times before. But it seemed highly unlikely that the journey north would be possible: the Karakoram Highway and the Gilgit-Skardu Road were cut by destroyed bridges and blocked by landslides caused not by geologic forces, but by local militants with explosives. Gilgit itself was under a 22-hour-a-day curfew; people had only from two to four p.m. to shop the local bazaars for essential commodities. Most discouraging was word that the road would not re-open for 10 or 11 days, which meant that I would not have enough time to complete this lengthy trip. Earthquakes, landslides, and floods from spring snow melt-off are nature’s usual way of stopping me in these rugged mountains—did my plans have to be affected by human destructiveness too? Such things happened on almost every single trip!

I was five weeks into this journey, having left my home in Colorado on May 9th. Using up airline miles that had been accumulated for a free ticket, I had taken a direct flight from Denver to Frankfurt, and then onward to a cool, drizzly Prague. After a spring spent writing articles for Mineral News and for the English ExtraLapis on Pakistan, and an extended five-week East Coast selling trip, I desperately needed a short break before facing the rigors of Asia. The five days flew by, with the first several of them spent in Kladno with my friend Ivo, relaxing and buying a few minerals from his stock, and the last three in Příbram, a world-famous mineral locale. But I devoted those three days to outdoor athletic pursuits in the unusually cold weather. The Czechs have a patron saint for every day, and the three days from May 12 to 14 honor St. Pankrac, St. Servac, and St. Bonifac, referred to as “the three frozen men”: it seems that over an extended
period of history, winter has breathed its last on these days nearly every year. As I have repeatedly come to the Czech Republic on these days for quite a few years, I can say that, in my experience at least, the legend is true.

Despite the weather, my friends Robert and Vashik and I ran to the top of the highest mountain in the central Czech Republic (Mt. Temsen) on successive days, following trails through the woods so beautiful and ideal for “trail running” that I was tempted to write an article about them for *Trail Running* magazine. But sometimes things are so nice that I selfishly want to keep them secret so as not to have a flood of people come and change the environment. A 100° C dry sauna each night in a mountain cottage and a four-hour mountain bike ride through a beautifully forested former military reserve both relaxed and revitalized me for my Asian journey.

On May 16th I started the long flight to Pakistan from Prague, with plane changes in Munich and Dubai, where I took a quick sauna at the fitness center in the airport and loaded up on my favorite Middle Eastern delicacies. Omani dates stuffed with almonds, pistachios, and sweet halwah, along with gifts for the family that I stay with in Pakistan, filled my oversized shopping bags. I boarded the Pakistan International Airline flight to Peshawar via Lahore. Twenty-three hours after leaving my friend’s apartment in Příbram, I arrived in a sunny, hot, and dry Peshawar, about 25 miles from the Afghan border in west-central Pakistan. My longtime friend, Amir Ullah, met me at the airport, along with his son, and after a warm welcome we drove the few miles to his house for a few hours’ rest, before driving down to the mineral market at Namak Mandi in the late afternoon, after the worst of the 42° C mid-day heat had passed.

I started the slow hunt for good mineral specimens that continued for six days with little variation in my daily schedule: wake up at 5 a.m., go to the “jogger’s park” and run 10 to 12 miles, return to the house for breakfast and a half-hour nap, and view specimens brought to the house by the owner’s closest friends until late morning. Then Amir Ullah and I would drive to the mineral market and go from shop to shop, drinking endless cups of black tea or the local favorite, *kawa*, a tasty green tea seasoned with cardamon. Also high on my list of local specialties is fresh mango juice, blended with a bit of milk and unhygienic ice, risky for most foreigners but too delicious for me to resist. My stomach had been conditioned with bacteria from eating nothing but local food for years, as well as plenty of water buffalo yoghurt, so it rarely gives me any problems. *Singla, chaunsa,* and *malwa* are some of my favorite mango varieties, so sweet and juicy during the peak of their seasons that they can be sliced on one end and gently squeezed into the mouth.

Our first stop on the circuit was at the shop of an Afghan friend. A father of 11, he had three sons and two younger brothers working with him in the 10 x 12-foot shop. After drawing the curtains at the entrance facing the narrow street to keep prying eyes from viewing his stock, he then unwrapped his wares as we sat cross-legged on traditional cushions. Surprisingly, he had a number of interesting items: the always desirable purple *apatites* from Afghanistan, along with pastel bi-color *tourmalines* from Laghman Province, and, as he always seems to have in his stock, a *yellow-green spodumene* with an orange *garnet* inclusion. He also showed us a few “faden” pink *apatites* from the conflict-stricken Wana area, the site of a recent Pakistan Army offensive against tribal militants.

As we ambled down the street, numerous known and unknown dealers shuffled up to Amir Ullah to ask him to view their wares. We made promises of “tomorrow, tomorrow,” but “tomorrow” was not to come for those known to have mediocre material. As we climbed up a flight of steep concrete stairs to the second-floor office of one of the better Afghan dealers, we chanced upon the dealer’s likable uncle, Gul Bakht. This septuagenarian with a long, flowing, snow-white beard was still lean, spry and nimble, smiling and friendly. Sometimes Amir Ullah would grab his beard and joke about the fact that the old man’s tribe had a reputation for fierceness. Nonetheless, in his slightly cackling high-pitched voice and with his fierce good humor, the elder enticed us to buy a well-formed five-inch pink *spodumene* from Pech, with a
green termination on one end.

We crossed a hallway to enter a room stacked 5 feet high with wooden boxes with hinged lids; bulging gunny sacks were scattered on the floor. The proprietor, nicknamed “the goat” in Pashto for his scraggly beard, proceeded to show us box after box of Afghan material, some quite desirable. I liked a seven-inch-plus doubly terminated single tourmaline from Paprook, but was quoted a price that would have been right if this had been a matrix piece. Similarly expensive was a gem 500-gram kunzite, doubly terminated with “sawtooth” terminations. Having not seen the light of day or ultraviolet rays, it retained a fine blue color down the c axis and an emerald-like green on the a and b axes. This blue color will change to purple and pink under even a small amount of ultraviolet light, so displaying such a specimen is problematic. On the other hand, once the crystal does change color, the color is quite stable. I took notes on 25 to 30 individual pieces and lots, and we returned home for a late dinner.

The following morning, we decided to have some favored dealers come to the house and show us their goods in the greeting room. The first to arrive brought some new arrivals from Zegi Mountain, but I found only a small tabular intergrowth crystal of bastnäsite to purchase. Next, my regular supplier of pinkish sherry-colored topaz from Katlang arrived. He is another elder with a long, white beard, a longtime broker from the mining village of Katlang who brings specimens from the miners to sell to dealers in Peshawar. We were able to negotiate on three matrix specimens, one quite good.

Next in line was a Panjheri man who is a regular traveler to the sodalite-lapis mines of Badakhshan Province in northeastern Afghanistan. He had saved us four excellent specimens of afghanite, two of them having a distinctive green color, one having a crystal in excess of 3 inches on matrix! A deal was reached, and the first superior Afghan piece of this trip was now in my hands.

The Panjheri was followed by my regular peridot rough supplier from Mansehra, who had brought along five rather gemmy peridot crystals which I quickly purchased, along with some cutting rough.

As the early afternoon heat approached 105°F we decided to take a short rest, since most of the dealers in the market would be doing the same, sleeping off their lunches during the mid-afternoon doldrums. We returned to the market place at about 3:30 p.m. and settled onto some cushions on the floor of a shop, where we viewed specimens on a plastic tarp placed over the carpet, illuminated solely by a large round incandescent light bulb in a goose-neck lamp. Although it was mostly just good commercial material, I found several attractive white apatites from Tormiq, the crystals arranged in parallel rows on matrix, similar to kernals on an ear of corn. These were slightly lesser in quality than two treasured specimens that had been acquired on my previous trip. Also from the same locale was a decent specimen of hedenbergite, quite rare to see in recent years, as production has declined dramatically from ten years ago. From Afghanistan, aside from some small morganites, was an interesting specimen from Mawi: a sharp matrix pollucite with medium pale green tourmalines scattered across the surface. I purchased all of the above specimens, along with other, more mundane items for eventual wholesaling.

We returned home near dusk and welcomed a visitor who had just returned from the Northern Areas. Since I was only staying briefly in Peshawar on the first of two trips to Pakistan in May and June (I prefer to go to the Northern Areas in June, after work has started in some of the mines at higher altitudes), I agreed to look at the material, provided it was priced in line with what I knew to be going prices up North. Like most Pakistanis, the owner liked aquamarines and had purchased a number of them. Of the entire collection, my attention was most drawn to a pair of crystals from Shengus which were obviously from the same pocket, as they had matching inclusions and growth lines. I purchased a matched pair of 4-inch crystals for slightly more than the price at Shengus, their point of origin. With two other gem aquamarines from Nyet also purchased, I retired late for a short 4 to 5-hour sleep.
I normally awake at the first hint of morning light during the summer days in Asia; here in Peshawar that usually means between 4:30 a.m. and 5 a.m. I have to prod a servant awake to make me some hot tea: a concoction of black tea, fresh buffalo milk and honey, lightly boiled for 5 or 6 minutes. As I sip this and eat a banana or two, I wake the driver to have him take me to the park for my run. Normally he parks under a shade tree and naps away, sprawled in the front seat of the car, while I repeat my endless laps. After the run, I return home for a hearty breakfast of porridge, eggs and paratha, a fried whole wheat bread. I normally read at least two English language newspapers, among them Dawn, The News, and The Frontier Post, while eating.

Then began the problem I alluded to at the beginning of this memoir: One morning I encountered a story about a disturbance in Gilgit. The previous day, the main Karakoram Highway had been blocked in nearby Dainyor for several hours by a procession of people protesting the wording in a school textbook. Although Pakistan is over 80% Sunni Muslim, in the Northern Areas the Shiite sect predominates, starting about an hour’s drive south of Gilgit. Apparently a local cleric determined that the government-issued textbook had a decidedly pro-Sunni bias; he demanded that the government change the controversial wording, and organized a protest march and blockade to bring attention to his cause. I read the article thinking that this was just another local incident that would be resolved, having no idea that it would escalate and end up personally affecting me.

That same morning, several Afghans came to the house, along with a friend from Skardu. First the Pakistani produced some rusty but cleanable microcline feldspar twins, some with topaz, from Yuno, and a second batch of feldspar twins with more etching on the topaz, from nearby Mungo in the upper Shigar Valley. I selected a nice lot of small but sweet transparent orthoclase (“adularia”) crystals from Alchuri and then turned to my Afghan friend. He produced a hand-selected parcel of complete, gemmy purple scapolite crystals, some to four centimeters, and many great thumbnails. I bought the entire lot, as the ultimate selection price would not have differed that much from the cost of purchasing them all. The locality for these specimens is Badakhshan Province; I have yet to hear a specific name, although my good friend indicated that the site is only about a six-hour walk from the lapis mines in the Sar-e-Sang district. My friend, who is tall, lean, outspoken and quite knowledgeable, then produced a bluish gray corundum crystal on matrix. The tapered bipyramidal crystal is nearly 5 cm long, and came from yet another unidentified mine, said only to be in Badakhshan Province. I purchased this at a fair price, and other dealers subsequently offered me others for ten times the price. Being a “yaqut wala”, a ruby dealer from Jegdalek, my friend then produced several nice matrix specimens of ruby corundum from that renowned locality, the likes of which have recently been far scarcer in the marketplace than they were five years ago.

