

The Eyes of Africa



This is the story of the “Eyes of Africa,” an enormous and intensely beautiful mineral specimen from an unprecedented discovery that has garnered a cult-like following in the mineral collecting community. The defining example from the famous “Alien Eye” pocket, it is incomparable in the mineral kingdom. Its story is as unusual and intriguing as its very presence but to truly understand its importance, let us start before the beginning.

The Erongo region of Namibia was once home to a massive, ancient volcano that erupted approximately 130 million years ago. It laid the groundwork for an extraordinary geological landscape unlike any other in the world.



View of the Erongo igneous ring complex from the distance. // Photo by Dr. Thomas Böllinghaus

Today, the area has extensive granitic formations and has produced a variety of mineral species including quartz, feldspar, muscovite, schorl and biotite, just to name a few. But it is most known for its unique and unimaginable fluorites which are matchless in their aesthetics. Namibian fluorites are often multi-colored with tones that are deeply saturated. These color zones are often well-defined and intense with sharp delineations between colors which create dramatic contrast within each crystal. They also tend to form in unusual crystal habits compared to forms from many other localities. Most coveted are the wonderfully complex cubo-octahedral crystal habits that mineral collectors love for their geometric shapes and sculptural appearance. Besides these distinctions, the fluorites from Namibia are also incredibly diverse, with each pocket producing its own spectacular color combinations and luster variations. Purple and colorless, green and purple, yellow and pink: these are just a few of the color pairings produced, and the luster ranges from waxy to glossy which provides yet another element of diversification. With each pocket’s distinctive material and their limited production collectors passionately chase fine examples to complete suites or even entire collections solely dedicated to Namibian fluorites. Many of them follow the productions of the area with a sense of urgency, brought on from the understanding that these particular “limited edition” collectibles are actually natural minerals—irreplaceable treasures that formed millions of years ago.

Fluorite, Okorusu Mine, Namibia



Fluorite on Quartz, Orange River, Namibia



Fluorite, Okorusu Mine, Namibia // All photos on this page by James Elliott

In 2007, one such “limited edition” discovery was found in the Erongo Mountains. It was so extraordinary it reshaped the face of Namibian fluorites and created a buzz worldwide. The pocket was known as the “Alien” or “Alien Eye” pocket. Alien Eye fluorites were immediately recognized as a special subset of Namibian fluorite that set a benchmark in the world of mineral collecting.



Fluorite, Kudubis, Erongo Mts., Namibia // Photo by James Elliott

When miners first discovered the pocket of arresting green and black zoned fluorites, they were astounded. Even before they were able to clean the pieces, it was clear that these crystals were unlike anything ever seen before. They had sharp and distinct black outer zones that framed unmistakable, diamond-shaped central zones. Once properly cleaned of the mud and hardened silica that coated the surfaces of the crystals, light was able to reveal their truly incredible aesthetics. The central zones were a brilliant otherworldly green color, rarely seen in nature and almost indescribable. They were an emerald color yet with a certain electricity and completely stunning. The glow of the green zone was so

intense, many likened their effect to something out of a science fiction movie. Anyone able to experience their eerie yet beautiful luminescence was quick to agree that “Aliens” or “Alien Eyes” is an incredibly apt name for the fluorites. The pocket produced just a few dozen complete, undamaged specimens and only a fraction of those were of fine quality. Most of the specimens were either single crystals or crystal aggregates, free floaters that had dislodged from their matrices at one point or another in their geologic history. In fact, only a handful of examples had any form of matrix at all. Matrix examples of any mineral species are typically far more valuable and prized by collectors. This example is no exception, the “Eyes of Africa” is by far the largest and the most important of all known specimens.



Fluorite, Kudubis, Erongo Mts., Namibia // Photo by James Elliott

News of the find spread like wildfire. Local collectors in the region and mineral hunters who frequented the area were the first to know and the competition to acquire examples was fierce. As the Alien Eye fluorites trickled into the market, foreign collectors too became aware of the “alien invasion.” Highly unusual and instantly recognizable, they gained an instant cult following with a number of prominent collectors, all of whom were flocking to purchase any available material. Avid South African collector, mining magnate Desmond Sacco, made hard bids and strong efforts to monopolize the material but

met head to head in a race to secure specimens with the eccentric and well-known collector, Heini Soltau. Also in competition were collectors like, Mark Kielbaso and Jurgen Tron (who had a specialty in Namibian minerals). Alien Eye fluorites became an instant contemporary classic and today fine examples are highly sought after and the best pieces almost never come to market. These factors alone make the "Eyes of Africa" intriguing, as the signature piece of such a famed and sought-after discovery but its story of acquisition did not end at mere extraction.



