

Brazil Tour 2009

By Harley Waterson

At the 2008 Abbotsford Gem Show, a travel company called Adventures Abroad had a couple of talks about a 2-week excursion to Brazil to see gemstone locations and offer collectors a chance to get close to the mines, and buy some Brazilian materials.

The tour was scheduled for August 2008, and they didn't find enough rock hounds that could organize vacations to take in the 2008 tour, however, a number of us chatted and ended up taking the 2009 tour last August!

Nineteen people went on the organized tour. Two from Texas, two from the Victoria club, and the rest were from the lower mainland.

As advertised, the tour was to visit some gemstone locations in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, take in a gem trade show and visit some dealers. The trip also included a couple of extensions to the southern state of Brazil called Rio Grande du Sul (this is the area where the Brazilian Agate and Amethyst come from) plus a 2nd extension to visit Iguacu Falls.

We had lots of questions about getting prepared for the trip....what is the weather? What clothes do we take? Do they speak English? What shots do we need, and so on. We chatted with several other world travellers, and then we stocked up on some new clothes, and a few other things to bring along such as Deet and toilet paper. We had some immunization shots for a long list of various tropical diseases. We even bought a Brazilian Portuguese language CD!

Getting to Brazil consisted of two Air Canada flights, the first being Vancouver to Toronto, followed by a 10+ hour red-eye to Sao Paulo Brazil. No, we didn't see the Amazon—it was late at night. We were met at the airport, and directed over to another gate to take another flight to Belo Horizonte which is closer to the gemstones!

August arrival in Brazil is their late spring. Cool for them, but pretty much short sleeve weather for us. Not hot enough for me to put shorts on, but very nice and comfortable. A couple of days had rain, so a light jacket was necessary. No more bugs or mosquitoes than in my back yard in Surrey. We weren't near to the Amazon jungle, so it was not overly humid, nor were we in danger of being bitten by piranhas or crocodiles. In fact, we saw almost no wildlife other than some birds, marmosets, and a couple of small lizards.

For our tour, we did spend lots of time on a large Greyhound sized coach (bus). The coach was very comfortable, and pleasant as we barely half-filled the full sized coach.

Our tour leader was a professional tour guide, with many years of herding tourists all over the world. He spoke many languages in addition to his native English. When we got on the bus for the first time, the very first thing we did was pick up a local Brazilian geologist, who was also involved in the gemstone trade with her husband. Her name was Regina. (pronounced Regeena). She spoke Portuguese, and enough English such that we could understand her colorful descriptions of the history of Brazil, the people, the things we were passing by, and the hopes and dreams of the locals. To cap off our long travel day, we spent some time on the bus travelling to our first hotel in a town called Belo Horizonte.

So, the first day of our Brazilian extravaganza! Up at 7:00AM for breakfast, and onto the bus at 8:00AM (what? I thought I was on vacation!)

Our schedule for the day was to travel to a smaller town called Teofilo Otoni, ETA 5:00PM. Before we left the larger town of Belo Horizonte, we stopped for some local cash at a particular

bank, as almost all of the local banks do not take international ABM cards. After travelling for a bit, and some stories about the history and basic geology, Regina asks if we would like to visit an Emerald mine. Well, in about 5 milli-seconds it was unanimous. She pulls out her cell phone and calls ahead. Soon enough we're off on a side road, and end up at a tiny village. Off the bus, and a gang of locals show up to show us their rough, and cut stones, all for sale of course! After negotiations, we walk over to a hole in the ground, and everyone who is game is dropped in a sling down a 20 meter vertical shaft into a hand dug emerald mine!



The "mine" is more like a single shaft dug by pick and shovel by a couple of wiry locals. The schist is easy to dig, and they look for quartz veins where emeralds may show up. The miners chase the quartz through the host rock hopeful to find some facet grade stones. Back up at the top, more locals have brought over their rough and cut stones to sell to us! Good thing that Regina said that the first price is always waayyyy high, so don't feel bad about making a much lower offer, and

negotiate until you're happy.