With temperatures pushing 110°F but with humidity at only 10%, we headed to a cheap hotel near the main mineral market, where two contacts from the Northern Areas were holed up. One of the partners had telephoned us and informed us of a spectacular piece from Raikot, which is about three hours by road southwest of Gilgit. He carefully unwrapped an aquamarine “flower,” symmetrical and undamaged, about 6 to 7 cm tall and across, standing upright on a 15 ×15-cm plate of beautifully crystallized albite. I had first purchased similar material about three or four years earlier, but this was by far the best that I had seen. I was thrilled until I heard the price: in excess of $25,000. The price was way over the limit. I turned my attention to other material spread across the bed. The red garnets with albite and schorl, also from Raikot, were attractive, with one particular piece having an albite “mushroom” cap, studded with garnets, on a schorl stem. I selected a half dozen pieces and started to negotiate a price for them and the aquamarine. The dealer claimed another man owned the aquamarine and absolutely needed a particular price, far above my offer. I was in a quandary. If I did not buy the piece before I left the room, it would be offered to a European who had a strong Euro for purchasing, whereas I was holding a weak dollar. We tried numerous tactics, but to no avail.
The dealer swore on Allah’s name that the owner needed the set price, which I was inclined to doubt as repeated cries of “Qasam, Qasam”—appeals to God’s truth—emanated from his bearded face. I left the room to let Amir Ullah negotiate in private, but when I returned I found that nothing had changed. I edged my offer up steadily, but there was no corresponding downward movement on his part. Amir Ullah indicated that he thought it was worth an offer of about 30,000 rupees higher, and the aesthetics made me agree to make one last try. This offer was not accepted; we were still far apart, and I began to feel a creeping resentment against the dealer. I told him that this had been my last offer, and headed for the door. He told me not to leave, and I agreed, but stepped outside to consult once again with Amir Ullah. His duty as a broker was to seal these seemingly impossible deals, and he went back inside to probe for the number that would satisfy us both. After hearing a heated discussion through the thin wooden door, I was joined by my friend who was not optimistic, but suggested that the last resort was a traditional “tupki,” a ritual in which the broker places the buyer’s and seller’s hands together, ceremoniously places his own hand on top, then raises the hands upward and thrusts them downward while shouting out a compromise price. We performed the ritual, and the uttered price was closer to my offer than to the seller’s stated minimum. There was a long moment of silence, then some protestations, and a final handshake agreement. The piece was mine! I felt both an exhilaration over obtaining the piece and a bit of resentment over paying more than my original estimate. But in the end I am always happy to own a top piece, as they always seem to sell.

The ordeal left me mentally frazzled and physically tired. We tried to look at a few more lots that day, but then decided that it was not going to be productive, and so returned home.

The following morning we returned to Namak Mandi to visit one of our favorite Afghan dealers. Surprisingly, he produced a very large (10 × 10-cm) topaz crystal, of a dark sherry-brown color, ringed by muscovite. It’s from Dassu in the Haramosh Range and is amazingly reminiscent of a pocket found several years earlier that had contained a number of very large (to 18-cm) crystals, distinctive in that all of the crystals have muscovite solely as the matrix (no
feldspar), many having the mica embedded in the crystal faces. Very strong in color, but generally lacking a fine luster, the original lot had only one piece with the aesthetics that I really liked, but I had been unable to purchase it. This time I casually asked the price after explaining that it would have to be reasonable, as I would be traveling to the area in the very near future. Somehow this worked. I never cease to be amazed when my Afghan contact sells to me more cheaply than the mountain Pakistanis do. He also had a number of crystals of tourmaline from Papa, near Paprook, the famous pegmatite in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. These semi-translucent crystals, dark olive-green blending into rusty maroon-red, many of them with nearly black terminations, were not the most beautiful, but were the most affordable ones on the market. I purchased four, up to 10 cm in length, all retailing for less than $500.

Red spessartine garnet crystals on albite with schorl, from Raikot (Ed David photos).

We wandered down the original heart of the mineral market, aptly named the “narrow market” for the 3-meter gap between facing small shops, and split down the center by an open grated drain or sewer. One always had to watch his step so as not to plunge through a broken or missing grate and twist an ankle or scrape a leg, with all of the prevalent bacteria awaiting their chance. We returned to the shop we had visited on the first day, and finally negotiated the price on a nice double ruby on matrix from Jegdalek, on which the owner had been reluctant to accept my offer on the first day. We then stepped next door to a gem-cutting shop owned by a Peshawari, and as we were only partially obscured by a sheet across the entrance, the Gilgiti man from the previous day’s ordeal appeared. He attempted to speak to us, a wretched squeaky whisper emanating from his mouth. He explained that he had a horrible throat infection. I immediately replied in Urdu that he had lied yesterday after swearing on Allah’s name that it was the honest-to-God truth and that Allah had now struck him down. The shop owner roared with laughter to the point of nearly rolling on the floor, wholeheartedly agreeing with me over the protestations of the mountain man.

Now down to my last full day in Peshawar, I gathered a few interesting odds and ends: some nice single xenotime crystals from Zegi Mountain, and from the same dealer some specimens
showing both spinel and sodalite on matrix: very unusual, since one species is aluminum-rich and the other aluminum-poor. Besides adding a nice 7.5- cm afghanite crystal to my list, I obtained two lime-green diopside crystals in anhydrite, all from the same general area of the Sar-e-Sang district. I queried the owner, who made regular trips to the locale in Badakhshan Province, about exact localities, and for the afghanite he gave the village that translated into Rabot, and for the diopside he gave the village of Uskazher, about 1 km from the main lapis mine. He later indicated that some fine single gem crystals of yellow potassian fluorian richterite, often associated with sodalite, were found at a place which was a day’s walk to the backside of the mountain housing the main lapis mine, Lajuar Madan. (Note: Lajuar Madan is the centuries-old Dari name for the lapis mines, literally meaning, Blue Mine.

My shipping broker friend’s father, whom I had known for more than 20 years, had recently started working an area in the Khyber Agency, on the Afghan border, for some typical alpine minerals. Besides finding some golden yellow titanite, he also recovered some specimens with root beer-colored vesuvianites up to 2.5 cm on small pieces of light-colored matrix. His partner then produced an interesting rare specimen: small, golden microlite crystals to 5 mm nestled amongst a cluster of pastel bi-colored tourmaline, with some quartz and lepidolite. These specimens, from the classic locale of Mawi in Laghman Province, have been trickling out sporadically over the past few years. Except for an interesting bi-color tourmaline crystal from Papra with a distinctive schiller effect (which would produce a nice cat’s-eye if cut), nothing else was appealing enough to induce me to part with more money.

That evening we began the dreaded and tedious task of wrapping each specimen for export. We carefully wound surgical cotton around each piece, stuffing a small paper chit in each to indicate lot number and location. Our assembly line ended with Amir Ullah winding a roll of pink Chinese toilet paper (experience has taught that the “Horse” brand holds together the best) around each specimen, carefully tucking each end under the roll to ensure that it would not unravel. We delivered the stuffed tin shipping boxes to my broker, along with a list of contents, and after “Goodbyes” we got into our unairconditioned car in the midday heat for the 3-hour drive to the Islamabad airport, with an evening connection to Karachi. After a few hours’ wait, I boarded the red-eye Thai flight for the nearly 5-hour trip to Bangkok, arriving at 6 a.m. to begin a nearly two-week tour of Southeast Asia, before returning for another tour in Pakistan…and the road goes on forever…

Sri Lanka’s crystal production continues to decline. On this summer trip I was shown the fewest samples I’d seen on any of my trips in the past decades. The one man in Sri Lanka who specializes in gem crystals had only two sapphire specimens to offer me, a glassy yellow 3-cm bipyramid from Passara, Uva Province, and, from nearby Bibila, a slightly longer, curved blue sapphire. Since he still had the best prices of anyone, it was an easy choice for me to snap up these crystals. But what was lacking in quantity was made up for by quality. While visiting a top gem merchant, I was pleasantly surprised as he carefully laid a number of very large corundum crystals on the table between us. Two outstanding blue crystals were from Kolonna, Southern Province. The larger measures almost exactly 10 cm and has a number of thinner “fin-like” intergrowth crystals, earning it the nickname “the fish.” The smaller crystal is a more nearly perfect hexagonal bipyramid and is still large at 8 cm. I balked momentarily at the price, but was not willing to leave these crystals behind—and neither were the two buyers who snapped them up shortly after my return home. I also took two other 10-cm crystals: a yellow and blue one with a bit of an embedded mica crust and a slightly waterworn but quite yellow sample from Balangoda, about 20 km down the road from Ratnapura, the small city that I call my home in Sri Lanka.

The highlight of my trip was a series of runs into the jungle at the foot of Adam’s Peak, a sacred mountain for Buddhists. I was beginning to train in earnest for the U.S. National Long Course Duathlon Championships in August, which involve a 56-mile bike ride and an 18.6-mile run. Doggedly I pounded out 2 to 2.5-hour runs in the steaming heat and humidity of a tropical country during the summer monsoons. One day, as I entered a village next to a gorgeous
waterfall, I was joined by a group of schoolchildren who, with snickers and laughs, trailed behind me. As I earned their respect by accelerating up the steep, rutted, red clay trail, I started to sing refrains from the music album “Deep Forest.” With the children’s replies echoing through the rubber trees planted in pockets amidst virgin jungle, and the sheer delight on their smiling faces, I knew that I had made a new set of friends. At the highest point of the trail we stopped at a crystal-clear stream, where I dunked my head into the cool water and pulled my energy food from my pocket: almond-stuffed dates from Oman. Of course the poor village kids had never tasted such a treat; most of them devoured the dates and begged for more; (a few spit them out with a vile look on their face). We returned down the trail to wave at the kids’ relatives, who peered out at us from their simple cinder block houses, and I left the kids at their local school, which was nestled under giant shade trees on a flat knoll in the forest.

On the evening of Friday June 5th, I traveled with the family with whom I stayed in Ratnapura down the ever-winding, dangerous road to Colombo. About 5 years earlier the driver had lost control of the Hiace van on a rain-slicked highway and had pummeled a bus stop. Luckily a concrete barrier had stopped the vehicle before we would have struck three people waiting for a bus. I checked into the historical Galle Face Hotel, built in the 1840's by the British and host to hundreds of royalty and celebrities over its fabled history. But the last 20 years of civil war had diminished the flow of foreign visitors to the point that the hotel had little money or need to upgrade. Weathered by the incessant salty sea sprays, it retained a decayed colonial charm. For me it was the perfect place for R and R, and ideal for writing articles, lounging within feet of the Indian Ocean, while the frantic traffic snarl of downtown Colombo was drowned out by prevailing westerlies and rhythmic ocean swells.

I had an evening flight to Dubai, with an onward connection to Karachi. Unfortunately, my initial flight was delayed, so that I missed my connecting flight, and I went through a roller coaster of potential flights and available seats. Just as it had begun to look as if I would spend the night at the Dubai airport, a Karachi-bound flight was delayed long enough for me to grab one of the last seats and have my luggage transferred. I finally stumbled into the closest cheap hotel near the airport at 2:20 a.m., three to four hours late and able to expect at best four and a half hours of sleep. But for some reason the hotel office decided to give me a wake-up call at 5:45 a.m., destroying any hope of adequate sleep. Groggily I struggled to the airport, and on a hot, sultry, June Sunday morning, I finally arrived in Peshawar for round two. And the road goes on forever...

Road weariness has to be conquered, and the best strategy is to take a one-hour power nap. I fell into a coma-like state that neither heat nor noise could break. Awakened to a semi-conscious state that only a couple of cups of good tea could alleviate, I was finally revived and ready to trudge down to the mineral market; it was a new day, and I was a new man with a never-ending interest in looking at new minerals.

Since I’d only been away from the market for two weeks, I asked the vendors to only show me new arrivals. The only noteworthy item that first afternoon was a nice brownish rust-red grossular garnet specimen, with multiple crystals in excess of 2.5 cm, lustrous and on matrix, from the well-known Afghan locale of Kantiwa.

