

THE TUCSON EXPERIENCE

Almost everyone with an interest in mineral specimens, mineralogy, gemstones, and the lapidary arts is familiar with the Tucson Gem, Mineral & Fossil Showcase. That's the official, catchall name for the annual assemblage of trade shows that literally turns the city of Tucson, Arizona, into the gem-and-mineral capital of the world for three weeks each year.

These combined shows, which fill the calendar from late January until mid-February, are often referred to simply as "Tucson." They attract nearly 1,000 mineral and gemstone dealers from around the world and pump more than \$150 million into the Tucson economy. The Tucson Gem, Mineral & Fossil Showcase draws an estimated 100,000 visitors, and show space and lodging are booked years in advance.

But the significance of Tucson extends far beyond head counts and dollar figures. Tucson is the place where new mineral discoveries are announced, new specimens are introduced, and marketing trends and the prices of mineral specimens and gemstones are established for the following year.

Today's event is nothing like the local gem-and-mineral show that the Tucson Gem & Mineral Society founded in 1955. That inaugural show, which featured modest exhibits by 18 mineral hobbyists, didn't quite fill an elementary-school gymnasium. But the show managed to grow slowly and within a few years it had moved to somewhat more spacious quarters—a Quonset hut at the Tucson fairgrounds.

The Tucson Gem & Mineral Show began at a most opportune time—just as national interest in mineral collecting was starting to boom. The post-World War II years were characterized by substantial increases in disposable income and educational levels, trends that manifested in many ways. One was a growing interest in the earth sciences and their hands-on extension—mineral collecting.

Driven by demand for mineral specimens and soaring prices, the ranks of mineral dealers soon quadrupled. As commercial, specimen-collecting companies went into business, dozens of new gem-and-mineral shows appeared across the country.

But the Tucson Gem & Mineral Show had a head start on all of them. By the 1970s, Tucson was already a 20-year-old tradition. It also benefited from an attractive location with warm, winter weather and it was held during an otherwise "slow" time of the year.

No other gem-and-mineral show ever challenged Tucson for supremacy. And as interest in mineral collecting continued to grow, so, too, did Tucson. By the 1980s, the Tucson Gem & Mineral Show had been joined by several additional "satellite" shows.

Today, the Tucson Gem, Mineral & Fossil Showcase has 42 separate shows that convene in hotels, motels, convention centers, parking lots, tent "cities," and along frontage roads. The core event, held at the sprawling Tucson Convention Center, is still the original Tucson Gem & Mineral Show which begins on the second Thursday of February and ends on the following Sunday. In 2014, the Tucson Gem & Mineral Show will celebrate its 60th anniversary. Its satellite shows, each with their own dates, locations, and attractions, begin in late January and some now extend beyond mid-February.

Along with hundreds of individual mineral and gemstone displays, the Tucson Gem, Mineral & Fossil Showcase features special and often spectacular exhibits presented by major museums, universities, and leading private collectors. These exhibits focus on everything from mineralogy, mineral specimens, and mineral collecting to gemstones, gems, carvings, beads, meteorites, jewelry, specimen mining, fossils, and paleontology. There are also dozens of classes, lectures, multimedia presentations, demonstrations, and manufacturers' displays.

Tucson veterans know how to navigate the profusion of shows, but for novices this can be a real challenge. The following suggestions can help to make the most of a Tucson visit.

First, don't expect to see more than a tiny fraction of the various shows in a day or even in several days. The shows are simply too big, and their attractions too interesting. Allow as much time as possible for your visit and be sure to book lodging far in advance. With a population of 55,000, Tucson is not a big city, so its hotel and motel rooms fill quickly, especially when hundreds of dealers are using them for displays and as offices.

Avoid going to Tucson "cold." It is important to research venues, attractions, and local geography beforehand. A helpful website is www.tucsongemshow.org, which functions as a clearinghouse for the Tucson Gem, Mineral & Fossil Showcase. Most shows offer free admission to the public, but it pays to learn in advance which shows require a fee or are restricted to individuals with wholesale business licenses.

A good place to start is the Tucson Convention Center, which hosts the original Tucson Gem & Mineral Show. This show sets the tone for the entire event, is a bit more novice-friendly than some of the satellite shows, and is the place to ask questions.

Among the attractions that should not be missed are the displays presented by major international museums that can include some of the world's rarest and most spectacular mineral specimens.

Experienced Tucson show-goers offer this bit of advice: Don't buy anything quickly or on impulse. New visitors are often awed at the first items they see and purchase them—only to find better buys later. It helps to take notes of items of interest and their prices—and continue looking. If there is any one slogan that fits Tucson perfectly, it's "you never know what you might find next." Remember, too, that many sellers are willing to negotiate. And always be on the lookout for discounts and bargains when the shows wind down and dealers are eager to reduce their inventories.

Tucson is not just another gem-and-mineral show. It's a global event that makes this Arizona city the gem-and-mineral capital of the world for three hectic, fascinating, educational, and very enjoyable weeks.