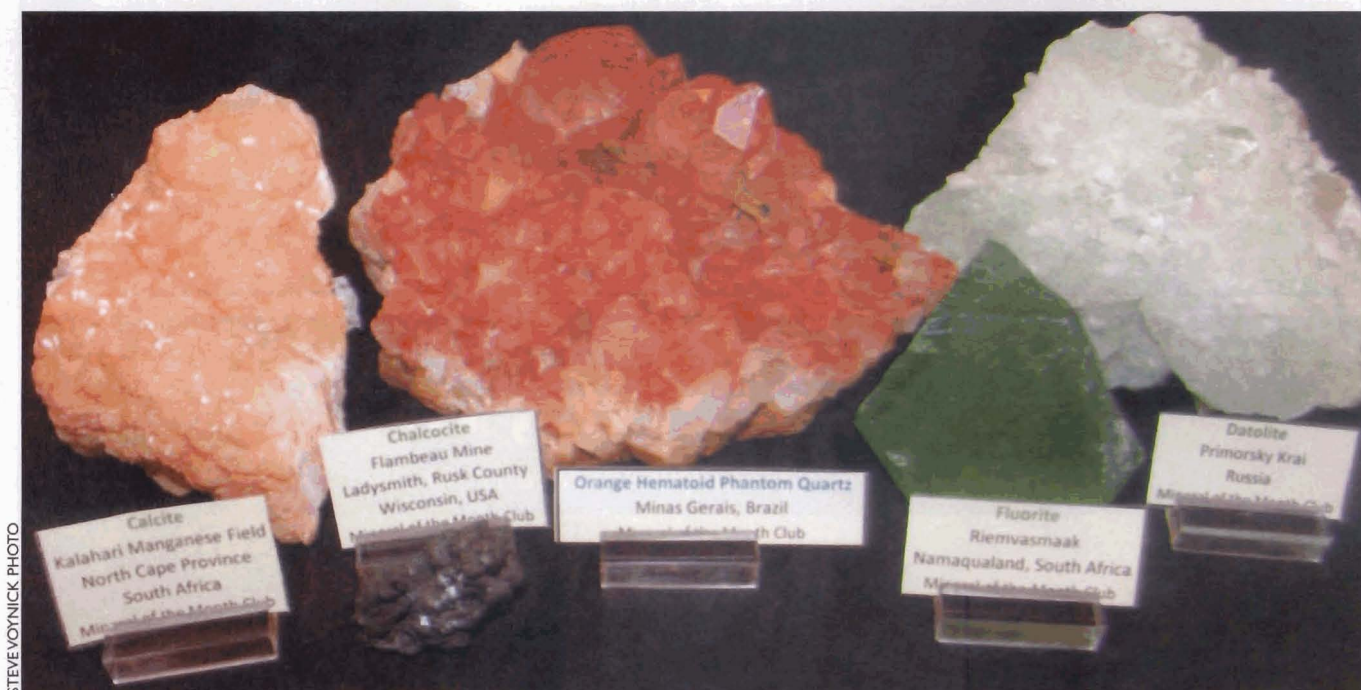


The Mineral of the Month Club

It's Bigger
and Better
than Ever

Story by Steve Voynick



STEVE VOYNICK PHOTO

Past Minerals of the Month include datolite from Russia, fluorite and calcite from South Africa, quartz from Brazil, and chalcocite from the United States.

The Mineral of the Month Club offices in Woodside, New York, are particularly busy at the end of each month, when the specimens of that month's featured mineral are packaged and mailed to the club's hundreds of members.

"We sort the specimens by size and grade," says club manger Christine Domino. "Each specimen comes with a box, a mineral-identification label, a computer-generated mailing label, a 10-page write-up, our newsletter, and a mailing envelope. It's a lot of work, and our monthly postage costs are well over a thousand dollars. But it's all worth it, because we know how pleased our members are to receive their mineral specimen every month."

Recent Mineral of the Month Club specimens have included indigo-blue cavansite from India, red rhodochrosite from China, blue celestine from Madagascar, green fluorite from England, amethyst

quartz from South Africa, and sky-blue turquoise from Arizona. Each is accompanied by a detailed write-up that explains almost everything there is to know about that particular mineral.