I bought a small cabbing grade piece for \$20. Others bought a few other pieces



Regina with an Emerald

More money changes hands with negotiations in Portuguese and English. Well, we spoke English, they spoke Portuguese.....often I resorted to writing down a number on my hand or paper.....that seemed to work the best!

We found out that mining laws are quite different down in Brazil. If you own the land, you own what's in the ground. So, lots of ranchers/farmers have a little hole in the ground that they dig when the cattle have been fed, or the crop planted and there is some spare time. Larger mines also exist, and hired workers may have low pay, or no pay unless they actually find some stones. There are few

regulations regarding safety, or pay and benefits for the workers.

Needless to say, day one was big time fun, and we were really late getting to our hotel with the diversion!

Day 2 was the day to explore the FIPP gem show/sale. The show was a block from the hotel, and scheduled to open at 10:00AM. So, breakfast was again at 7:00AM, and Regina had arranged for a couple of dealers to be in the hotel lobby for us. A few hundred \$\$\$ changed hands.....then, onto the bus! We have a local dealer/showroom to see while we wait for the FIPP show to open.

Over at this first dealer, we find that he “owns” a rutilated quartz mine. Scattered around the office and display area were foot-long smoky quartz crystals, some with tourmalines, and also a 12-inch long black tourmaline paperweight. Lots of cut gemstones, quartz specimens, rutilated specimens etc. After that, we walked through the town admiring the architecture, stopped at the town square for a fresh coconut and back to the FIPP show at 10:15.

The FIPP show is similar to any show with oodles of dealer tables with rocks, specimens, finished cut stones, and some jewelry for sale. What set this apart was the materials, quantity, and selection. There was absolutely no jade, no jaspers, nor barely any agate for sale. Available were tons of quartz crystals, topaz, amethyst, citrine, tourmaline, rutilated quartz, and other local materials in both cut, and rough form.

Since I was hoping to find some interesting Rutile or Tourmilated quartz, I was in heaven. Prices were not “cheap” but the \$100 per kilo Rutilated quartz wouldn’t make it to BC, as the clarity of the material would be snapped up before it got here, or would be maybe \$300/kilo or more! In Brazil, there were tubs full to sort through! Oh, I didn’t bring enough money!

I found a couple of other things to buy of course, some quartz crystal phantoms, a couple of tiny chunks of red rhodonite, and some pyrite in quartz. All of us were a little hesitant to go wild and buy lots at the show, as this was only day #2.

At the end of the day we left the show, and had some food, and off to a presentation by local geologists who were trying to lobby the government to improve safety, wages and working conditions for the miners.

Day 3 was a day where we got into a two buses and split up into two groups to visit a couple more hand dug emerald mines. More countryside to see! Somewhat like Kamloops with funny looking trees.

These were again host sand-stone type of host rock with some quartz veins. The miners follow the quartz hoping to find a pocket of emeralds, tourmalines, or aquamarines!



Oh, back to town, and another dealer! This is “the-guy” to see for Paraíba tourmalines. Sure enough, his office and display area is chock full of those vibrant blue tourmalines. Out of my price range though.....maybe a cabbing piece?

Day 4: Up early again! We loaded ourselves into the bus and off to a small town where we jumped into 5 cars and headed up some gravel roads to some abandoned pegmatite mines. We had the opportunity to wander around a large cavernous commercial mine, and we were able to find some quartz, mica, and some other interesting specimens. Too bad we didn't know ahead of time that we would be on a real field trip we could dig, hammer, and keep the specimens! We spend most of the day in three locations, and Bob Morgan picked up a 40+ pound smoky quartz crystal! It made it home in luggage! At the end of our field trip, we went back to town for some food, and to relax in the back yard of a local gemstone cutter! He had his surplus specimens, rough, and cut stones for us to buy! Back to our hotel, a quick break to freshen up, and muster in the lobby and off to another gemstone dealer, who opened up just for us! More buckets of rutile quartz, tables of smoky quartz, topaz, and sensory overload.