That evening I retired at a reasonable hour, only to awaken a touch before 5:00 a.m. I noted in my journal that the room temperature had dropped to 86° F, which was relatively mild for June. Even at that hour the light of day was streaming through the window. (Pakistan had tried daylight-saving time a few years earlier, and there had been total confusion: some people had refused to change, and everyone had to indicate whether they had in mind “normal time” or “Musharraf time,” after the name of the ruling general who had ordered the change. It became a great excuse, when arriving late, to exclaim “I thought you meant normal time, not Musharraf time.”) Anyway, as things now stood, it was a daily battle to revive the servant and driver, who both slept outdoors on the upper verandah. Wrapped corpse-like under white sheets for protection from mosquitoes and cooled by a giant fan blowing horizontally on them, they did not understand
the necessity of rising this early to run in the heat. But they always gladly obliged, knowing that a good tip awaited them at the end of my stay; also, they were bound by the Pushtoon code, which required them to treat a guest with the utmost respect and deference. My daily run had now reached half-marathon length (21 km), and I considered it satisfactory to finish in under two hours, since the heat often reached 90° F by 8:00 a.m.

As usual, I read the English-language newspaper while eating breakfast, and was alarmed by the news. The simmering tension over the school book issue had not faded away, but had exploded in a violent rage; the blockade of the Karakoram Highway had escalated into a full-blown confrontation with the police, with angry mobs overrunning several police stations in the Gilgit region and lower Nagar, seizing the weapons, destroying several bridges, and using explosives to set off landslides to further blockade the Gilgit-Skardu road. An anonymous government spokesman indicated that the key Alam bridge, spanning the Gilgit River and allowing transit to Skardu, had been destroyed. My heart sank: would I not be able to return to my beloved Karakoram Mountains, my second home, my life’s destiny? Summer was the perfect season to travel there, escaping the unbearable heat of the lowlands to enjoy the coolness and freshness of high-altitude valleys. Amir Ullah immediately phoned to Skardu and was told that the tension level was so high that travel there was not recommended, even if we were able to get a flight on the daily (weather permitting) Boeing 727 that flew in from Islamabad.

But my somber forebodings were soon relieved—nothing works better for this purpose than some fine-looking mineral specimens. One of my favorite Afghan dealers had just returned from Kabul, and had bought a collection of lazurite crystals that had been saved for some time, possibly years. The seven pieces were all select: complete dodecahedrons, fine blue, very sharp and all on matrix. Interestingly, the Carnegie Museum had asked me just a bit over a month earlier to keep an eye out for a textbook sample of lazurite, and I had responded that I had not really seen the quality that they desired for at least three years; I had warned them that it could be a long wait before I found one. Now the chance to purchase such a specimen was literally in my lap, and the asking price was favorable. The Jegdalek native also produced a similar number of fine afghanite specimens and a desirable matrix ruby from his home village. Just as enthralling was a collection of photographs he had taken of his ancestral home, surrounded by fruit trees, their drooping branches heavily laden with fruit. He demanded that I return with him to Afghanistan, now that the Northern Areas trip seemed hopeless. I warned him that I simply would not have time to obtain a visa, and he looked at me in my native shalwar kamiz with white skull cap, and with my darkly tanned skin, and he said, “No need, you look Afghani, we will drive to Landi Kotal in my car, cross the border, then hire a jeep and then proceed to Jegdalek, where we will gorge ourselves on wonderful fruit and enjoy the more temperate climate at that higher altitude”. And so I mentally flip-flopped, and started to feel the excitement and anticipation of a new adventure in the making. And the road goes on forever—thank God for that, for after 30 relentless years on the road I still find that there are new sights to see!

But now, putting reveries and dreams aside, it was back to business, beginning with a late morning trip to Namak Mandi. Once again a different Afghan friend came up with some interesting Pakistani minerals: a fine collection of faden orthoclase (“adularia”) crystals from Alchuri in the Shigar Valley. These specimens, very pale pink aggregates of transparent crystals in parallel growth with a distinctive winding white “rope” in the center of each crystal, measure up to 5 cm and are desirable for both rarity and attractiveness. I knew that I could sell the lot of nine pieces quickly (one would go into my personal collection), as I know a number of feldspar collectors with 20, 30, and even 50 years of mineral collecting experience. Amateurs may consider feldspars nothing more than matrix material, but many advanced collectors love their crystallography and the variety of their forms.

Next door, in a cluttered room with barely a place to sit cross-legged on some faded cushions, a relative of the previous man produced a nice assemblage of his specialty: gem crystals. One of my favorites that he normally has in stock are gem “floater” kunzite (lilac spodumene) crystals. I
am particularly fond of the variety locally nicknamed *dant*, the Urdu word for “tooth.” These crystals are commonly doubly terminated, with dozens to literally hundreds of sharp, needle-like points. When they are highly lustrous, transparent to flawless, and have the natural blue and green color indicating that they have not been exposed to any ultraviolet light, I find them irresistible. Besides having fine material, this Kunar native has always been very forthcoming with localities, traveling to the sites in Afghanistan to purchase the goods, and noting the correct locality names. This time he had some small but fine blue tourmalines on quartz matrix from Rhodisht, in the Pech Valley.

That name, Rhodisht, first came up in October of 2001, when, as the “American War” with the Taliban was raging, I bought some very distinctive tourmaline mined from near that particular village. These were mostly single bi-colored crystals, up to 12.5 cm, very pure green on one half and greenish yellow on the other half. This time he had new material from a locale named Diwana Baba, a site near the famous Paprook mine. These tourmaline crystals have a pastel pink color like that of some specimens from Paprook, but also have bright green pinacoidal terminations with very thin blackish blue layers.

Later that evening, one of our local friends stopped by with different material from Diwana Baba: pale blue apatites that are the color of aquamarines, some of the crystals on quartz matrix. These were another easy decision to buy, since their price was reasonable and they look different from any other apatites that I had seen from this area of the world. In addition to a few nice microclines from Raikot and the Swiss-like adularias from Alchuri, he had one Badakhshan specimen with a pale blue lazurite coating over a well-formed scapolite crystal. If broken open, it would reveal a transparent, but heavily fractured, pale yellow, fluorescent crystal inside.

The following morning, my daily newspaper ritual produced nothing but discouraging news from the Northern Areas, and my spirits were lifted only by the return of my Jegdalek friend. This time he arrived with the results of his daily combing through the local market. He had grabbed a nice peridot crystal with the highly desirable association of magnetite and he had captured some items from one of the areas in which he specialized, Baluchistan Province. These included the thick, jet-black, lustrous epidote crystals from Wadd, combined with some transparent colorless quartz, and, from the mountains of that same province, a multi-crystal matrix specimen of axinite—not surprising from a locale that has been producing anatase and brookite.

A man whom I had not met before appeared next, and produced a very fine specimen showing multiple lavender apatite crystals on microcline from Mawi, Laghman Province, Afghanistan. With some crystals approaching 2.5 cm, a decent luster, and pleasing aesthetics, it was of immediate interest. However, the owner also thought highly of the piece and quoted a price about four times my maximum. I made my offer, and did not budge. The owner re-wrapped the piece and carried it away. Amir Ullah and I afterwards both expressed regret that I hadn’t obtained the piece, but agreed that the price had been prohibitive. Many times a piece walks away and is quickly forgotten. This one gnawed away at me—but sometimes life throws a second pitch. I was to see this beautiful specimen again the very next day.

We journeyed to the sleepy mineral market, the noon sun intense and driving people into the shade. A longtime Afghan friend who had just returned from his ancestral home of Kala, in the famous Pech Valley of Kunar Province, excitedly informed us that he had some new items that he had never seen before. He stated that the yellowish lime-green crystals had been dug just outside a village named Sinzai, near Kala. The dodecahedral forms led me to believe that these crystals were garnets, and the color suggested grossular; later analysis proved both guesses correct. Surprisingly, the crystals fluoresce under longwave ultraviolet light, a property that I had not encountered in a garnet before. Since the largest individual crystal measured about 3 cm, and the price was reasonable, I bought the entire lot. Many of the crystals are a bit etched, and somewhat dirty. Unfortunately on the first cleaning attempt using acid, the matrix started to bubble furiously, indicating a carbonate. The matrix also fluoresces and we wanted to keep it rather than dissolve it, so we had to resort to cleaning the specimens by a different method.
Additionally at the market, besides some decent wholesale material, two other things of note were displayed: a bi-color garnet from the previously mentioned locality of Kantiwa, with both a rusty brown and a red color on the same crystal faces, and a small lot of clear quartz crystals with some very attractive inclusions. Upon close inspection, one could see hundreds of rust-red rutile needles coating razor-thin brookite crystals, some of which measure over 2.5 cm. I always purchase such first-seen items if the price is good, which it was in this case.

We worked well into the evening, legs cramping from hours sitting cross-legged, initially selecting material from the steady flow of soft-wood boxes opened in front of me, and then negotiating prices on the lots or on single pieces. Well after dark, we returned home to have a late-night dinner, which is not unusual for a Peshawari family in the heat of the summer.

Wednesday dawned sunny, but with a northeasterly breeze that kept the temperature down somewhat, making my morning run easier. But the news from Gilgit and Skardu was no better. The government was organizing military convoys to move all of the foreigners down to Islamabad for safety. This was the 50th anniversary of the climbing of K2, which is the second highest mountain in the world, towering over 28,000 feet in the Eastern Karakorams on the Pakistani-Chinese border. There was a crowd expected, 1600 climbers and trekkers from Italy alone (the initial climbers had been Italian) who were to arrive in the Northern Areas, and the observances were to culminate in a four-day festival in late July in Gilgit. The government had a stake in pulling off this event smoothly, and this new problem was the last thing that they needed.

Another discouraging note was that my Gilgit contact had called the previous week to announce that he had another fabulous specimen from Raikot, and he wanted me to stop in Gilgit on the way to Skardu to view the piece. Repeated calls to his shop went unanswered: the curfew was keeping him in his home. We were also confined to Amir Ullah’s home, with a steady flow of arrivals lining up in the entry guest room, all eager to show their wares. Knowing that we never seemed to have time to visit their shops, the merchants who were always tugging at my sleeve decided to catch me at home before I went down to the market, so I would not be able to refuse them. The positive aspect was that, with so many people waiting, there was an urgency to make the price and sell, rather than be rejected and sent back without a sale.

First to arrive was a venerated elder from Katlang, Santa-like with his long flowing white beard. His one specialty was obviously the famous topaz from his native town. This time we reached an agreement on two matrix pieces, both from the Shamoozai mine, one very aesthetic specimen having a rich golden crystal standing vertically on matrix, the second specimen having a more diagonally positioned crystal with a distinctive pale pink color.

As luck would have it, the owner of the apatite reappeared, having had a day to think about his price. Obviously I had to move upward, while he on his side was being forced by the frenzy to rethink his position. The local tradition mentioned earlier called “tupki” was the ideal way to resolve the stalemate. Amir Ullah performed the ritual again, after which this fine, fist-sized specimen was happily placed in my purchases box. I hand-carried it to the Ste.-Marie-aux-Mines show in France, where it found a welcome home with an American collector, Jesse Fisher (see photo on following page).

Always keeping an eye open for rarities or unusual combinations, I was pleasantly surprised to be offered several lime-green hydroxyl-herderite crystals with topaz from Yuno. This Shigar Valley location has produced fine topaz for about 15 years, but only in the last year have I seen any nice hydroxyl-herderite from there. [Ed. Note: These crystals are often carelessly referred to as the fluorine-dominant species “herderite,” but in fact there are no validated specimens of herderite known from any locality, making it a doubtful species.] Besides purchasing these specimens, I obtained from another dealer some parisite crystals up to 2.3 cm from Tor Ghar, a bastnäsite locale about 10 km north of the better-known Zegi Mountain.