Club members also occasionally receive specimens of non-minerals such as amber from Lithuania, iron-nickel meteorites from Russia, opal from Australia, and obsidian from Arizona.

The Mineral of the Month Club has recently made some big changes. In March 2012, then-owners Richard and Cheryl Sittiger sold the club to Dimitri and Mary Spanos, who have since moved its headquarters from Cambria, California, to Woodside, New York.

"Members still receive the same quality specimens and detailed write-ups at the same affordable prices," says Dimitri, "but now we serve a broader range of collectors by providing everything from study specimens for students and beginners all the way to fine specimens for advanced collectors."

"Mineral collecting is changing, and the Mineral of the Month Club is changing with it," Dimitri explains. "Because this is the computer age, we've greatly expanded our online presence. By combining our specimens and write-ups with our new Web site resources, we're making mineral collecting a richer and more educational experience than ever before."

The idea of mailing a mineral specimen to subscribers each month began with California mineral collectors Russ and Alexandra Filer in the early 1970s, a time when the hobby of mineral collecting was growing rapidly. The big gem and mineral shows in Tucson, Arizona, and Denver, Colorado, were already well established, magazines like *Rock & Gem* and *The Mineralogical Record* had published their first issues, new gem and mineral clubs were being founded across the country, and more people than ever were collecting minerals.

The Filers provided their Mineral of the Month Club members with small, inexpensive, study-grade specimens until they retired in 1982 and disbanded their program. The demand went unfulfilled until the mid-1990s, when the Sittings, mineral collectors who were establishing themselves as dealers, brought the concept of the mail-order mineral club back to life, using the same name, but with a few changes to the program.

"The Filers' club worked well in the 1970s," Richard recalls, "but mineral collecting had since changed a great deal. Cheryl and I realized that collectors were much more sophisticated and knowledgeable, and that if a similar club were to succeed in the 1990s, it would have to offer more than just mineral specimens."

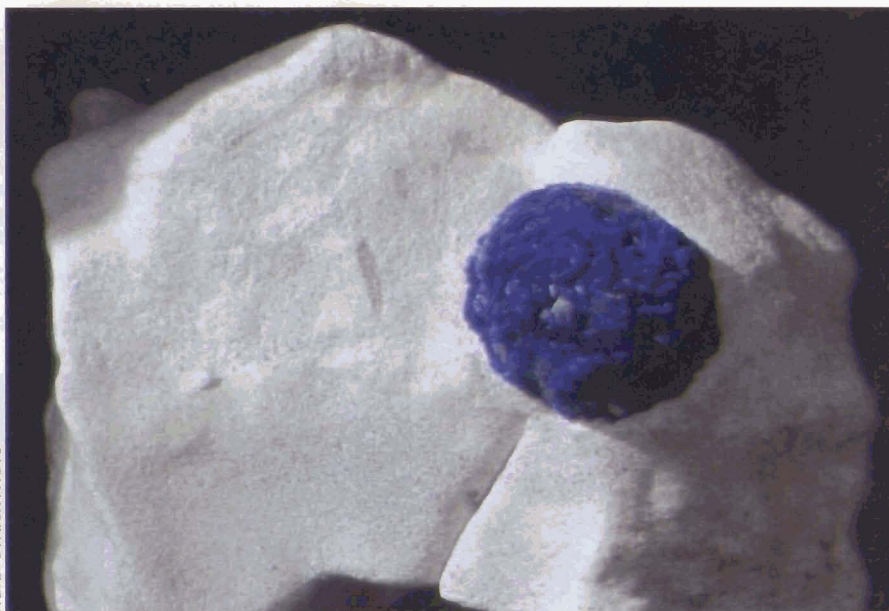
The Sittings began by upgrading the size and quality of the specimens and offering two membership levels to serve collector interests and budgets. Most importantly, they included a detailed, informational report with every specimen.

TOP: In May 2012, club members received nodular "suns" of bright-blue azurite in a kaolin clay matrix, mined at a remote site on Aboriginal land in Australia's Northern Territory.