Day 5: Travel to the town of Ouro Preto. Along the way we see more countryside, some open pit iron mines, and listen to entertaining stories about the local area from Regina.

Before we get to Ouro Preto we stop and unload off the bus. We're at the home of the famous "Imperial Topaz"it's a big muddy looking pit full of smaller excavations where the locals have been digging for topaz.

There's a pick, have a go! What? Us? We can dig for topaz, like, right now? Yes!

So we rummaged around in the loose dried muddy ground.....no topaz, but the locals were very willing to sell us their finds of those bright orange topaz

crystals!

Down the road through town to the creek, and a quick gold panning demo....Ouro Preto means "black gold" and the gold is coated with palladium, which turns it black. Millions of dollars of gold has been found in the area, most of which is placer.



Back on the bus up to the main part of

Ouro Preto and check into our hotel.

More food.

Day 6 Ouro Preto: Up again early, and we get a short tour & talk about the history of the town. We walk through a couple of the local churches, and more discussion of the history of the area going back hundreds of years with the squabbles over the lands by Portugal, Spain, France, and the various factions of the catholic church. A town with a 300+ year history! This is a very picturesque village with many large old churches and historic buildings.

We walked up the street to the skating rink sized "Soapstone market" where 50 or so vendors are squeezed into a small area, and almost everything in the market is made from soapstone by the locals. Up another block to the local mineralogy museum, and we spend a couple of hours looking at the marvelous collection. A great museum with great displays of minerals, and crystals...unfortunately, we were not allowed to take pictures. They did have one tiny little piece of jade from BC! Throughout the town were about a dozen gemstone and mineral dealers. Since we were in the heart of the area where the Imperial Topaz comes from, all the dealers had both rough and cut stones. We were in one shop looking at a dish with some vibrant orange

rough, and the proprietor says, wait, I have some more for you to look at. Clunk! He places a shoe-box sized box full of stones in front of us. We can't even get to see just six stones here to choose from! We had a shoe box full..... One dealer had a fellow faceting some stones on a jamb-peg faceting machine. He was fast, and was doing some great work on a well used old machine! Incredible results from a low tech device. More food, and beverages!



Soapstone market: The artist putting the texture on the bowl lid with a tiny pointed hammer



Imperial Topaz rough for sale.



The shoebox.

Day 7. In the lobby where we are congregating to get on the coach, we haggle with some more locals on rough and cut stones. After a couple of hours on the coach, we're back at Belo Horizonte airport and we must say goodbye to Regina. We'll miss her colorful stories and knowledge of the local gemstones!

We catch a plane to Rio de Janeiro. We grab our luggage, and get on another coach and head towards the hotel. But wait! It's a nice day, and there's still daylight! Bus driver! Head to Sugarloaf mountain gondola! The trip up Sugarloaf wasn't on the official agenda, but was a nice treat....the views were awesome, other than the haze of city pollution in the air. By the time we get checked in, it's almost dark. No time for lollygagging around, we need to freshen up and get back to the lobby for our next item!

Down the street a few blocks is the Headquarters of "Amsterdam Sauer" the Brazilian gem and jewelry store chain. At the HQ flagship store is a "museum" showcasing the Brazilian gemstones. What a collection of cut stones, medium, and giant size! Incredible large specimens, including a 75KG specimen covered in pink-green tourmalines, another 68KG single loose topaz crystal....We also had a short talk on the history of Brazilian emeralds, which for a number of years were not officially called emeralds, but were viewed internationally as green aqua's or green beryl's.

The museum itself was perhaps only the size of a Tim-Horton's, but there were a few \$\$millions in specimens!



Museum Pictures

Smoky quartz carving.



During our tour in several of the shops we saw carved gemstone birds. Likely everyone has seen them, such as the little fridge magnets, or perhaps ones as large as 10-12". At the Amsterdam Sauer store, they have ones which are much more detailed, and exquisitely carved, up to 4-feet in length, beak to tail feathers. I managed to peek at one price tag, and one smoky quartz bird about 16" in length on a quartz crystal base was \$4500 US.