Miners climbing in the early morning // Photo by Rainer Bode

Few people know the inner workings of the mines as well as the miners themselves. They are responsible for removing material unharmed but more often than not, the somewhat primitive practices necessary for mining mean they often break more than they recover. Occasionally though, a skilled miner can make all the difference in recovering a mineral masterpiece. Such was the case with head miner and Namibian local, Herold Gariseb. It was, in fact, Herold and his men who first came across the Alien Eye pocket and it was his efforts that lead to the pocket's effective recovery. It was also Herold who sold the vast majority of the material, which was being sold as fast as he could collect it. Despite the demand, there was one piece too special for immediate release. It was,

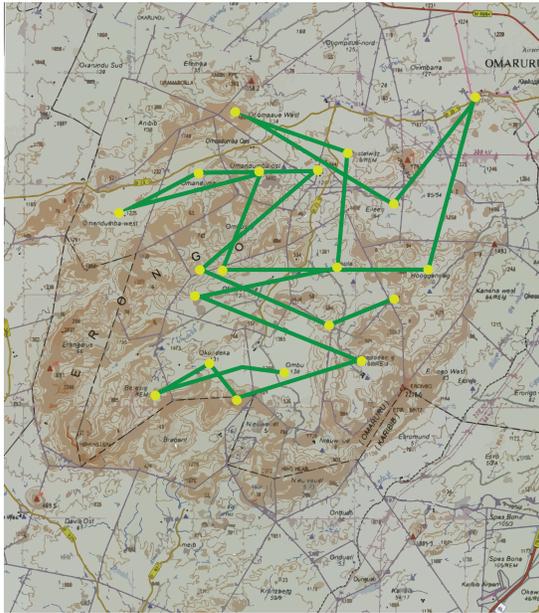
of course, the "Eyes of Africa" which Herold recognized as a treasure the moment he came across it. In the pocket, it laid horizontally on the floor, coated with mud and silica debris due to its placement, but even then it was immediately clear that the piece was going to be "the" example from the find. Gargantuan at 58 cm tall and 34 cm wide, it was the largest and most complete specimen unearthed from the ground. Not only did it have a matrix, but the matrix was composed of lovely white quartz crystals that would contrast the fluorites perfectly, one of which was staggeringly large, a 22.75 cm tall primary quartz crystal that stood at its center like a ship's mast! It also had the highest quantity of Alien Eye fluorites present of any example from the pocket. All of which were complete in their beautiful cubo-octahedron form and all as large as any of the sizeable single specimens, upwards of 4.25 cm on edge. It was the clear prize of the pocket and Herold decided that it would wait for the "right buyers" or "price," so instead of going to market, it went in the trunk of his white Mercedes and followed him everywhere he went.



Gravel road to a granite farm // Photo by Rainer Bode

Meanwhile, Mark Kielbaso and Jurgen Tron were in the nearby town of Usakos seeking out mineral leads. It was there they heard word of a white Mercedes cruising the dirt roads of Erongo with a "must-see" Alien Eye in its trunk. They immediately drove off for Tubussis, a main stopping point for miners of the region but

found neither the white Mercedes, or any Alien Eye specimens.



Criss crossing the Erongo region

Leads from locals seemed to point to every dirt road in every direction of the Erongo region, a roughly 24,000 square mile expanse. They drove for hours which then turned into days, passing the majestic and massive granite boulders across an arid yet surprisingly green landscape. The white Mercedes became their White Whale and just as it seemed like they were chasing more of a ghost than a real person, they followed a lead that took them towards the settlement of Uis from Okombahe. Finally, the lead paid off and they spotted the infamous white Mercedes in front of (what was unbeknownst to them) Herold's home. They had passed the house several times while crisscrossing the region but without the Mercedes parked out front it was just another house. The industrious Herold had been out for days delivering supplies to all of his miner's families who worked in mines across the region. The men were always one village behind him. Upon meeting, Herold took Mark and Jurgen to his car and uncovered a piece so spectacular, there was

no doubt that the odyssey had been well worth the effort. He showed them how it had been oriented within the pocket and described how it had come from a small, hand-carved tunnel that lead nearly 46 meters out past the main tunnels. With its unlikely discovery, not once but twice, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that this piece was indeed special. They then proceeded to business and negotiated a deal since there was no way Mark and Jurgen were going to leave without the piece. As a contingency to the sale, Herold insisted on having a photo of himself with the piece taken for posterity.