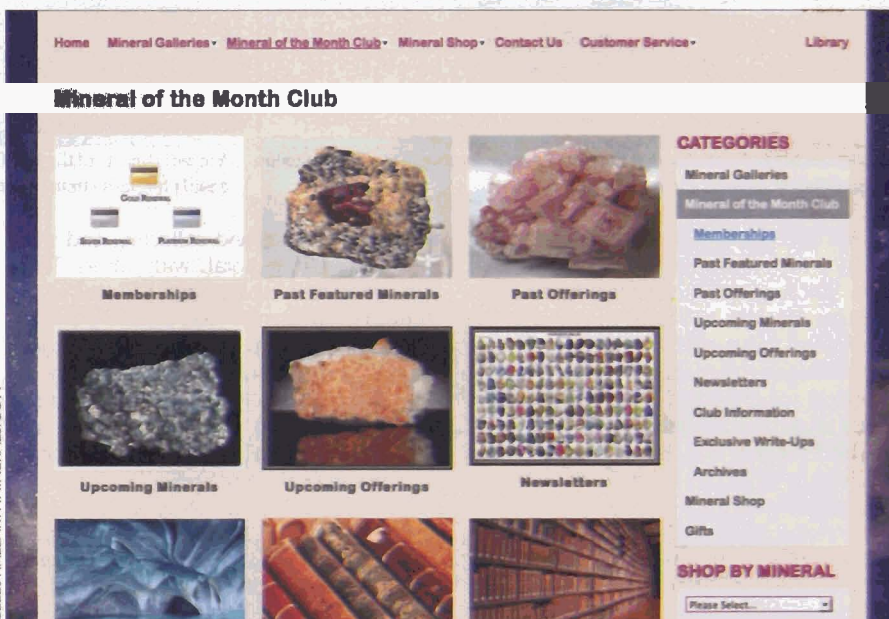
CENTER: "By combining our specimens and write-ups with our new Web site resources, we're making mineral collecting a richer and more educational experience than ever before," says Dimitri Spanos.

BOTTOM: Mineral of the Month Club members recently had the chance to acquire beautiful specimens of orange quartz included with hematite from China.

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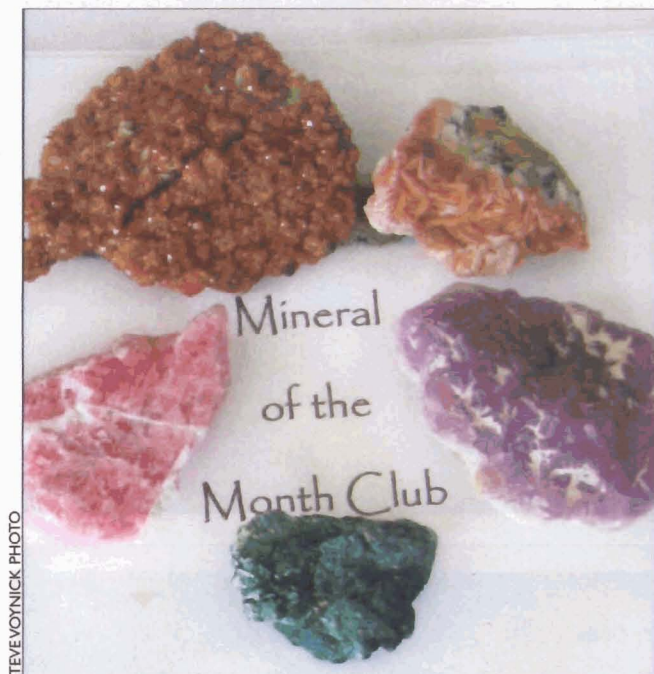


