

## Club Newsletter--May 2007

Dear Club member,

Like many of you, we grew up believing that "The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain"--but after nearly two weeks in Spain, we now can say unequivocally that this is not true! Still, we didn't let a week of rain put a damper on our trip, as you will see.

Since we could not get with our airlines miles a direct flight from California to Spain, we opted to fly into London's Heathrow airport, and stay for two nights in London to see the city. Naturally, the British pound hit a recent record high against the American dollar about ten minutes after our plane landed--but that did not stop us from enjoying strolling through Westminster and London, visiting St James Park, Buckingham Palace, and Soho, and savoring a selection of excellent English ales and meat pies and lots of chips! The weather was gorgeous, warm and sunny, not a hint of fog, during our entire stay in London.

We arrived in Barcelona on Saturday night, and checked in at our hotel, the Barcelona Center Guest House & Studios on Carrer de Comtal street, in the heart of the old city, just a block away from the Plaza Catalunya. The room was in an old apartment building with an ancient door and a teeny little lift. Our room was small, as are most rooms in the old buildings in Spain, but had been refurbished recently and was very clean and comfortable, with a small center courtyard for our use. Mr. Agustin Giralt owns and runs the establishment, and was very accommodating and helpful to us--and speaks English much better than either of us spoke Spanish!

As soon as we had checked in, we immediately headed out for *tapas*, small, savory Spanish dishes enjoyed as a snack or with other tapas as a meal. Our hotel was located in the heart of the old city, so Sunday and Monday were spent exploring the ancient streets and buildings filled with shops and restaurants, with time Sunday for an excellent late



View from our room in Westminster.



A narrow street in the old part of Barcelona.

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night Flamenco show. During the finale, the dancer made use of Richard's hat, as we laughingly called it *El Sombrero Famoso* for the rest of our trip.

Tuesday April 24th was our 25th wedding anniversary and we thoroughly enjoyed our special day, ending it with a delicious dinner at *Els Quatre Gats*, a restaurant that opened in 1897, once the meeting place of artists including Picasso and Gaudi. But the day's highlight was a meeting at the office of the very charming and affable Josep Sanchez-Lafuente i Mariol, nicknamed Pitu, owner of one of the two ametrine mines in Bolivia. The name "Ametrine" is of course a combination of the quartz variety names amethyst and citrine, and refers to a unique material that contains both purple amethyst and golden citrine! It is unique to this region in Bolivia, just a short distance from the Brazilian border. (Photos and details on the locality can be found on Pitu's web site at [ametrino.com](http://ametrino.com).) The material is ideally suited for gemstone use, and if you've never seen it, you can imagine how beautiful the combination of colors is, particularly when the minerals occur in clearly defined zones.



Celebrating our anniversary while wearing *El Sombrero Famoso*.

You may also be able to imagine our excitement when Pitu brought out a flat of 3" polished slices of ametrine. These showed both purple and orange zones with clearly defined edges, indicative of amethyst and citrine crystals that had grown side by side! They looked like radiation warning signs! We had never seen these before, and as you might expect went a bit gaga, trying not to drool on the pieces (just kidding about the last part.) As you also might expect, they were rather expensive, but Pitu was kind enough to allow us to pay him in American dollars rather than in Euros, as the Euro was also at an all-time high against the dollar. He also was so kind as to give us a smaller slice as a gift! We have photos of these on our web site if you want to get an idea of their beauty--go to [www.mineralofthemonthclub.org](http://www.mineralofthemonthclub.org), and click on "Spain trip" on the left side, and then click on "Barcelona photos" to see them.

We also obtained from Pitu beautiful, well-formed crystals consisting of both amethyst and smoky quartz, another rare combination produced at his mine. These are being shipped home and haven't arrived yet, but we'll give you the details on next month's Offer sheet. AND we picked out a few polished slices and tumble-polished pieces of the gemmy orange/red sphalerite from northern Spain, gorgeous material that we fell in love with a few years ago when we first saw it. Pitu had purchased a small lot that was collected some years ago. The mine is currently closed, flooded, and on public land--a triple whammy that means the chances of recovering more of this sphalerite is extremely slight.