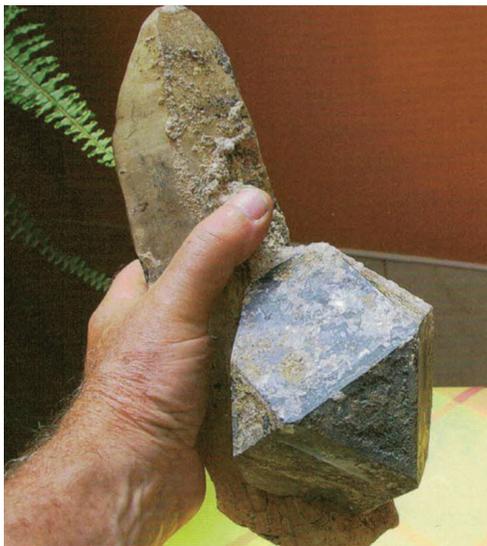


Herold Gariseb, the miner who found The Eyes of Africa
// Photo by Jürgen Thron

The men went to secure funds in the city of Omaruru and it was there that Mark and Jurgen bid farewell to a happy Herold with their new specimen in tow. They were then left with the daunting task of just how they could transport a somewhat delicate, 28.2 kg mineral to the United States. They proceeded to the capital city of Windhoek to find a "Baby Super Store" where they could acquire diapers. In an area where packs of diapers are broken up and sold one at

a time, the men acquired 400 baby diapers and gave the "Eyes of Africa" an unglamorous but wholly necessary protective layer. They then placed it all into a 30-gallon plastic drum, and for further measure, that into a 55-gallon steel drum. After acquiring all the necessary permits, they shipped the piece on an ocean freighter to the United States that did not arrive for three months. Once in the U.S., the piece underwent the routine cleaning with mild detergents to remove the mud and silica coating. The process took approximately two years and unveiled the awe-striking specimen that we know today. The piece was so utterly impressive, Mark and Jurgen were in no hurry to release it to the public. Knowing the extraordinary appeal of Alien Eye Fluorites, they reserved it, allowing several years to pass and ensuring that no other new recoveries of Alien Eyes were made in that time. None were, and the value of the "Eyes of Africa" and all other fine Alien Fluorites grew immensely.

In 2017, Mark and Jurgen decided to contact mineral dealer, Daniel Trinchillo of Fine Minerals International, who they knew specialized only in the finest mineral specimens. They offered him the opportunity to represent the piece and Daniel did so immediately. He knew the piece to be spectacular and felt, if given the opportunity, it should be shared with the world and not locked away in a private home. He offered it to his friend and client, collector Lyda Hill who has worked extensively with the Perot Museum of Nature and Science. Having already acquired an exceptional Alien Eye Fluorite, she was familiar with the locality and was immediately entranced by this piece. She understood that it was a truly breathtaking mineral and worth sharing. She acquired the piece so that the PMNS could exhibit it to share with the world.



Lyda Hill's fluorite before cleaning // Photo by Heini Soltau



Lyda Hill's fluorite after cleaning // Photo by James Elliott

The "Eyes of Africa" is nothing less than a treasure, an anomaly amongst anomalies. Large in size, yet still well-formed and wonderfully composed, it is instantly recognizable and absolutely unforgettable. It has all the attributes necessary to anchor a world-class mineral collection, including an immediately discernible locality (down to a specific pocket) and an awe-striking presence. It demands attention with its beautifully colored fluorite crystals grown atop the lovely white quartz crystals that provide the perfect landscape for them to glow. The crystals are complete, undamaged and whole, and the colors are every bit as remarkable as one could hope for. Its impact eclipses all other examples of its kind and is a true mineral masterpiece by all collecting standards.



The Eyes of Africa fluorite // Photo by James Elliott