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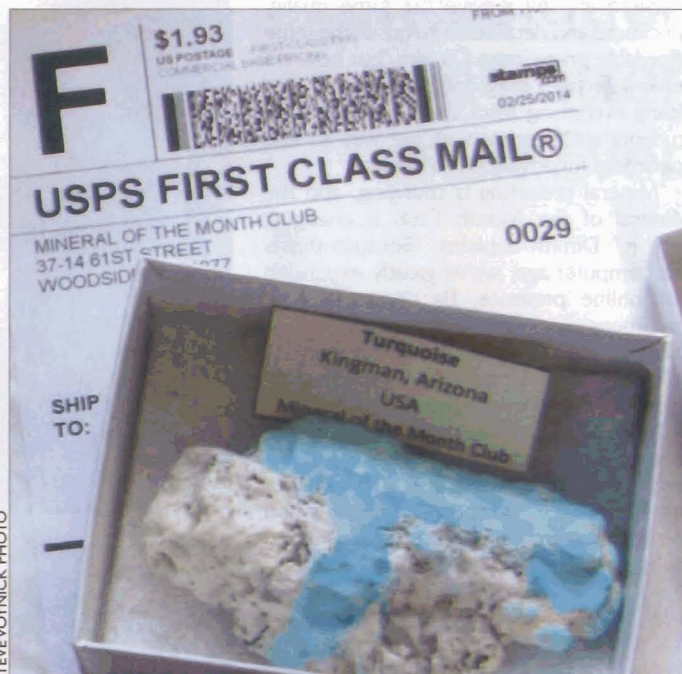
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The Mineral of the Month Club has three tiers of membership that offer specimens to suit different budgets and collecting interests.



STEVE VOYNICK PHOTO

A recent Mineral of the Month Club mailing brought members a fine specimen of gem-quality turquoise from Kingman, Arizona.

"Anyone could buy mineral specimens, but not the stories behind them," Richard says. "Because many collectors had neither the time nor the resources to research the specimens, they couldn't fully benefit from the collecting experience. By providing that research, we imparted a substantial added value to club membership."

The Sittings launched their Mineral of the Month Club in March 1996 with only a handful of members. Their first featured mineral was pyrite in the form of perfectly formed cubic crystals from the classic locality at Navajún (La Rioja), Spain.

Interest in the club grew steadily, and it soon had three membership levels, a growing Web site, and hundreds of members. To promote the club, the couple attended as many as 15 gem and mineral shows each year, which—together with day-to-day club business and monthly mailings—kept them quite busy.

By 2010, with their son grown, the Sittings were looking forward to a new phase of their lives, one with a less rigorous schedule. They decided to sell the club, "But not to just anyone," Richard emphasizes. "We wanted new owners who would continue to develop the club and take good care of our members."

At the Mineral of the Month Club booth at the 2011 Tucson Gem & Mineral Show™, the Sittings met Dimitri and Mary, businesspeople and avid mineral collectors from New York City.

"Dimitri and I had always loved minerals," Mary says. "An entire room of our home is devoted to our collection and our mineral library, but we were looking for a

way to move beyond collecting and share our interest in minerals with others. That's when we learned that the Mineral of the Month Club was for sale."

The Spanos and Sittings kept in touch and, in spring 2012, Dimitri and Mary decided to purchase the club. When the sale was finalized that March, the former and the new owners began working together to assure a smooth transition.

Richard and Cheryl agreed to continue to handle the next two monthly mailings from California. The featured mineral that April was astrophyllite from the Khibiny Massif on Russia's Kola Peninsula. These specimens were radiating, starburst-shaped aggregates of thin, bladed, bronze-yellow crystals with a bright, submetallic luster that contrasted nicely with their light-colored, nepheline-syenite matrix. The write-up detailed the geology of the Khibiny Massif, a region of great mineralogical diversity that has yielded some 477 mineral species.

The May 2012 mineral was an unusual form of azurite from the Malbunka Copper mine in Australia's Northern Territory. Consisting of deep-blue, semispherical nodules, or "suns," in a matrix of white kaolin clay, these specimens had been "relieved" to more dramatically display the azurite. From the write-up, members learned how these specimens were collected after the Aboriginal Malbunka clan leased the mine site to an Australian specimen miner.

"We were pleased knowing that our members would enjoy those beautiful azurite suns," Richard says. "But we were also a little sad, because they were no longer

'our' members. Cheryl and I, along with our friends, had managed 196 monthly mailings, and this was our last." Richard and Cheryl remain connected with the Mineral of the Month Club as historians and advisors to this day.

Meanwhile, Dimitri and Mary were busy setting up offices and working space at 37-14 61st St. in Woodside, a section of Queens near LaGuardia Airport. They also hired a manager for the Mineral of the Month Club, Christine Domino.