Same price for the white quartz bird with ruby eyes, tiger eye beak)

After the museum tour, we had to exit through the showroom of course! Top grade jewelry and loose stones for sale. It just seemed a little higher priced in Rio versus the gem show a couple days earlier. Giddy-up, back on the bus, we're going for dinner! We travel to a higher end restaurant with a fabulous buffet of cold items, and wandering waiters with skewers of the hot entrees such as beef, port, sausage, chicken lamb, etc. They give you a two-sided coaster, one side green (Keep bringing the hot-bbq items) and one side red (Stop! I can't fit anymore in) Everyone waddled overstuffed out of that place.....again, great food.

Day 8) up early again, back on the bus, we're off to the mountain we saw from Sugarloaf that has the giant statue of Christ the Redeemer at the summit. Two choices to get to the top are driving in a shuttle bus, or a cog-wheel train. Cogwheel train for us! Again a great day for viewing as the weather was again sunny and pleasant. On the trip back down the cogwheel train, we were entertained by some musicians.

Back on the bus, and off to a nearby town called Petropolis. This town was used as a summer retreat for the emperor during earlier years, as Petropolis is at a higher elevation, and wasn't quite as hot in the summer time. We toured the emperor's palace, and a huge nearby church, and drove back to the hotel. (No photography allowed of course)

On this day, we actually had a couple of hours to ourselves to walk around before the next scheduled activity. Back on the bus, and over to a night club for a song and dance review of Brazilian style music. Entertaining, but the show just seemed to be aimed at tourists, and felt as if the entertainers had done the same show 1000's of times, and the costumes just seemed a little tattered.....

Day 9) Up early again (are you detecting a trend/) and off to the airport to fly to Porto Alegre. Porto Alegre is in the southernmost state of Brazil, as we are heading to the volcanic area! The home of the Brazilian agates and amethyst. It's drizzling in Porto Alegre as we load up onto another coach. We head out towards our next hotel, in the town of Bento Goncalves. Along the way we notice that there is a more "American" feel to the businesses, and buildings we are travelling by, and the whole city feels more affluent. Homes just seem to look a little bigger, better kept. Our guides tell us that this area of Brazil is indeed more industrial than the farming/ranching/gemstone area we were visiting earlier. This area was also settled by a higher percentage of German, Italian, and French settlers. We stop at a Brazilian winery for a tour of this large modern facility. Part of the tour is a wine tasting! More fun! Too bad I don't like wine nearly as much as beer. Anyway, the general consensus after the wine tasting reveals that there is no surprise that Brazilian wines are not real popular and are also not available in BC. There's ample other choices of great tasting wines. At least they are trying! The tour of the winery worked out well as it was an indoor activity for the drizzly day! At Bento Goncalves we stopped at a very nice Italian restaurant, and again are treated to a 72 course meal.....the bus seemed to be loaded heavily again for the ride back to the hotel.

Day 10) Up again, and loading our bags on the coach as we're travelling to our next stop, the town of Soledade. Not raining today, so the countryside is easier to see. Before we leave town though, we make a stop at a church shaped like a 1/2 of a wine barrel. All around the building are stained glass windows, and it looked fabulous from inside.

Back on the bus! We finally arrive at Soldade in late afternoon. Straight to a dealer! Our first Soledade dealer has a building about the size of a mid-sized Safeway store. Multiple rooms....Amethyst here, Citrine vugs there, quartz crystals over there. Huge amounts of everything, and all great color, and quality. Not much for agate though.....back on the bus and off to another dealer, and this one's bigger, about the size of a Costco warehouse. About ½ the floor space is agate of some type, the rest is quartz, amethyst, citrine. In the agate are agate coasters, agate bookends, agate halves, and oodles of polished slabs, about 75% of which are dyed. The agate slabs are all polished, both sides, and graded by size, and stacked by color, such as dyed red, dyed blue, dyed green, or if you look hard enough maybe not dyed. We found it interesting that they were the same price by the pound, dyed or natural. I kept looking for the "nice" ones that have interesting unusual patterns, but they were few and far between. I found a couple of tubs with "nicer" grades of slabs, and chose a few. Most of us just wandered around in a bit of a daze at the sheer volume. Can't get too excited, as we have another day to see the other dealers!