We waited for the afternoon shadows to grow before we left home, as the marketplace would be napping off a late lunch. Near dusk, after buying some commercial items from several dealers, we met the agitated and animated man returning from Gilgit with his tales of woe and destruction.
that were quoted in the opening paragraph. I was utterly disheartened, as I had now seen most of the new arrivals in the marketplace, and was not looking forward to another ten days in the heat. I longed for another soul-cleansing trip to the wilds of the North. We returned home and immediately called Skardu. The report was bleak: the road was blocked, essential commodities had been whisked off the shops’ shelves as people hoarded food and supplies, and the petrol stations had been pumped dry. A trip to Afghanistan looked to be in the works...

On Thursday I awoke to a very comfortable 82 degrees, surprisingly mild compared to previous Junes, and an opportunity to stretch the run out to nearly 15 miles. When I returned I conferred with Amir Ullah, and we decided to call another contact in Skardu. The man’s brother answered instead and reconfirmed the blockade. As my Peshawari host and I discussed our plight, the phone rang: the first goods truck had just driven into Skardu! The road was open! Normally when there was a road blockage, the local nonmilitary religious clerics would let things calm down for a day or two and then have discussions with the militants. The only real people affected badly by the blockade were those living there, who experienced the hardships of food and petrol shortages. The central government was in Islamabad, many hours away to the south.

I was momentarily elated about the end of the blockade, but then came some cautious discussion about dangers that still existed. Amir Ullah and I have been through much together, spending well over a year of our lives traveling together to the Northern Areas, braving bandits and gunmen, earthquakes and landslides, mud slides and floods, insects, cold and heat. He knew that I would want to go, and there was not much sense in trying to talk me out of it. He also enjoyed the mountains and, having made more than a hundred trips there in his lifetime, had more knowledge and more local friends than almost any other traveler to the region.
Orange fingers of clouds, illuminated by the first rays of a summer sun, signaled the start of a long day. The house was a-bustle as Amir Ullah and his wife awoke and she prepared tea. My packed belongings were brought downstairs; I forgot about my lack of sleep in the giddy anticipation of another journey, the tension of the unknown dangers lurking ahead, and the thrill of hitting the road for the millionth time. Zareeb, the driver, arrived at about 5:00 a.m., and as the ‘82 Corolla was being packed, Amir Ullah’s wife Jamilla produced a huge, ancient Koran and said a prayer upon it for both of our safe returns. Amir Ullah took the front seat to serve as a second watch for the driver, while I had the luxury of the rear seat, although it was somewhat uncomfortable with no head rest and lumpy back support. My watch showed 5:15 a.m. as we headed directly east toward the orange orb of a rising sun, intensely colored by the endless dust of the dry Indian subcontinent.

We swung toward the northeast to shortcut our way to the Malakand Agency and the low pass of the same name. We reached the largest city in Swat, Mingora, at about 8:45 and continued to the crossroads town of Kwasikela, where the road from the left fork turned to the upper Swat Valley and the road on the right zigzagged to the top of the Shangla Pass, then descended to the Indus Valley. Just before the intersection we stopped at our favorite “truck stop,” an open-air restaurant where one sat on a rope bed with a small table in front. The peeling blue paint on the walls was mostly covered over with large posters of important mosques or mountain scenery; one poster, incongruously, showed a colorful Western meal complete with proper place settings. This restaurant normally had fresh yogurt which had been churned that morning, whole milk for tea, and malai, a clotted cream in which you could dip your fried whole-wheat paratha bread.

Years ago at this place I had watched an industrious 11 or 12-year-old boy running to the kitchen with orders and returning with his hands full of tea pots and flat wicker baskets stacked with hot unleavened bread. He was smart, and a good waiter, but what was his future? It would include 16-hour days at $1/day for wages, but would not include school. This is the plight of the third world.

Our stomachs were full after the fifteen-minute stop, and then we had to face a road horribly torn up with new construction. We bounced along at the snail’s pace of 20 km/hour, eventually reaching the top of the pass at 11:00 a.m. I enjoyed the coolness of the altitude, and at the crest there were still a few surviving pine trees, whose scents brought back memories of Colorado. Although physically fatigued, I was relieved to be away from the pressure of people constantly trying to show me minerals, and a dawn to late-night regimen with few moments to relax. Amir Ullah and I often use travel time like this to reminisce about our past journeys, frequently beginning with a laugh and “Do you remember...?”

While bouncing along in the Toyota, we discussed the very earliest days of his introduction to the gem and mineral world. Back in the mid-1960’s, while working in the gold and silver jewelry bazaar of Andersahar in Peshawar, he was introduced to a man named Hamidullah, who gave him a rudimentary education in faceted natural ruby, sapphire, and diamond. At that time virtually nothing was crossing the border from Afghanistan, and nothing was coming from the Northern Areas. Tourmaline and aquamarine were unknown, as well as any crystal or mineral collecting. He first traveled to the Northern Areas in about 1972, when he was a brash young 18-year-old, and went to Dassu in the Shigar Valley. What a long way to come. Now more than 30 years later, he is returning with decades of knowledge under his belt, and the graying hairs of a wise elder. Our reverie was interrupted by our arrival in the hot, dusty, dirty crossroads town of Besham. After seven and a quarter tortuous hours, we finally joined the Karakoram Highway (KKH), and were able to travel more comfortably on a much better maintained, tarred road.

We saw vehicles heading north on the winding road that immediately climbed high above the Indus River on its west bank. That was a positive sign, because we had heard rumors that the road had been blockaded in Pattan (a little less than an hour upriver) by irate Sunni Muslims who were protesting an armed robbery of one of their villagers by Shiite militants south of Gilgit. But the route that had been carved out of steep cliffs was open, except for a few small areas where the
road crew was removing debris that had slid unto the road as a result of heavy rains two nights earlier. Once we had finally crossed over the Indus River at Komilla to the flatter east bank, we began to relax a bit more. About ten years before, on a buying trip, Amir Ullah and I had nearly been killed in this town (the closest town on the KKH to the peridot locale) when we had wrestled an armed gun man off one of our traveling companions. Had the gunman’s 32-caliber semi-automatic pistol not jammed, I would not be here to tell the story.

The rest of the day was largely uneventful. Even the legendary heat (which can reach 125° F) was tame, with the temperature reaching only about 104°. With the humidity at less than 8%, sweat easily evaporated in the dry flow of desert air gushing through the open windows of the unairconditioned car. A short distance before Chilas, we confronted the one problematic question that had been nagging in the back of my consciousness, “What will happen at the checkpoint at the border entrance to the Northern Areas?” The government was evacuating foreigners from this area for their safety. Would the military officials allow me to continue my journey? We rolled to a stop at the edge of the road, blocked by a thin wooden beam that was counterbalanced by a large rock on one side of a fulcrum, with the other end attached to an implanted post by a long rope. To open it for passage, the attendant simply had to release the rope to let the rock and gravity raise the beam. Amir Ullah told me, “Go and talk to them.”

I left the car by the rear door and ambled up nonchalantly to the checkpost.

“Salaam Alekum,” they uttered, the standard greeting, to which I responded appropriately. Then in Urdu they asked the license number of the vehicle. I replied, reciting AZJK (Azad Jammu Kashmir, the name of the province) and the four-digit number that followed. They queried me about where I was from and about my destination. After answering, I asked them if I needed to register.

They replied, “No, registration is for foreigners only. Be on your way.”

I was dressed in a shalwar-kamiz and wearing a white skull cap that was typical of a Peshawar i, but not worn by locals in this area. Since my Urdu was Pushtoon-accented, they accepted me as a Peshawari and allowed me to pass. The best thing about this encounter was that I did not have to lie or make up a story and get involved in a long interrogation about why, as an American, I was traveling to the Northern Areas in a time of crisis.

I shuffled back to the car and said “go” to the driver in Pushtu. The attendant released the rope, the beam swung upward and we quietly continued on our way.

Now I could totally relax, and peacefully contemplate the spectacular scenery. The surging Indus River was contained in a deep gorge to our immediate left, and across and above it were pockets of greenery, painstakingly irrigated by the local Kohistanis. The snowfields and glaciers of the towering peaks separating this valley from the Swat Valley further to the west were the source of the roiling streams which cut deep scars in the numerous narrow side valleys in this dusty, rocky, khaki-colored landscape, and often produced wonderful waterfalls which toppled over the near vertical mountain walls.

After more than 12 hours in the Toyota, we finally pulled into the enclosed compound of the best hotel in Chilas to warm greetings from the manager and the staff, who were friends of ours from our numerous previous stays. Immediately, a waiter prepared sweet black tea with milk, that mandatory magic elixir served throughout the subcontinent, both calming and uplifting after a rigorous journey. After several hours, dinner was brought to the room, and we ate it in traditional style, with communal bowls spread across a heavy plastic sheet covering the floor. This was perhaps the best food available for an eight-hour stretch along this sparsely populated desert valley.

With little to do for entertainment, we went to bed early. At 4:40 a.m. we were awakened by the waiter knocking at the door; he was carrying a steaming pot of tea and some parathas for our breakfast. We rolled out of the compound at 5:30 a.m., with the sun already producing heat as it rose above the eastern mountain ridge line. We continued to travel northeast, crossing the dangerous area near Tato pani, where in 2002 and 2003 I had been blocked by both earthquakes.
and landslides. Cautiously we edged along on the partially destroyed road, and little did I know that the best specimen I was to acquire on this trip had been collected at a point on the mountain just above us.

We were within 40 km of Gilgit when we reached the branch road leading to Skardu. We turned right to cross the Gilgit River on the Alam Bridge, still intact, contrary to the anonymous newspaper report that I had read nearly a week before. However, at Shatot, an Army quick-assembly bridge spanning a very narrow but deep side gorge had been damaged: the wooden planks of the base had been burnt, but had been quickly replaced. Next, at Sassi, a quick stop at a “mineral shop” yielded nothing interesting.

A bit farther upriver, we encountered the God-forsaken town of Shengus, once forcibly abandoned for a time in the 1990's because of the imminent danger of its being shoved into the raging Indus River should one of the frequent earthquakes bring down the unstable mountainside above it. In the summer, it is usually quite hot because of its southwest-facing position in a narrow valley. Shengus probably has more flies per capita than any other place on the planet, and mosquitoes also thrive quite well.

The lethargic dealers in Shengus have a steady stream of buyers who stop in the town while plying this route between Gilgit and Skardu. Consequently it is an unlikely place to be offered anything nice, and, if one is, it is a difficult endeavor to agree on the price. In a dark, dingy shop, under the glare and smell of a gas lamp, I rounded up a few garnet specimens and a piece of aquamarine rough, about enough to pay my expenses for the day.

Soon, having left Shengus, we were slowly swinging through the innumerable curves carved literally from vertical cliffs, all the while enjoying the views of the incredible pegmatites lining the steep canyon walls on the opposite side of the river. These white streaks extend more than 10 meters vertically and stretch horizontally a kilometer or more. Small cavities of worked-out pockets are visible on the granite cliffs which rise nearly dead vertically from the Indus River. This gorge has fascinated me every time I have passed through it, filling me with wonder at the bravery of the men who work these perilous slopes.

We stopped only momentarily in Stak Nala. Nowadays, with the almost complete exhaustion of the tourmaline deposit that is located about a vertical mile above it, this small cluster of teahouses and shops rarely offers any acceptable minerals, and such was the case that day.

As we chugged up the steepening road, the air cooled considerably. One more checkpoint remained: about 30 km from Skardu, the road crosses over to the southwest bank of the Indus after hugging the northeastern bank for the 140-km distance from the Alam Bridge. As usual, when I approached the military police at the checkpoint on the western end of the bridge, I was greeted warmly after beginning the conversation in Urdu. This method always breaks the ice, and my holding an American passport is no longer problematic.