An accomplished jewelry maker, Christine has collected minerals all her life. She was initially hired to work part-time, but her duties soon expanded to include answering telephone calls and e-mails from club members, contacting dealers to acquire specimens, managing the office, supervising the monthly mailings, and filling special orders. When Dimitri and Mary realized that they needed a full-time club manager, they offered her the job.

"I was elated," Christine says. "I had always loved minerals and crystals, and now I had a full-time job working with minerals and mineral collectors."

Dimitri, Mary, and Christine handled the June 2012, mailing from New York. The featured mineral was marcasite from the Czech Republic's Komofany lignite mine. The specimens were coxcomb clusters of twinned, spear-shaped crystals with a silver-bronze color, a brilliant metallic luster, and a hint of blue iridescence.

That accompanying write-up explained the dimorphism of marcasite which, like pyrite, is an iron disulfide. Club members also learned how 600 years of lignite min-

ing at Komořany had caused serious environmental degradation, most of which was inflicted during the intensive mining operations conducted during the years of Nazi and Soviet occupation, and of the remediation efforts that are now underway.

Compiling the club's monthly write-up is a big job that demands time-consuming research from dozens of sources. The 10-page write-ups consist of sections on physical properties, name origin, chemical composition, crystal type and structure, collecting localities, jewelry and decorative uses, history and lore, and technological uses. A special section provides an in-depth discussion of a particular aspect of the featured mineral, while an "About Our Specimens" section explains how, where and when the specimens were collected.

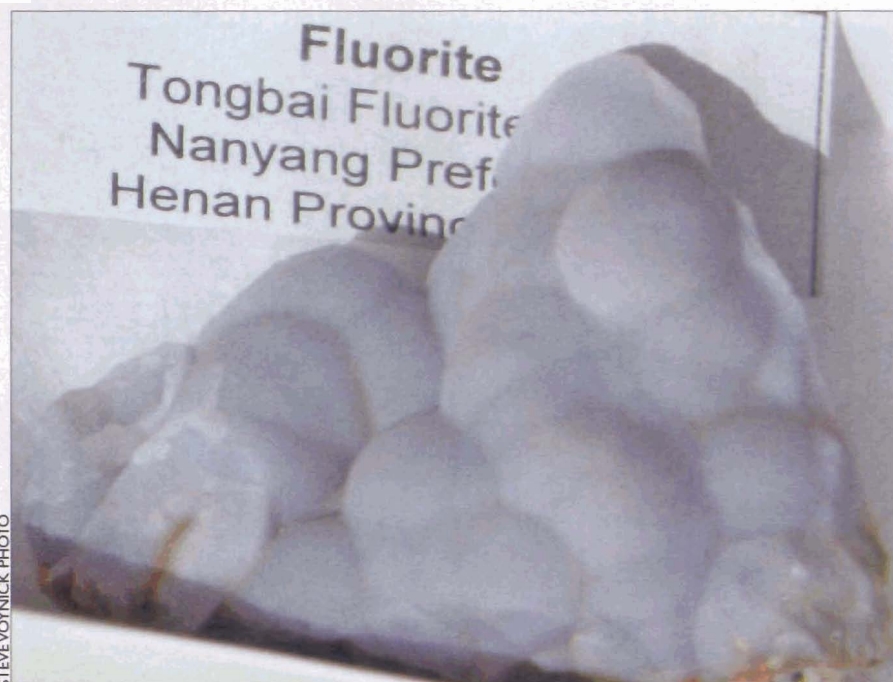
"About Our Specimens" also offers suggestions on how to view and study the specimens, and discusses lighting techniques, the use of loupes or magnifying glasses, viewing by reflected or transmitted light, specific features to look for, and how to vary lighting and viewing angles to reveal such phenomena as color zoning, iridescence, and pleochroism.

Additionally, when necessary, the write-ups advise club members of special storage and handling considerations. This happened most recently when the featured mineral was realgar-orpiment. Red realgar and yellow-orange orpiment are closely related arsenic sulfides. Orpiment is often powdery and tends to rub off on the skin, and its arsenic content can make it toxic if ingested or inhaled. This write-up reminded club members to wash their hands thoroughly after handling the specimens and, because realgar is light sensitive, to store the specimens in lidded boxes after display or study.