The weather was ideal our whole time in Barcelona, balmy with a light breeze, but it was the last we would see of the sun for a while. Thursday saw us renting a car (a Citroen with a stick shift), packing

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up, and heading to La Rioja province to visit the pyrite mine, a trip of about 450 kilometers through the scenic Spanish countryside on the highly efficient toll roads, which included crossing the Greenwich or prime meridian (0° longitude.) We had gotten directions ahead of time on Google maps, but unfortunately one of the local roads was closed due to construction with no discernable detour. Fortunately, with some excellent directions from a non-English speaking Spanish truck driver, we were able to find Navajun, the small town near the mine.



Ruins in Navajun.

Navajun is a town of fourteen people, a couple of dogs, at least twenty-five cats, and at least twenty or more homes, many more than 700 years old and currently in ruins, as you'll see in our photos. The pyrite mine owner, Pedro Ansorena Conde, also owns a "Casa Rural" Inn in Navajun called Casa Don Pedro, one of two "Casa Rurals" in Navajun, and he had a gourmet dinner and a nice large sleeping room waiting for us. (The cost of sleeping rooms and meals at his Inn were quite reasonable.) We were informed by Senor Martin, the Inn's excellent chef, that it had been raining for two days already, and the rain would continue on and off the whole time we there, most unusual for this time of year--although where can you find "normal" weather anymore these days? We later heard that it had snowed there after our departure!

Waiting and hoping for nicer weather for our visit to the mine, Friday we went instead to Pedro's warehouse in the nearby village of Aguilar. Here is where his five workers prepare the specimens for sale when conditions prevent them from working the mine. And there really is very little preparing to do as compared to minerals found at most other localities--the pyrite comes out of the ground with its characteristic great luster. All that needs to be done is some light cleaning, a little trimming of the matrix, and occasionally gluing in pyrite cubes that popped out of the matrix during collecting operations.



Cleaning pyrite specimens at Pedro's warehouse in Aguilar.

We carefully examined hundreds of pyrite specimens, and even saw a few large rocks with dinosaur tracks on them! We eagerly set aside the best and biggest pyrites with a view to purchasing them for sale back home. After a couple of hours, when we had looked at everything and filled up a table with about 30 large specimens and perhaps 50 or 60 medium-size specimens, we waited to hear his price for

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the whole lot, fully ready to put some of them back, as painful as it would be. But Pedro came through for us in a big way with a very very fair price, and even though shipping costs from Spain to the U.S. are expensive and the weak dollar means a more than 30% premium on the cost, we will be able to offer these exquisite pieces at very fair prices. Pedro is shipping them to us, along with the amethyst/smoky quartz points we purchased from Pitu and some souvenirs we obtained along the way. But we did carry home with us on the airplane one amazing matrix piece with a group of about seven or eight highly lustrous 1" cubes that will not your socks off! Pedro said that only five or six specimens with such intergrown crystals/twins of this superb quality are found each year. We'll put a photo of it on our web site, along with a copy of our pyrite write-up, so you can read up on the history and other details about the incredible mine.

Saturday was day two in Navajun, and we really had no choice but to go to the mine, even in the steady rain. Pedro took us in his 4-wheel drive jeep up the two kilometers to the mine, along the slippery, muddy road past gorgeous vistas of green terraced hills, as all the rain had made the mountainsides lushly green. The mine consists primarily of a large open pit, which of course was completely flooded, with a very pretty, newly-formed waterfall trickling into the cavity. We donned our rain gear and boots and first examined a short wall to the side of the pit, which held hundreds of small pyrite cubes, about ½" and smaller, and Richard picked up a small octahedral pyrite specimen, actually very unusual for the locality, which produces so many near-perfect cubes.

We walked up to another collecting area, past more dinosaur tracks, and found what we had traveled thousands of miles for, and what seemed to us like the mother lode: a wall with dozens and dozens of large cubes, 2" and more, ready for the picking! Unfortunately, the marl matrix there literally absorbs the rain, and just crumbled under pressure, making it impossible to collect any large cubes in matrix. Fortunately, it will dry out again when the warm dry weather returns, and the crystals can be removed in matrix, so we felt obliged to leave most of them there for future extraction--it seemed like tearing a baby away from its mother to collect them that way.

However, a number of them had already loosened from the matrix, so gathering them up felt rather like adopting them and taking them to a nice safe home, where they will be treasured and admired.



Pedro and Richard survey the flooded mine, with the waterfall in the back.



Examining pyrite cubes in the mine wall.