The sun was receding behind the high mountains protecting Skardu, and temperate breezes rustled the leaves of the poplar trees lining the road as we entered the city limits. We pulled up to Yadgar Chowk, a gathering place for mineral dealers, to let our arrival be announced. Here, since telephones still are not prevalent or dependable, the word spreads from mouth to mouth. (We have nicknamed this the BBC network, because years ago, the BBC broadcast on shortwave radio was one of the few links to news of the outside world.) We crossed to the opposite side of town to take a room at a hotel on a high cliff overlooking the Indus.

On the following morning, needing to burn the pent-up energy of two days in a car with no exercise, I was out running by 5:15 a.m. I followed the main road toward Khapalu, which had a left-hand turnoff to the Shigar valley. As I ran through the small villages, the early morning risers were out, viewing me with puzzled interest. The long climbs at 8,000 feet elevation are great for conditioning, and I continued to the turnoff and then down to the bridge crossing the Indus and to the steep ascent on the opposite side on the newly constructed asphalt road. Once I reached the flat top amidst a sea of sand dunes, I turned around to retrace my steps. Back on the main road, I encountered a group of Western climbers newly arrived by air from Islamabad.
packed in a jeep heading toward the Shigar Valley, all waving and wondering what lunatic could be out running seven miles out of Skardu.

After a hearty breakfast, Amir Ullah and I rode to the Katalgah Market, a collection of ramshackle cement-block shops arranged parallel to each other and separated by an alley. The market houses some fabric sellers and a cluster of mineral dealers. Its location on a hillside is such that it is terribly cold and bleak in the winter, but relatively comfortable in the summer, although the light is poor. The selection of minerals was, as I had been forewarned, absolutely bleak. I managed to buy a few sphenes from Tormiq from a vendor who normally specializes in this material, but I quickly became disillusioned when offered a 1-cm cassiterite crystal for “only” $1700!

Shigar Valley

A few other stops outside the market that we renamed the kachra (“rubbish”) market revealed nothing exciting at all, so we reformulated our plans. We found our regular jeep driver and gave him some money to buy some grains, vegetables, and fruit in the market, after which, I had decided, I would travel with him to the upper Braldu and Basha Valley. Amir Ullah would stay in Skardu, try to capture any new material arriving from various locales, and firm up some appointments with the top two or three dealers in Skardu to visit after my return.

By two o’clock, the jeep driver, another friend and I were on our way to Shigar. After the two weeks of clouds we’d experienced here the previous November, the crystal-clear skies were a welcome relief, and we rapidly made our way to Hashupa. We stopped at the orchard there to buy some cherries, but were disappointed that the superb black variety was all sold out and only the very tart red cherries were left. I purchased 2 kg for about $2.60, and we continued the short distance to Alchuri.
Worked out pegmatites at Dassu.

Some of the local dealers were gone and others had been picked clean by the dealers who came in daily processions from Skardu. Undaunted, we traveled to Haiderabad, where we perused the offerings in three or four shops, selecting a few particularly lustrous root beer-colored vesuvianites that had been newly dug at Alchuri. Since these had never been found in the Shigar Valley before, the local dealers were unrealistic in pricing them, and I had to use all of my guile to finally walk away with three good small miniatures from the several hundred spread across the plastic tarp on the floor.

We crossed the old Bangla Bridge, spanning the confluence of the Braldu and Basha Rivers, and made our way to Tisar. After traversing this extended village we were able to cross a fast-flowing side stream which gushed from the north side of the Haramosh Range, and continue the 5 km to Chutron, stopping to refill our collapsible water jug with fine spring water along the way. In Chutron we were greeted warmly by Akmad, the retired military man who ran the two-room government rest house next to the best hot springs in all of the Northern Areas. Akmad was disappointed that Amir Ullah had not come: the two of them had become friends over long conversations in this sleepy village while I had been on some side trip to one of the mines on the upper Braldu. This was our base camp, and we settled in to prepare a dinner and relax in the hot springs.

The following morning I was up shortly after the very early dawning of light at around 4:40 a.m., and I began my run under pristine skies, the color of the finest Pakistani aquamarine. I ran to the edge of Tisar and back and felt well enough to repeat the run. A very hearty breakfast followed, with fresh local eggs, the yolks the color of the rising orange sun, and a very thick whole grain bread called qorba, which locals pack with them on extended trips into the high mountains and live on for several weeks.
A small mining camp at 12,000 feet, above Haiderabad in the Shigar Valley.

We made the 45-minute drive back to Haiderabad, where a number of other dealers who had meanwhile arrived showed me some more vesuvianites and a large plate of byssolite-included adularia, also from Alchuri. One of the original hotel-teashop owners, a man nicknamed Alfi Hawaldar (literally, “Sergeant Glue”), warmly welcomed me. Alfi, a short, squat, clever man with small yellow-brown nubs for teeth and a hearty belly laugh, is a notorious character who makes a good living manufacturing wonderful fake mineral specimens that he sells to unknowing Western trekkers and climbers who stop for a tea break at his shop, about halfway up the road to Askole where the rigorous trek to K2 starts. You too, reader, may own one of his creations, as he sold an entire collection of 60 or 70 fakes to an Afghani dealer who took them to Tucson about 10 years ago. We sometimes ask Alfi to examine pieces that we have bought elsewhere to determine if they have been glued, as he is the top expert on the subject. This day he had a fine lot of schorl crystals, (unmanufactured!) similar to some that I had seen nearly five years previously. Small but super-lustrous, with bits of star mica attached, these cute specimens had been found near Dassu, about 45 minutes up the Braldu.

But since there was nothing else in Haiderabad worth making an offer on, it was time to head upriver. The jeep road heads northwest and turns almost due north where it is squeezed by the Braldu. At this site you can reach out of the jeep and touch a pegmatite on the rock face without stretching much from your seat. The road turns into a very soft, sandy double track, often with a flow of water at this time of the year.

We normally stop at a small shop in the village of Baha—if you can call it a village, as it is only a small group of widely scattered houses. Here one of the men said that his elder brother was looking for minerals and would be back later that afternoon. A short distance further up the road we reached an Army encampment, with another swinging wooden barrier. Several officers approached the vehicle to ask questions, and when they understood that I was a foreigner, they asked me to register. Amir Ullah always insists that it is best to register in these upper valleys,
close to restricted areas, because if you are caught returning without a record of entry, it could be problematic. The head officers were ethnic Pushtoons, and after I spoke to them in Urdu, I stunned them with a little Pushtu, which greatly endeared me to them. On my return late that afternoon, they begged me to have tea with them.

We crossed the bridge over the Braldu to the west side, crossing below the village of Teston, known for large but etched garnets and for very fine aquamarines which are often identified as coming from the nearby and much better known village of Dassu. Just before that village, the river and road start to swing easterly, and you enter Dassu, where pegmatites which were worked more than 50 years ago are easily visible from the jeep window.

We stopped at a local mineral dealers’ bazaar and found several lots of good commercial garnets and pale etched beryls that had been collected near Nyet, our next stop. Once again, not much material was being shown, and most dealers had already sold even their worst material. I did check one relatively new shop and saw several huge feldspars. Two of them were simple untwinned microclines, not worth the trouble or the cost of shipping. But there was a lustrous Manebach twin about half a meter tall and a third of a meter wide, coming in at a whopping 18 kilograms!! I had never seen a Manebach of this size and quality from Pakistan (or anywhere else, for that matter), and I decided it was worth the headache and hassle to move this big, heavy beauty (or beast) from deep in the Karakorams all the way back to Colorado, (and to its final home in Michigan).

Nyet Bruk viewed from Nyet village.

We moved upward, turning to climb the gut-wrenching trail up the steep face guarding the entrance to Nyet. Near the end of this perilous climb is a hairpin turn so sharp that the jeep has to stop, reverse, and go forward twice to continue upward. At the top there is a small level parking area, from which point we had to dismount and walk into the village; it is a moderate climb through narrow alleys, with large stone walls forming the bases of rather primitive houses. One of
the larger dealers has a house situated with the windows facing southward and looking across the Braldu Valley; from these windows the view is of a beautiful mountain slope called Nyet Bruk, a designated grazing area for the village’s sheep and goats. In the lofty upper regions is one of the most prolific aquamarine-producing areas in Pakistan—so much so that several years ago the government tried to establish a lease program for people wishing to mine there. In this particular house, I almost always find some aquamarine crystals that are worth buying, and this time was no different. The lot consisted of ten etched but lustrous aquamarines up to about 8 cm, along with some broken, clean material for gem cutting. But this was about all that the village had to offer. Once again, I was surprised to see so few minerals available.

Apaligun village.

By now it was after 2:00 p.m. and we decided to travel to the last village up the road where there was hope of finding more minerals. Apo Ali Gun (“Apaligun”) is on the river valley floor, below a cliff upon which the village of Folji is situated, and miners work the areas above the two villages. We arrived at a large tea house which at the time was hosting eight jeep-loads of trekkers and their guides, on their way to the Baltaro Glacier. The foreigners were enjoying a box lunch prepared in one of the better hotels in Skardu, and sipping on bottled sodas.

We quietly drank some hot black milk tea and retreated to a small, dark shop adjoining the restaurant to view a beautiful lot of small but hyper-lustrous gem aquamarine crystals. The owner quoted a relatively high price, but bargaining is always expected. We tried various tactics but, as the sun slowly slid westward, we could not get the man to drop the price by more than a couple of percent. Reluctantly we had to leave, looking at a 3-hour trip to return to the hotel. I calculated the final selling price, piece by piece, and came up with a full retail price for the crystals, if sold one by one, of about 300,000 rupees. After one and half hours, the seller had reduced his demand from 450,000 to 440,000. We drove away, muttering about crazy and mentally deranged locals, and the three of us agreed that I had given a reasonable offer.
Getting back down to Dassu was a two-handed affair: one kept one hand firmly grasped on a strap above the door and the other braced against the steel dash, trying to keep one’s face from being slammed into the instrument panel or one’s head from crashing into the ceiling as the vehicle jolted violently, negotiating huge potholes and fallen rock. The road improved as the valley widened near Dassu, and we were able to speed up to Baha, where one of my favorite dealers resided. He had just purchased a small but excellent lot of **aquamarines** blasted that afternoon from a pocket across the valley, and he resold it to me for a small mark-up. I paid him a deposit for half the amount, and arranged to have him meet me the following morning to return to Skardu, where I would pay him the balance.

Feeling quite satisfied, we climbed back into the jeep, estimating that we had about another hour of driving to return to our guesthouse. We made a quick stop in Haiderabad to see if anything new had appeared, and headed toward Tisar. The soft, dusty, sandy track wound through the village, and at the far western edge we were stopped dead. The beautiful clear day had been wonderful for travel, but the intense solar energy had melted a huge amount of snow on the upper Haramosh Range towering above us. A tractor pulling an empty cart had tried to cross a raging stream and had become stuck in the middle, absolutely blocking us. This scoured stream course had a huge collection of boulders blocking alternative routes, so there was nothing we could do. It was nearing 7:00 p.m., and darkness would fall before long, so we quickly decided that we would pack all of the minerals and equipment into two backpacks and walk the 5 km back to the hotel. Unfortunately, we had the 18-kg microcline, along with the two others totaling 40 kg that my Skardu friend had purchased after I had passed on them.

The jeep driver decided to stay with the jeep and the microlines and my friend and I set off on a very brisk walk in the gathering twilight. I decided to cinch my backpack as tightly as I could tolerate and set off on an even-paced run, thinking that I might as well turn it into a training session, and also speeding our return, as we needed to make dinner from scratch. The cool downdrafts were already moving down the valley, soothing our high-altitude sunburns, as we ran along the edge of the cold Basha River.

We arrived at dusk, hurriedly prepared dinner and ate. Unexpectedly, several local men then appeared, whom I had not met before. Someone had told them that a foreign buyer was in the upper valleys and they wanted to show some new items. But I was dead tired, and the light from the single bare 25-watt bulb in the room was not adequate, particularly since my eyes had been out in the intense sunlight the entire day. We made an agreement to meet on the following morning.

