

# Impressions from the Lapis Mines in Badakshan

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### By Guy Clutterbuck

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The Lapis Lazuli mines of Badakshan are the oldest and certainly produce the finest Lapis Lazuli in the world. Dates of origin of the mine known as 'Sar-e-Sang' are a source of debate, there is evidence of workings going back six thousand years, and continued dates obtained from ancient regal jewellery in Egypt and Iraq support this.

Anyone wanting to see exceptionally fine Lapis jewellery should visit the British Museum and see the Royal jewellery and other attendant objects found in the 1930's in the Kings burial chamber in 'Ur'; formerly Mesopotamia, now southern Iraq. The Lapis used is unquestionably from Sar-e-Sang and the pieces are approximately 4,500 years old. Merchants traded the stone throughout most of Asia and into Europe using the numerous silk routes that passed through or nearby what is now northern Afghanistan.

To get there nowadays is a highly dangerous trip to Kabul followed by a jeep ride and finally a horseback journey to the mines. The only viable alternative is the route I took over the mountains from Pakistan. Since the border is officially closed between Afghanistan and Pakistan it is no less arduous than the trip via Kabul. The motivation for taking this route however, is that any Lapis obtained is less likely to be robbed on the return journey to the only viable export point, namely Peshawar. This city on the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan has taken over as the main conduit for Afghan trade since the destruction of Kabul airport. There are groups of what could optimistically be described as muj\*deen roaming Northern Afghanistan, in reality little more than bandits. Nonetheless, Masood, a respected commander, and at the time of writing defence minister in the interim government of Afghanistan, has a reasonably firm grip on Badakshan. So the travellers real enemy in the mountain passes are not rival factions of mujalladeen but simply exhaustion. It is approximately four days to the mines from the Pakistan border, but that is four days hard going on foot and horseback. There is no food other than what you bring yourself or what you scrounge from the occasional farmer who has drifted back since the Russian departure to eke out a diminished crop from the arid soil. Whole villages were bombed out reducing the farmland to the batTen khaki colour of the jagged surrounding mountains. Sleep is out in the open and at that altitude the nights are very cold. Because of the elements the possibility of altitude sickness and fear of stepping on the flotsam of war with the Soviets, (specifically old antipersonnel mines dropped by helicopter) it is important that anyone contemplating such a trip should be fully prepared physically and mentally.

In the far distance you can see a small dark patch against the buff mountain face, this is the entrance to the main mine 'Mardan-y-Yak', now worked out. Finally after a couple of hatTowing river crossings you arrive at the final destination, rarely visited by Europeans, Sar-e-Sang in the shadow of the Lapis mountain. (The crossings in the late afternoon in summer are the worst since the sun's warmth has melted the snows all day creating white-water torrents in the valleys.) The small town of Sar-e-Sang is similar to many other mining towns, there is a frontier atmosphere about the place. You rarely see women in the country areas of Afghanistan unless they are working in the fields. However in the mining area there isn't a woman in sight. Consequently there is little to soften the environment.

From Sar-y-Sang which in reality is a collection of mud-built hovels along a natTow winding path which constitutes the main street, there is an hours struggle up the steep mountain face to the entrance of the mines. In places the gradient is so extreme that logs have been dragged up to create a series of parapets and ledges which the miners struggle over daily on their rig-zagging path to work.

Along the difficult climb you occasionally pass a blinded miner who holds out his hand asking for 'buckshee', When I asked what caused their blindness and injuries, which in some cases are appalling mutilations, my guide replies "bum.., bum", He meant "bomb" and in some cases explosives. He was referring of course to the Afghan mujalladeen war with the Soviets. However in some instances the injuries. may have been more or less self-inflicted, caused by the inept handling of explosives in the mining process.

The sight of these figures certainly focuses the mind on the very real dangers of extracting this most beautiful of rocks. (Lapis is actually defined as a rock, in as much as it is a combination of several different minerals, with the Lazurite being predominant in giving the rock its intensity of blue.)

At the entrance to the mines which could best be described as holes, a Badakshani amIed with a Kalashnikov demands a pass. Since I was accompanied by the current leaseholder, (a Panjshiri who had made his fortune from emeralds in the Panjshir valley), the usual requirement was waived. We entered the mine, in this case the fourth mine, (in Dari, the local tongue, 'Mardan-y-Char').

The tunnel became increasingly narrow so in certain places we had to drag ourselves on our stomachs with only a few inches to spare

above us.. Equipped with only a hand held Chinese torch for illumination, (my American made one had got lost in the freezing snow earlier on) the only view I had was the soles of my guides' boots as he unavoidably drew the thick clogging dust behind him.