The club's second mailing from New York in July 2012 featured the ruby variety of corundum from Mysore, India, a locality in which star ruby has been mined since ancient times. These specimens consisted of hexagonal, purplish-red, ruby crystals as large as 1 inch in a black-and-white syenite matrix.

In August, members received specimens of an industrial mineral, probertite, a basic hydrous sodium calcium borate. The mineral was from California's famed Boron Pit, the world's leading source of boron minerals. These specimens were once part of the personal collection of Jim Minette, a long-time Boron Pit manager. Minette sometimes collected specimens by redirecting mining operations when unusual mineral occurrences were found. After the Minette collection was sold, the Mineral of the Month Club had the good fortune to acquire some of its specimens.

Members next received pink crystals of manganoan calcite from China's Manao-



Unusual specimens of purple, botryoidal fluorite from Henan Province, China, were among the 2013 mailings.



The September 2013 mineral was the sand-rose variety of gypsum from the Erg Chebbi dunes of Morocco.

shan mine. The write-up explained how Manaoshan management authorizes "collection teams" of miners to gather commercial quantities of specimens under a profit-sharing arrangement. The write-up also detailed how the rapidly growing Chinese mining industry has become a major source of mineral specimens.

Membership in the Mineral of the Month Club is structured in a three-tier arrangement. Each month, Silver Level members receive a small, quality specimen of the featured mineral that is usually between 1 inch and 2 inches in size. This

basic level is aimed at families, youngsters and students as a starting point for developing an interest in minerals and in the earth sciences.

The club's youngest Silver Level member, age 6, recently told Christine that he studies his monthly specimen and reads the write-up with his family. Many teenage members use the specimens and write-ups in school reports and presentations. Silver Level membership costs \$150 per year and includes the specimen, write-up, newsletter, a list of special monthly offers, and all shipping and handling charges.



August 2013
Rhodochrosite

Dear Platinum-Level Members, Our August Mineral of the Month is rhodochrosite, a manganese carbonate that is widely considered to be among the most collectible of all mineral species. Our specimens are from the Wudong (Wutong) Mine at Liubao, Gangxi County, Wuzhou Prefecture, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. This locality is in southwestern China somewhat [...]

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December 2012
Elbaite

Brazil Dear Platinum-Level Members, For December 2012, our Mineral of the Month is the most familiar and gemologically valuable of the tourmaline-mineral group. As you may be aware, elbaite occurs in an unusually broad variety of colors. Our specimens of pink elbaite prisms set in a matrix of white, milky quartz produces a soft, but [...]

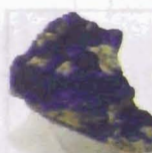
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December 2013
Apophyllite

Dear Platinum-Level Members, Our December Mineral of the Month is apophyllite-(KF) from the Mumbai District in the Deccan Traps of India. One of the world's largest volcanic formations, the Deccan Traps are also the leading source of zeolite-mineral specimens. While apophyllite-(KF) is not a zeolite mineral, it often occurs in close association with various [...]

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February 2011
Azurite

We're very excited about this month! We're featuring azurite, a colorful, hydrous copper carbonate from Arizona's famed Morenci Mine. Our write-up explains azurite's mineralogy, its use as both an ornamental stone and an early one of copper, and the history and technological development of one of the world's greatest copper mines.

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FEBRUARY 2012
MUSCOVITE & FLUORITE

A new find! Our composite muscovite-fluorite specimens were collected in the White Mountains in Inyo County, California. The White Mountains are a 60-mile-long, 20-mile-wide, north-south-trending, fault-block mountain range with two peaks above 14,000 feet and six peaks above 13,000 feet. Some 500 million years ago during the Paleozoic Era, the ancient sea that covered this [...]

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Specimen photos and write-ups on past months' featured minerals can be found on the Mineral of the Month Club's parent company's Web site, www.celestialearthminerals.com.

Gold Level members, who are often intermediate-level collectors, receive larger and more visually appealing specimens that can measure 2 inches to 3 inches, are suitable for display, and offer the opportunity for detailed study of color, crystal structure, and other features. Both Silver Level and Gold Level specimens can be larger, depending on the specimens available.

The cost of Gold Level membership is \$345 per year. Many Gold Level members who are building collections or have serious interests in mineral education have upgraded their original Silver Level membership to Gold.