It dawned cloudy with a strong downhill wind blowing. As I stepped out of the room, I was relieved to see that our jeep was now parked in our compound. I repeated the previous day’s run, but pushed a bit harder. Even though I had started my run at 5:15 a.m., by the time I had taken a quick hot mineral water bath and devoured a breakfast, I was running late according to my schedule.

I had instructed the new dealers to open their goods and have them available for immediate viewing, and became a bit irate when I returned to the house where they were staying and found that they had done nothing. I told them that they had lost their chance and that I had to leave, as I had set some specific times for appointments that morning. But my Skardu friend calmed me down and told me it would take just a couple of minutes, and the owners hurriedly unwrapped the specimens from some torn, faded newspaper. Much to my surprise, some interesting specimens appeared: pale lavender, lustrous **apatites**, quite transparent, most with some small matrix, from a single pocket found near Nyet. Heartbreakingly, one 4-cm crystal had been broken during extraction and repaired back onto the matrix, but the remaining specimens were undamaged, and were distinctly different from any other apatites that I had ever seen from the Northern Areas. With the rush to leave adding some tension to the air, a deal was quickly hammered out, and pieces were stuffed into my 20-year-old faded blue backpack which was then loaded onto the jeep.
During the hour’s drive to Haiderabad the driver told us about how he had slept in the jeep the previous night, afraid that someone would steal the feldspars; at about 3:30 a.m. he woke and found that the water had receded enough to make it possible to squeeze the jeep around the stalled tractor.

We arrived in Haiderabad and my friend from Baha was waiting. After a quick survey of the shops yielded nothing exciting, we headed down-river. My friend produced a specimen from his bag and I was surprised to see another apatite like those I had just purchased at the hotel. This crystal, approaching 5 cm, had been attached to a large quartz crystal. The aesthetics were wonderful, but the apatite had been shattered at the base, leaving a noticeable gap between it and the matrix. Because I do not do filler restorations, I reluctantly declined the piece, even as he dropped the price to induce me. The apatite was eventually bought by a Gilgit for about 25% more than the price that I could have bought it for. It was taken to Ste.-Marie-aux-Mines and sold, and I wonder now whether I should have jumped at it.

Basha Valley.

Alchuri was bleak, with a large spread of very picked-over junk scattered over the floor of a large room. With so many local buyers passing by daily and so few specimens, one could only hope for the luck of being in the right place at the right time to make a trip worthwhile.

I was fatigued, but the jeep’s lack of a headrest and its continuous jolting made it impossible to sleep. I was actually afraid that I might break my neck if I fell asleep and was caught in a bad position by a particularly rough bounce. The day cleared somewhat, and we arrived tired but happy in Skardu.

After a 30-minute nap I awoke refreshed to start the viewing sessions that had been arranged by Amir Ullah in my absence. We drove to Yadgar Chowk to announce our presence to the dealers in the market, allowing the oral network to alert everyone of my return. We walked with an old friend, a former master tailor turned “mineralogist.” His office was a room in a typical Skardu dwelling: an outer wall of mud-filled bricks with a small double door, always low enough
that the owners warned you to “watch your head.” This door opened into a small courtyard where a short, hearty shade tree and some flowers eked out an existence, with the help of hand-watering, in the hard, khaki-colored soil. The guest room turned office was close to the entrance; the main living room, housing the wife and female relatives, was on the opposite side of the house, off-limits except to closest family members.

We sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by stacks of hinged wooden boxes, a mineral storage method started in Peshawar over a decade ago, and now copied up north. The first specimens that appeared were some of the same lavender apatites (a must purchase for me), but of more interest was a small miniature-size transparent gwindel quartz, only the second one I had seen in my long history in the Northern Areas. I assembled a group of minerals, including some fine Alchuri adularias that were clusters of 2.5 to 3-cm crystals in small cabinet sizes, some single gem diopside crystals, and a few more of the lustrous red-brown vesuvianites. We sorted the group into appropriate lots, to make pricing easier. As always, the owner started high, and our response was that we had purchased similar material in the upper valleys for far less. As our time was limited, and the seller knew that we knew the correct local prices, an agreement was reached rather quickly.

We returned to the main thoroughfare to jump into a jeep belonging to one of the most senior dealers in Skardu. Not only did he buy from miners, but his son-in-law ran a collecting crew that dug fine material from alpine cleft deposits and pegmatites, generally in the upper Shigar Valley. His sitting room was always notoriously cold in the winter, but was very comfortable on this hot, sunny June day. Only rarely were we disappointed with his stock, and today we certainly were not. His alpine selection was superb, with some gemmy, lustrous epidotes from Hashupa that are up to 10 cm long and nearly 2.5 cm wide. We added a few strongly pleochroic blue-green zoisites and a golden titanite from nearby Alchuri to the lot, and then we set our gaze on three fine gem aquamarines. Two are from Balachi, on the Gilgit-Skardu Road across from Shengus, and both have the telltale “clam-shell” albite typical of those pegmatites. One has several crystals angled off the top: the locals nicknamed specimens of this style “missiles.” The second crystal is as gemmy as the first, but the 10-cm rod extends through a small collar of feldspar. The third aquamarine specimen, from Teston, is a “flower” cluster of thin prisms on a matrix of albite and quartz. These pieces were grouped into one lot and the price was asked: “Kia qimat hai?” The wizened owner responded that he would give a close price, with almost no room for bargaining. He uttered a reasonable one, and I did calculations on each piece to guess my selling price, and thought in Urdu what the correct price should be in rupees. With a difference of only about ten percent, it was easy to seal the deal and wrap up the small but valuable collection.

We returned to the market to visit our last major dealer, who 4-wheeled us up the narrow road to the high ground of the wealthier “suburbs” south of the main bazaar. In the guest-greeting room of his fairly new house, we sat on western-style sofas in a room decorated with posters and life-like plastic flowers, complete with clear glue-like “morning dew”—such flowers, imported from China, are found everywhere in the North. He also had a Chinese-made device emitting soothing sounds of running water and happy, chirping birds. I limited my selection to only four top specimens, knowing that this man’s asking price was not reasonable for material that, although very nice, was still only commercial. Two small aquamarines from Dassu had the aesthetics needed: both are on matrix, and the larger cluster has perfect silvery star mica in addition to feldspar. The two more expensive pieces had arrived from different valleys. From Balachi, a 12 ×15-cm matrix of “clamshell” albite holds a rich cluster of 2 to 2.7-cm tabular apatites of an unusual pinkish gray color. Although the piece was heavily rust-stained, I had faith in my abilities to clean it properly without damaging the acid-sensitive phosphate. Oddly, this specimen was nearly identical to two that I had purchased from this man’s partner more than a year before, one of which ended up in my personal collection. The other specimen was a single thick aquamarine crystal from Nyet, distinctive with its split “fishtail” termination.

Wanting the pieces was one thing, but agreeing on a low enough price was a different story.
We underwent a protracted give and take until I had lost all hope of leaving with the specimens. Reluctantly I ended my offers, the hardened dealer sensed the deal slipping away, and suddenly he agreed to my offer. We quickly wrapped up the specimens and returned to the hotel to finish packing everything, a job which we sandwiched around a decent dinner.

The dawn’s first light filtered through the curtains well before 5:00 a.m. For an energy boost I quickly consumed a handful of almond-stuffed dates with water, then loped down the road at 5:10 a.m. Amir Ullah and I had purchased tickets for the morning Boeing 737 flight to Islamabad, and I cautiously watched the sky for increasing clouds as I wound my way eastward and then northward over the undulating hills, seeing the first of the yawning villagers performing their early morning tasks.

After an hour, I reached the turnoff to Shigar, which I had just traversed by Jeep the previous day, and angled downward to the bridge. As I ran on by, the startled guard belatedly asked what I was doing. “Exercise!” I called as I crossed the bridge and climbed the steep opposing bank, emerging on the flat sand dunes that previously had barred all travel other than by jeep. I retraced my steps and did not drop my pace as I returned through the villages, seeing the adults taking their children to school. After an hour and a half, adrenalin kicked in, my consciousness channeled itself into tunnel vision, time was distorted, the road and I became one, and the road went on forever...

The 16-mile run ended abruptly at the metal gates of the hotel. I quickly replaced my spent glycogen and re-hydrated as the last of the “tailenders” stopped by to try to sell their wares. We loaded the Toyota for the short 15-km trip to the airport, but we felt apprehensive as billowing clouds formed over the upper mountains. Experience has taught us that Skardu has absolutely unpredictable weather, with unexpected changes every few hours on some days. Too many times we have awakened to clear skies, only to have the flight cancelled four hours later because of bad weather (kharab mausan).

We arrived at the airport and joined the queue leading to the terminal doors, depositing our luggage on the dusty gravel. Word was received that the flight had been approved by the authorities in Islamabad after consultations with the PIA staff in Skardu, and the crowd surged through the opening.

We dragged our heavy duffel bags into the building and laid them onto the X-ray conveyor belt. The black canvas bag, which contained the minerals wrapped in cotton and toilet paper and stored in a light tin box, drew attention.

“What is this?” the airport security officer queried.

“Stones,” we answered.

“Open the box,” he said, and we obliged him. He looked curiously at the box filled with neatly wrapped packages and asked us to open one of them. We did, and now, uncertain, the inspector called his supervisor over to look. The ranking officer asked a few questions and we gave level-headed responses, remaining calm and collected. The boss turned and looked at Amir Ullah’s walking cane and his graying hair and my whitening beard and whispered to his subordinate, which we overheard, “These are two old men, just let them go.” Little did he know that my slow, stiff leg movements were the results of a two-hour-plus run, not old age. But it was nice to see again the customary reverence for elders that was so common in Asian cultures—though it is now slowly disappearing, along with many other old customs.

After much anxious waiting we heard that the plane was landing. As we traveled to it by shuttle bus, I reflected upon our journey. Not only had we reached all of our desired destinations, we had done so virtually hassle-free. None of the unforeseen troubles that tend to spontaneously occur while traveling in one of the great mountain ranges of the world, (earthquakes, landslides, weather, etc.) ever materialized. And the religious and sectarian differences of the peoples inhabiting this great land did not raise their ugly heads on this particular journey, a journey which had initially been deemed impossible to complete. Now we finally felt confident that we would avoid the 20-hour road trip to Peshawar, since we were boarding the 45-minute flight to the
capital city of Islamabad.

The plane taxied down the long runway, and finally pulled aloft in the thin mountain air. It gradually spiraled upward, like a buzzard catching a desert updraft, then leveled off and headed northwest, following the Indus River.

Jagged, snow-capped granite peaks were visible from our window, seeming almost within our arms’ reach, as some of the most awesome mountain landscape in the world unfolded before our eyes. We continued in the direction of Afghanistan, the towering peaks of that country’s Hindu Kush Mountains pushing through the clouds. When the aircraft reached the Gilgit River, the pilot turned it to the south, and we approached the western flank of the massive Nanga Parbat (“Naked Mountain”); the plane actually flew lower than the mountain’s west-facing upper Diamar Face. One of the ten highest mountains in the world, Nanga Parbat soars to over 8000 meters and marks the western limit of the Himalayan Range. The mountain is a vertical mile higher than any of its neighbors, hence the nickname “Naked Mountain.” The Germans were so obsessed with being the first to climb it that they left scores of dead buried upon its slopes. The frequency of its self-generated storms and the extreme difficulty of climbing it have earned it a second nickname: “Killer Mountain.” About ten to twelve years ago a PIA plane disappeared near here while flying to Gilgit. The wreckage has never been found.