The distant clanking noise up ahead became clearer and more resonant as we neared the working area. The tunnel began to widen and barely discernible hands emerged from the dust and darkness to grab and prod. They turned out to belong to the local thieves, who helped themselves to a few pieces of Lapis as the mining trolley went past on its way out of the mine. In the blackness of the confined space, the shouts and jabbering heightened a feeling of claustrophobia that was difficult to ignore.

Finally, after a distance of what must have been approximately one hundred and fifty yards we arrived in what appeared to be a sort of catacomb with miners frantically working at the cavities that the explosives had blown out. With my torch I picked out the seam of blue rock overhead which snaked through the parent rock, a dull grey/white calcite. The iron pyrite (also known as 'fool's gold') caused the rock to sparkle with golden flecks. Where the men had clearly identified a pocket of fine Lapis known as 'the eye' or 'the best' ('hobats' in Dari), they worked it away from the roof or sides of the hollow. (I would say the area of this hollow was about the size of an average western living room.)

The shouting intensified as the miners scrambled to gather blocks and shards of Lapis that they knocked out from the cracked rock with the help of a sizeable metal bar and a sledge hammer, about the size of a British 14lb hammer. Working in this environment is a serious business fraught with hazards; a western health and safety inspector would find it hard to conceive the lack of precautions. Most of those are left to 'the will of Allah'. There is not a hard hat or a pair of goggles in sight, and their idea of a miners lamp is a paltry torch.

When they start using explosives, the western observer, or any observer in his right mind should clear the area immediately. They drill a series of holes, (the Swedish drills manufactured by 'Atlas Copco' are the preferred choice over the rather inept Chinese effort) in order to house the sticks of explosives. Normally four of five sticks are required to bring the roof down. They handle these explosives with astonishing casualness.

Having carefully positioned myself at what I judged to be a safe distance, I waited for the explosion and the smoke and dust that followed to clear. Returning to the face area can be lethal after the dynamiting has taken place because in the excitement of the moment, the miners have been known to be neglectful in checking if all the explosives have been detonated. I am told that occasionally they begin chipping away immediately with horrifying and predictable results.

After some time at the face of the fourth mine we continued our struggle through the maze of tunnels until we reached a couple of wiry, elderly miners who alone were working an unpromising seam, armed with only an antiquated Chinese drill. Since there was no ventilation or extractor fans the build up of carbon monoxide was overpowering and the thin protection of a headscarf over my face didn't stop me from choking and retching. How these two miners survived is beyond me. A hundred metres at a spluttering crawl finally brought us out at the main entrance to the mine. (The first and fourth mines which produce the top quality material have finally worked themselves into one another and become joined.)

Looking down from the level surface that formed the entrance, we could see down a virtual precipice to the valley below. The vaulting heights of the snow covered mountains contrasted with impossibly blue sky and at that altitude it wasn't easy to draw breath. If our friend the health and safety inspector had survived this far without a heart attack he would have doubtless had time to reflect.

The miners work on average twelve hours a day. There are no holidays unless they are too exhausted to keep dragging themselves up the mountain. Some of them remain in the mining village for the entire winter since the mountain passes are closed by snowfall. Their huts are without furnishing, save for the inevitable steel trunk and rugs covering the hard earth floor. Injuries and illnesses are dealt with by an unqualified doctor. The miners are paid on a commission basis by the mine leaseholder, an individual or a syndicate who currently pays approximately £10.00 per month. In terms of potential yield during that period it is a negligible amount for leasing the mine. The miners wages are an additional expense which in reality are supplemented by a limited amount of pilfering at the face. The leaseholders who are usually Panjshiri, (the neighbouring province) cannot police the mines too assertively for fear of inflaming traditional tribal and regional animosities; besides, legend has it that the mountain itself is a woman and if the authorities become too heavy handed she won't 'yield the goods'.

The miners finish their working day by descending from the mines carrying anything up to sixty kilos of Lapis on their backs. The sight of the night shift returning to the village far below as the dawn breaks over the mountains and filters through the dust that has risen behind them, is a sight not easily forgotten.

There you have it, a brief glimpse of the mines in July 1994. Controlled properly they may last for another thousand years, but as little in that part of the world is properly controlled it is hard to say. The problem currently is that the mines are being worked too

hard, with a resultant glut of Lapis on the world market, particularly in Hong Kong. Anyone considering purchasing Lapis should really search for the finest material. Which is a rich, vibrant almost violet blue. Its beauty gives anyone lucky enough to acquire it an indication why so many face danger, hardship and deprivation extracting it from Badakshan, probably the most remote and inhospitable region of Afghanistan.

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