Platinum Level members do not automatically receive a monthly specimen. Instead, they are sent a descriptive list of the best available specimens of each featured mineral. These are often high-quality, cabinet-size specimens that make attractive display pieces.

Platinum Level specimens are sorted into three groups based on size, quality, crystal development, color, matrix associations, overall visual appeal, and cost. Platinum Level members can select a specimen from any group, then contact Christine by telephone or e-mail to discuss details. When necessary, she will even e-mail photographs of individual specimens. The cost of each Platinum Level specimen ranges from \$40 to about \$300. "With three levels of membership, we can accommodate every type of collector," Christine says, "and our members like that."

Club members of all levels also receive a description of five special offerings, which they can obtain at an additional cost, each month. These are specimens of unusual interest that were acquired from dealers in small lots. "When we acquire large lots of

specimens for our Minerals of the Month," Dimitri explains, "dealers also show us small lots of unusual specimens that we then make available to our members as special offers." Although previously limited to Platinum Level members, Dimitri and Mary now make these specimens available to all members.

A recent special offer was a composite specimen from Pakistan that featured black crystals of the uncommon tourmaline mineral uvite on a matrix of pearly, greenish muscovite, with a scattering of blue sapphire crystals. Another, from Peru, consisted of bright, turquoise-blue chrysocolla and small, water-clear, terminated quartz crystals on a matrix of orange-brown hematite.

Dimitri and Mary also established a parent company—Celestial Earth Minerals (www.celestialearthminerals.com) to support the Mineral of the Month Club. The Web site is now the "home" of the Mineral of the Month Club and serves as a complete support system for the club that provides mineral photographs, mineralogical information, club membership services, and an online store stocked with everything from display stands and cabinets to loupes, books, and even fine mineral art prints and note cards by such noted artists as Fred C. Wilda.

Another new Web site feature is the Atlas of Minerals, which is intended for members who might not be familiar with the many different minerals that are mentioned in the write-ups and special offers. With the click of a key, members can now open brief or detailed descriptions of more than 100 minerals and mineral varieties. Members also have password access to a library with all the write-ups on featured minerals from 1996 to the present.

Informational, magazine-type articles about various aspects of collecting, written by noted gem-and-mineral writers, can also be found on the site. It includes the special offers, a fine mineral gallery, the Platinum Level letters, and previous newsletters. A full range of online services enables members to quickly and conveniently renew their memberships or order gift memberships.

"Our online services are there for our members' convenience," Christine emphasizes. "But they're not intended to replace personal contact. Members with questions or concerns can call me directly during business hours."

When some club members expressed interest in high-end specimens, Dimitri, Mary and Christine responded by introducing a monthly "fine mineral" offering, which is supported by a four-page article and close-up photographs. The first fine-mineral offering was brazilianite, a rare gemstone from Minas Gerais, Brazil. A basic sodium aluminum phosphate, brazilianite was only recognized as a mineral in the 1940s, and is the most recently discovered of all major gemstones.

Other fine mineral offerings have included crocoite from the Red Lead mine in Tasmania, Australia; amethyst from Piedra Parada, near Las Vigas de Ramírez in the Mexican state of Veracruz-Llave; and composite specimens of aquamarine and muscovite from Pakistan.

The ultimate key to the club's success is volume buying. Purchasing thousands of specimens each year substantially reduces costs, savings that are passed along to members. To find sources for all its specimens, the club relies on an international network of mineral dealers and specimen miners who can provide large lots of quality specimens. This supply network, which was built by the Sittings, has recently been expanded, with new dealer connections in the United States, Brazil and Morocco.

Since the Filers came up with the idea of mailing monthly mineral specimens, club members have received more than 125,000 specimens representing 70 different minerals and mineral varieties. During the 26 years that the club has been active, it has been personally owned and operated by just three couples, all of whom share a love of minerals.

Despite the changes made by current owners Dimitri and Mary, the basic purpose of the Mineral of the Month Club remains the same: providing monthly mineral specimens, and the stories behind them, at affordable prices.

For further information about the club, call (800) 941-5594, e-mail info@celestialearthminerals.com, or visit www.celestialearthminerals.com.