We crossed over the Babusar Pass, connecting the Diamar district to Chilas and the nearby peridot location at the far northern reaches of the Kaghan Valley, and then we started the slow descent to Islamabad. Upon landing we breathed the inevitable sigh of relief, but when the door opened we were immediately engulfed by the sweltering heat and smog of the Indus plains. We gathered our baggage and left the terminal, only to be assaulted by an army of taxi drivers, each touting the benefits of his machine. We were cajoled and corralled, pushed and shoved, and our luggage cart became a battleground for the competing drivers, all hoping to get the $30-$35 fare for the three-hour drive to Peshawar. We eventually settled upon a bright yellow, airconditioned Hyundai, and completed our journey home without incident. But there is a further anecdote connected with the journey: the story of the 18-kg feldspar.

Our Skardu friend, Dilshad, said that he would make arrangements to ship this monstrosity with some vegetable dealers from Swat who would be returning in their empty Suzuki pickups after delivering heaping truckloads of fresh produce to Skardu. The cost was 3000 rupees (about $50), and we paid him the cash. Our Peshawari taxi driver, Zareeb, normally waited at the airport until he saw the plane actually depart, so that if the flight should be cancelled we would have an immediate backup to go by road. That day Dilshad was with him at the airport and struck a deal whereby Zareeb would take the microcline in the taxi back to Peshawar for part of the fee and Dilshad would pocket the rest. So we ended up paying the driver full fare and petrol costs for his solo ride back, while he also collected on the "freight charges" of the feldspar!

Amir Ullah’s family was thrilled at his return. Over the past few decades they had heard so many stories of the various dangers he had encountered that they never took his safety for granted. No sooner had we returned than the phone started ringing incessantly, with various Afghan dealers calling to inform us of new material to view. Equally interesting was a call from our friend from the Northern Areas who finally felt comfortable enough to take his bi-colored beryl out from strife-ridden Gilgit and down to Peshawar to show us the following day.

The evening heat and humidity did not dissipate, and despite the efforts of the giant evaporative cooler in the window, I could not cool my room below 93° F. Good sleep is not possible in these conditions, and it was an exercise in discipline to awake and tumble from bed to start an early morning run. By the time I had walked the 50 meters from the car to the track, my shirt was drenched. After 3 km, sweat ran like rivers; by 8 km, I noticed that it no longer tasted of salt, a sure sign of electrolyte depletion. Luckily someone had placed a small bowl of salt next to a large jug of tepid water near the park entrance, and I scooped Teaspoons of it into my water bottles and drained them immediately. I doggedly looped the park again and again, accumulating the 13.1 miles I had set as a goal for the day. It took sheer willpower to finish the
run that day, and I believe that the mental discipline that it took to complete it was a factor two months later when, on a hot day in Ohio at the U.S. championships, I qualified for the world long course (18-mile run, 52-mile bicycle) duathlon championships to be held in the Dolomite Mountains in Italy in May, 2005. When that race was held I placed 13th in the world’s 50 to 54-year-old division, only 1 minute and 20 seconds from 10th place in that 5-hour race.

After a quick breakfast, we drove to Namak Mandi in the most sweltering heat that I had encountered on this trip, and stopped at the one-star hotel called Star Qubaila to meet our friend, the dealer from the Northern Areas. We slowly shuffled up to his second floor room to be greeted by the occupant with his rants about the extreme heat conditions. Coming from the northern mountains, where even on the hottest days the temperature drops into the 50's overnight, this man claimed that he had awakened at least a dozen times during the night and drenched himself with water from a bucket in the bathroom and returned to lie under the ceiling fan in a futile attempt to cool himself enough to sleep.

I tried to conceal my burning desire to see his heavily hyped beryl specimen as the dealer slowly unwrapped half a dozen lesser pieces retrieved from the same pocket. He finally hauled a large box made from heavy cardboard from under the bed and solemnly unwrapped the layers upon layers of cotton swathed around the specimen. When the piece was finally revealed, I nearly gasped; it was huge, a full 15 × 15 cm across the top termination, and strikingly different. The 10 to 12-cm base was a most unusual shade of lavender with sub-tones of pink, a color that I had never seen before in a beryl. The individual hexagonal prisms (about 2.5 cm across) were arranged in a parallel group more than 12 cm long. Near the base of the specimen was a parallel group of colorless quartz crystals extending roughly a third of the way around the circumference. In the last 2 cm of each of the beryl prisms, near termination, the color abruptly changed to a bright aquamarine blue, the color of the aquamarine flowers from the nearby deposit by the Raikot Bridge.

The specimen had been found a few kilometers south of this bridge, above a landslide-prone area named Tatopani ("hot water"), where oozing sulfur hot springs had left the entire hillside de-consolidated. Subsequent analysis determined that this was indeed a beryl with a few percent of cesium in the lavender section, but no additional elements that may have accounted for the unique color.

Many people who later saw the piece in Tucson thought that it was a tourmaline. There, an Afghan dealer who came from nowhere a few years ago and is now trying to sell specimens for up to $50,000 repeatedly asked me where I had bought the “Afghan tourmaline.” We continued to correct him by calling it “Pakistani bi-color beryl.” This “expert,” with two years in the mineral business, refused to believe us, remaining convinced that it was an Afghan tourmaline, but was mystified at the price that I had written on the tag, knowing that it would have cost him far more than this for a tourmaline of this size and color if purchased in Afghanistan.

Now came the horrendous task of trying to purchase this beauty. I made repeated critiques of very small defects and was rebuked immediately. I feigned that I really was not very interested, but that he might as well tell me a price even though I was not going to make an offer. He consulted in hushed tones in Shina with his partner, and then spat out a number. My heart sank like a lead bar in water. In a second I realized that the dollar equivalent of the rupee price he had uttered was $86,000, more than the value of the entire hotel where he was staying. Once I recovered, I slowly rose and drifted towards the door, muttering “Ziada manga”—“VERY, VERY EXPENSIVE.”

He followed us with protestations that the piece was number-one, top, top quality, and worth every rupee that he had asked. We told him that we would think about it overnight and that we would return at about 9:00 the following morning with a counter-offer.

Amir Ullah and I slowly walked the short distance to the main mineral market, alternately declaring the beryl owner completely mentally deranged, and praising the specimen that he possessed. We grappled with the price, but agreed that in the course of both of our histories here
we had never seen anything like it. We both found it far more remarkable than the dozens of Afghan tourmalines that were being offered on the market at prices from $10,000 to over $100,000, but could not rationalize the asking price.

We continued through the market area, and climbed a set of steep stone stairs to visit an Afghan acquaintance, who wanted to leave that afternoon to return to his family over the Friday religious holiday. He quickly opened his boxes and produced his usual fine assortment of gem crystals: five flawless dark blue indicolites from Kala, in the Pech Valley, and two very pink tourmalines, each with a bright green termination, from nearby Diwana Baba. Finally, from a large lot, I selected the only four undamaged pieces with crystals of bright orange spessartine sprinkled over doubly terminated pink kunzites from the classic Laghman Province spodumene locality of Mawi.

We were then summoned to a nearby room where the proprietor had only a single new specimen, but it was extremely nice, and the best example that I had seen from a newly producing deposit. The village of Dokoori, only about an hour’s drive by jeep above the hot springs of Chutron in the Bash Valley, had been producing very green emerald crystals in mica schist. Every emerald crystal from the occurrence that I had seen previously had been very small or shattered. Before me stood a specimen with a richly colored emerald the size of my thumb standing vertically on matrix. I had seen nothing close to this when I had visited the Northern Areas, and had not even bothered to go to this nearby site while I was in Chutron because reliable sources had told me that all mining work in Dokoori had stopped.

The specimen was quickly purchased after a short negotiating session, and packed into my cloth handbag. (Bill and Carol Smith, my collaborators on the list of Pakistan mineral locales published in the 1997 Mineralogical Record article, have added this fine piece to their Northern Areas collection.) Other dealers then offered to show me their stocks, but at the tail end of my trip I had become very picky and passed on everything that was offered to me.

We returned to Amir Ullah’s house, knowing that there were only two days left for me on this extended tour of Pakistan. After dinner, several people arrived for a late evening session and the first produced the largest single adularia crystal that I had ever seen from Alchuri. It was 12.5 cm long and a good 4 cm across at its widest section, and it was standing upright on matrix to boot! Since the offering price was reasonable, I quickly purchased it and had it packed for export.

Moments later, a guest from Nagar arrived and unwrapped the second fine emerald specimen of the day. But this one was from a new location in China, several hours north of the Khunjerab Pass, the crest of one of the highest drivable roads in the world, topping out at nearly 16,000 feet. Nagar is only about four hours’ drive from the Khunjerab, and some of its residents have been able to obtain visas from the Chinese consulate in Gilgit, and travel to the mining locality near the village of Dabdar. The specimen is small, with a 6-mm x 2-cm hexagonal prismatic crystal lying on a partial quartz crystal. It has a superb green color and good transparency, but its most notable feature is its very high luster, though no enhancing agents had been applied. It made the perfect compliment to three faceted emeralds from the same locality that I purchased the following evening.

Overnight Thursday, the stubborn, hot low pressure system that, typically for this region in June, had brought the great heat and humidity, finally shifted eastward, providing some relief outdoors. Inside, the same heavy brick and mortar that moderated the temperature extremes indoors now served to trap the previous day’s heat, making life miserable without a ceiling fan or air conditioner. Power outages called “loadshedding” occur when the electrical grid is overloaded and the electricity is cut in one substation and rerouted elsewhere. They are often scheduled in advance so that people can make plans to deal with them. The unscheduled ones are problematic, though, particularly during the night when sleep becomes impossible, and this night was one of those, allowing me only three hours of fitful sleep.

The following morning’s run was easier because of the cloud cover and a bit of a breeze, but
also difficult thanks to my general body fatigue. I returned to a hearty breakfast and a number of waiting guests, all wishing to make a sale. My dependable Afghan friend came through with a few more specimens of the very attractive clear quartz crystals perched on lustrous black epidotes from Baluchistan, and, for the third time in two days, several emerald crystals, these from a third location: Shamoozi village in the Swat Valley near the famous mine at Mingora. The Afghan was followed by an underling of one of the major dealers in Katlang topazes, and I purchased one of the eight or so pieces offered; the crystal was transparent, of a pinkish golden color, with a cross-hatched termination, and on matrix. While roaming the marketplace, this man had also found specimens of an unusual combination: purple apatite on a pair of parallel-growth green tourmaline crystals from Afghanistan. The overall aesthetics and nice contrasting colors made it an easy specimen to decide to purchase.

It was now time to check Amir Ullah’s stock of Zegi Mountain and Tor Ghar rare-earth minerals. He was one of the original buyers of this material and has made countless trips to the area. Unfortunately, production had been light during the past six months. Someone had started to do some mechanized mining, and a villager had been killed in an accident, so the local landowner had decided to end the mechanized work, forcing the miners to revert to the shovel and pick-ax method. There were only a few worthwhile bastnäsites to buy, and no xenotimes, although a handful of interesting rutile crystals had been found. They were transparent, with a silvery luster, and the largest, measuring about 2.5 cm, displayed a dark red interior when backlit. They were clean enough that I faceted a few of the broken pieces.

We returned to the market during the peak heat of the day, to loosen up the beryl’s owner a bit. We arrived at his room to listen to a long tirade about the miserable weather and the electrical outages. But the owner’s resolve was not broken in the least; I got nowhere in my extended conversation with him, and private discussions between him and Amir Ullah also did not reveal the real price that he wanted. We left in frustration, spewing numerous negative comments about the man’s mental condition, character, and genesis.

As we walked through the market we were approached by two partners wanting to show me some brookites. I had been slowly collecting a few of these at a time, none too outstanding, but went into their shop to take a look. Unfortunately, someone else had selected first, and even though these brookites were the largest that I had seen, all of the pieces of the lot had some slight defects. Luckily our next stop was at the shop of one of my best Afghan friends, and he had just selected from a large lot of similar material that had arrived that day. We picked out a number that were cleaned and ready for viewing and were told that the rest of the lot would be available and would be saved for me to view the following day.