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And we did find one sizable matrix piece laying on the ground that we had to have, with lots of 1" or so crystals. As we have said many times before, nothing beats collecting the minerals yourself, having not just the specimen but also the experience that goes with it. As you can imagine, or may know from experience, it's an awe-inspiring feeling to see the lustrous cubes in their natural environment, and to contemplate the forces that caused them to occur, and how our Creator put those forces in place for us to enjoy. The potential for pyrite production at the mine seems almost limitless, and it should continue to produce mind-boggling cubes for decades to come!



Pyrite cubes and twins we collected, drying out on the window sill of our rustic room at Casa Don Pedro in Navajun.

All too soon, our pockets were full and the rain was worsening, and back to the Inn we went, to relax and bask in our experience. The roasted lamb cutlets with garlic, fresh salad and homemade bread we enjoyed for dinner, naturally along with some local La Rioja wine, tasted better than any we could recall, and we slept soundly in our comfortable room. This was truly the highlight of our trip.

On Sunday morning it was time to drive the nearly 400 kilometers to Toledo, and we were able to take another road out of La Rioja and enjoy more of the splendid scenery. As we passed through Madrid, we finally saw the sun again, and the weather was gorgeous as we finally made our way to the Abaceria Hotel in Toledo, a beautiful city and former capital of the Spanish Empire and place of coexistence of Christian, Jewish and Moorish cultures.

The rain was back Monday for most of the day, but on Tuesday it cleared up, and we were able to browse the streets of Toledo, enjoying the architecture, and doing some last-minute gift shopping. You'll never see more swords and knives for sale in one place! The rain returned Wednesday as we drove back to Madrid, and enjoyed a tour of the Spain branch of Jehovah's Witnesses just outside Madrid. Afterwards, we drove to our hotel, always a nerve-wracking experience in the larger cities filled with one-way streets, narrow corridors, and the dreaded traffic circles. But we arrived in plenty of time for a late night dinner and a final Flamenco show, before driving to the airport on Thursday for the long flight home. A six-hour layover in Chicago allowed time for a nice visit with Richard's Mom and sister, along with a delicious Chicago-style Italian beef sandwich, the icing on the cake of our trip. (The visit, not the sandwich.)



A view of Toledo from our hotel room.

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Of course, not every moment of the trip was complete bliss, as Richard got sick in Barcelona, and Cheryl in Toledo, but those are the things you instantly forgot about in the light of so many wonderful memories. We're already talking about our next trip over to Spain! As we mentioned, mine/hotel owner Pedro Ansoreno Conde was most hospitable toward us. He allows collecting at the mine for \$120 Euros per day, the surrounding area offers hiking trails, hot springs, and wine-tasting at the local wineries, or *bodegas*--one could enjoy a wonderful vacation just in the La Rioja area!



Tired but happy on our last night in Madrid.

We were happy to arrive home Friday afternoon, shake off the jet lag by about Sunday, and get back into our wonderful business of sending minerals to appreciative people! We're putting all our photos on our web site and you are welcome to take a look.

### SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING SHOWS

Cayucos Show  
Veteran's Memorial Building  
Cayucos, CA  
June 16 & 17, 2007

Culver City "Fiesta of Gems"  
Veteran's Memorial Building  
4117 Overland Avenue, Culver City  
July 14 & 15 2007

### SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING SPECIMENS:

**June 2007** By coincidence, it looks like we'll be featuring two oxide minerals in a row, as we feature botryoidal **Hematite** [ $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ ] from Morocco. After a streak of several small minerals in a row, it's nice to get back to fist-size Deluxe-size specimens again!

**July 2007** In July 1997, when we had only a handful of members, we featured sprays of exceptional **Epidote** [ $\text{Ca}_2\text{Al}_2(\text{Fe}^{3+},\text{Al})(\text{Si}_3\text{O}_{12}(\text{OH}))$ ] from Peru, and we are happy to report we will feature it again 10 years later! This will be an exceptional month. We're working on the following for the rest of the year: Andradite garnet from Mexico, stichtite from Tasmania, thomsonite from India, and native silver from China, along with a number of others. This will be another excellent year!

As always, let us know ahead of time if you wish to pass on any of these specimens.

Finally in June, we'll be sending Deluxe members some nice large pieces! We wish all of you our best in the meantime.--Richard, Cheryl & Crew.