As the late afternoon shadows lengthened in the narrow alleys, an Afghan with whom we had not done business before begged us to go to his shop, insisting that he would sell to us at a reasonable price. He opened a wooden box to reveal a collection of the distinctive Papra tourmaline described earlier. I was able to select eleven pieces, some single crystals and others attached to clear quartz crystals. He then produced a cabinet-size specimen of multiple yellow spodumene crystals about 10 cm in length, and on a very lustrous smoky quartz with just a hint of citrine sub-tone. The contrast was excellent, and so was the price, and he guaranteed me that I would make a good profit on the piece. It turned out that he was right: a dealer purchased it from me at the very next show where I exhibited it.

We returned home in the gathering dusk, our appetites dulled by the heat. The local families eat very late during the heat of midsummer, sometimes at 10 p.m., having waited for the house and themselves to cool a bit. We started the dreaded, tedious task of wrapping the minerals for export, sitting cross-legged on cushions in the large room which served as a bedroom, family room and greeting room for relatives and close friends. We mounted an assembly line of four workers to tuck a small paper chit with the mineral identification, locality, and lot number next to each specimen, before carefully wrapping it in surgical cotton, followed by a cushioning layer of Chinese toilet paper.
Saturday, the last full day in Peshawar of this seemingly endless trip, dawned hot and clear. I was faced with the daunting task of completing a 13.1-mile run in the debilitating heat to fulfill my established goal of running 95 miles in one week. The first 8.5 miles went as well as could be expected, but I made the last five circuits on the oval track on sheer willpower and, in the typical fashion of an obsessed runner, I passed my desired goal and added an extra mile and half to the week’s total, taking nearly two and a half hours to do it.

Perhaps the run foretold the remarkable ending of this last day—though it took a while developing. My Afghan friend performed his daily ritual, arriving as I finished breakfast, displaying his reward for his tireless combing of the market on the previous day. This time it was all Pakistan material, including a good bi-color tourmaline from the legendary Stak Nala mine. I had found very few of these in recent years and had not seen one during this entire trip to the mountains. I always told the Afghans that I traveled to the Northern Areas and that the only way they could sell me specimens from there was if they gave me the Northern Areas price, which surprisingly they often did. This time I was able to purchase two matrix aquamarines for a price that would be difficult to negotiate up north. Probably he had bought the specimens on the oldest street in the mineral bazaar, aptly named “the narrow market.” Northern Areas dealers have given it a second name: “heartbreak market.” After they have arrived with delusions of selling all of their merchandise for a large profit, the fierce competition from cutthroat local dealers wears them down, and, as their hotel tabs and the debilitating heat increase, many simply sell for a very small profit, or even take a loss, and leave town with their tail between their legs.

We arrived late in the market to be besieged by the dealers whom we had previously promised to see but had missed because of a lack of time. The few we did visit did not warrant the little time that was left, particularly with the bi-color beryl foremost in my mind. We strolled to the Star Qubaila Hotel, discussing our strategy en route.

Amir Ullah then said it was time for “number one cinema acting” as we mounted the cement steps and knocked on the wooden door to the decrepit room. The mountain man groggily answered. He had been napping after another poor night’s sleep and after a full day of waiting (we were arriving about seven hours late). Initial conversations were not hopeful and our continued debates proved inconclusive. I left the room two to three times to allow Amir Ullah to use his superb talent for diplomatic persuasion.

After an hour, my patience was at an end and time was running out. I forced the owner to finally name a final price, but his “final price” was still above the selling number that I had been contemplating for three days. In a very non-Asian fashion I stomped out of the room, visibly perturbed, muttering curses and telling the dealer that I was not interested. Amir Ullah rushed down the hallway to stop me from leaving the building and said “That was a very good job of acting.” To which I replied, “What acting? I am angry!”

The dealer was peering out of the half-opened door, trying to read the situation. He stepped outside and then told me to come back into the room and resolve our differences. I replied that he had had three days to make the price and we were much too far apart. I uttered an Urdu proverb: “Asman, zamin, ka farq” (“the sky, the earth, the difference in between”).

He protested, and I refused to re-enter the room. He resorted to grabbing my arm and trying to pull me in as I braced my foot against the wall. A see-saw action followed until the ever-affable Amir Ullah intervened, defusing the situation, and persuaded me to go inside. He talked to the other man privately and came back to me to report that the price had come down, but not nearly to the level that I desired. I told him “Let’s go; time is short.” And he, in his infinite wisdom, said that the piece was both unique and superb and I could not leave it behind. He proposed once again an open tupki, the bargaining technique which gives the opposing parties the option to reject or accept a broker’s offer. I agreed. Up went my hand, on top of which the miner laid his huge calloused hand. Amir Ullah added a third hand to the stack and pushed the three downwards and shouted a number in Urdu. I was stunned to hear that it was an acceptable
number, but waited for an immediate rejection from the other side. There were muttered protests and negative motions of the head, but then I heard the words, “Thik hai” (“It is okay”), and it slowly sank in that the piece was mine.

We quickly packed the beryl before anything else happened and said our goodbyes and left. Once on the street, Amir Ullah again said, “That was an academy award of acting! I almost believed you when you told me you were not acting when you stormed out of the room.”

I replied, “No acting, I was leaving and I had given up all hope of buying the piece.” And then I thanked him for his calm, level head and diplomatic resolve in ending this three-day ordeal.

It was 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, a semi-holiday in the mineral market as the more religious dealers took off Friday, the Muslim holy day, and added Saturday to their weekend. President Musharaff had ordered that Sunday was to be the official holiday to align the week more with Western businesses. But Peshawar is definitely more conservative than the other major cities in Pakistan, so Friday is still observed by many religious people, while the more secular ones observe Sunday, thereby creating a three-day semi-weekend.

We had received a call from one of our best Afghan contacts that morning. Instead of returning to visit his family on Friday, he had decided to wait in Peshawar on the word that freshly dug material was en route. We had heard this story many times before, and knew that the vast majority of these rumors never materialized. Therefore we never altered our plans to fit them. We climbed the steep concrete stairs to the man’s second-floor shop, exhilarated that the beryl was now in my white cloth bag. But we found the room locked and the entire floor abandoned except for one menial worker. This man had been instructed to tell us to wait; the material had arrived just minutes before and the dealer was returning as soon as possible. Moments later, our friend indeed arrived, a dirty white heavy cotton bag in tow, flashing a quick elfin smile.

“Fresh, fresh material,” he proudly proclaimed in Pushtu, and immediately opened his office door and invited us inside. Quickly he unwrapped about a dozen specimens, packed only in newspaper, good but not spectacular. I selected one morganite and we quickly agreed on the price.

Then, with a grin, he pulled out the last fist-sized specimen remaining in his bag, and placed it on the yellowed laminated mat before us, under the glare of the 8-cm clear bulbs that were the lighting method of choice in the market. Seven weeks I had spent on this long road, and at last a heart-throbbing mineral had appeared in the final hour! A “floater” fist-sized piece of white feldspar with a beautiful association of purple apatite and pollucite. The apatite crystals form an intergrowth approximately 2.5 cm across, and are of the best, deepest lavender color found in Afghanistan. The lustrous white pollucite crystal is complete, without the etched surfaces so common in the species from this region, and is about 5 × 6 cm in size. The piece could not be better aesthetically, with three different natural sitting positions and no saw marks or damage to detract in any way.

Within a second I decided that I needed this piece. Amir Ullah leaned toward me and whispered “Nayab,” the Urdu word for the best of the best. I did not need to be told this, as this piece took my breath away. I eagerly, anxiously, breathlessly inquired in Pushtu, “What is the price?” trying to sound casual and non-committal.

He immediately responded with a number that amounted to many lakhs of rupees (a lakh is 100,000). I was crestfallen, disheartened, depressed. It was far more than my initial thought for a selling price. I immediately doubled my idea of the price, knowing that someone else would have the same visceral reaction to the piece that I’d had. I gingerly made an offer, which was rebuffed immediately, the seller indicating that I was not even close. We asked for his final price and he came down about 20%, but the figure was still 2.5 times what I had offered.

We asked the wily, wiry Afghan to step out for a moment so that Amir Ullah and I could consult privately. For the second time in 20 minutes, Amir Ullah, in his infinite wisdom, told me
that I could not leave this piece, that it was top-top, and I would sell it immediately. I raised my idea of my offer by another 50%. Our friend returned and, knowing that we were strapped for time, suggested that I make one offer, only one offer, and if it was acceptable, he would sell the piece. Further consultations with Amir Ullah were conducted behind an upraised calculator, and we finally reached a compromise number. I nervously whispered my offer, barely audible, and for a few seconds that seemed an eternity, the Afghan thought it over, his face blank and unreadable. Finally, with a flash of a smile, he said "Okay." I was stunned, relieved, and disbelieving, and the entire deal was done in less than ten minutes! (This piece was the first one sold from the entire collection that I had purchased on this trip.)

Immediately, though carefully, I packed the specimen, along with the yellowish golden pink morganite (both from Mawi, Laghman Province). We walked down the steps and into the empty marketplace, light-footed and light-headed. We were having a physical reaction to this beautiful natural object. In the gathering dusk, we still had one last stop on the agenda: to see the newly arrived brookites that had been cleaned that day. We stepped into our good friend’s shop to be warmly greeted with the traditional Afghan hospitality and offered a choice of various teas or mango juice. I chose the latter, and the office boy scurried out into the market and returned with a large 24-ounce glass of my favorite golden orange-colored drink. We quickly surveyed the brookites and I picked out a dozen, associated with quartz. I was equally impressed by the quartz crystals with inclusions of brookite showing epitaxial rutile needles, and I selected two dozen. I rounded off the purchase with two more of the new yellow-green grossular crystals, then packed everything into a flat wooden box, rather than in newspaper, since the specimens were so fragile. Finally I returned home to a late-night task of packing specimens and belongings, and a fine farewell meal.

My last day in Peshawar started out less humid and only moderately hot. I had only one more day of long runs left, with Monday scheduled to be a rest day, partially because I was facing the combination of the long overnight flight to Karachi, with connections to Dubai, and onward to Frankfurt, followed by a tiresome three-hour drive to the Ste.-Marie-aux-Mines show in France. I had set a goal of 180 km for 8 days, an understandable distance for the locals as it was the distance by road from Peshawar to Islamabad, usually taking three hours in a car. The run was the home stretch and I ran it slowly, not wanting to overheat. Thirteen revolutions around the oval, nearly fifteen miles, and in two and a half hours my goal was accomplished.

I returned home to last-minute packing, and we left in the heat of midday for the three-hour drive to the Islamabad airport. Work was finished, and now there was leisure time to contemplate this trip. I mused that running and biking a long course duathlon and obtaining quality mineral specimens on a long buying trip were strikingly similar. Initially there is apprehension that one will not even complete the task. The forward journey seems daunting, but one keeps plodding away, accumulating miles (specimens). One must learn to pace one’s self, ignoring the competition (avoiding bidding wars) and one must be careful not to burn out of energy (money) early in the race. Some competitors make the mistake of beginning too hard, only to fall by the wayside or slow dramatically (purchase the wrong material or pay too much). As the hours of the race unfold (weeks of traveling and searching for specimens), confidence in one's abilities builds (one becomes more adept at choosing and bargaining). After four to five hours, the finish line nears and if one has had a good race, it becomes apparent that a medal is possible, and that the last surge forward can propel one to the victory stand (the top pieces appear and one is successful in purchasing a “trophy” specimen).

I was still stunned. In the last hour of the last day of the last week of an extended trip, two of the top three minerals purchased on my entire journey had fallen into my lap. Luck or fate, chance or skill, one never knows, but the road goes on forever....