Day 11) A couple of people on the tour are starting to look a little worn out, and even I'm feeling almost ready to sleep in, but no-doing that! More dealers to see after breakfast and that's what we came for! This is our last day to buy stuff, so I'm keen to find a couple more interesting things that will fit in my carry-on! Off to "the big-one".....this one again has an indoor showroom packed with amethyst and agate and is again about the size of a Safeway. Outside I notice at the back behind a chain link fence (Just to keep me out) are countless dump truck loads of agate nodules!



agates galore

There's 20 or so workers having a break, so they must be sawing, and polishing agates somewhere where we cannot see them! Anyway, they say we only have an hour here, so I get

busy rummaging around the tables loaded with agates. We get the call to get on the bus, and off to the next dealer.



Rose Quartz Crystals by the parking

area

This next one is a smaller warehouse, and is chock full of amethyst from Uruguay. I find a nice sized two-piece amethyst lined agate nodule! Finally something a little different, and yet still carry-able in my luggage!

Two more stops this last day. Another giant warehouse/showroom, this one like a home-depot, with a bigger variety of materials, including some huge smoky quartz with Rutile, Quartz crystals with "enhydro" (trapped bubbles of water in the crystals), and piles of capping grade tourmaline, aquamarines, Amethyst, and a big pile of chrysoprase.



Hilmar beside a large amethyst

With everyone's senses pretty much overloaded, it's good that at the last stop, they only had three things: Bags of Facet grade Amethyst, Citrine, and green quartz. Every piece flawless, and beautiful color. They had hundreds of 10-20KG bags of beautiful facet grade materials. Pick your size, and color grade, and buy a handful. The facetors were in heaven!

The town of Soledade also has an annual sale where 80+ more dealers show up to sell materials. That might be interesting, but I would need to bring more money, and make sure that I could arrange some shipping....

Back to the "Agata Hotel", and get freshened up for our last dinner together. Since Soledade is a small town, about the size of Hope, there isn't a lot of choice of nice restaurants. Alastair, our tour guide, arranged the local truck stop restaurant to host our group for another BBQ dinner where they bring out the skewers of meats! Everyone looked totally bushed, but many were eager for the next day's departure to the world famous Iguacu Falls. Six of us headed home the next day, and the remainder took off for the additional couple of days at the falls, and bonus days in Rio prior to returning home.

From the hotel in Soledade to the Vancouver airport was 29 hours. One coach, three flights. Hmmm.....maybe those couple of extra days with no pre-determined things to do would have been nice!

Anyway, everyone made it back safe and sound, and aside from a couple of wrinkles in the travelling, it was a great time! Perhaps the only real disappointment was not being able to bring home all the nice stuff we wanted to buy due to the weight! This is one area where the facetors win out over the rock and mineral collectors!

What did we bring back? Some polished agate slices, topaz samples, rough Rutilated, and tourmalinated quartz, pyrite in quartz, two tiny red-rhodonite chunks, amethyst filled agate geode, some small items from one of the field trips, including something identified as amblygonite, and trifilita (both are in the Audubon book). Livia picked up several items, including a finished pendant of facet grade red rhodonite! Fabulous!

Would I do this again? Sure, but I would probably want to go somewhere else....Australia? Madagascar? Iceland? Moose Lake Minnesota?

I tried to make sure that I considered this a holiday to someplace new, and the gem and mineral activities were just a bonus. Don't take this type of trip if you are not a rockhound or gem collector! Take a different Brazil trip!

For those who thought about taking this trip, there may be another one! If you might be interested, check with Bill Hughes of the Richmond club. His day job is travel agent, and he is in discussions with the tour operator to put this tour on again in August, 2010. If you are interested give him a call at 604-261-7123. e-mail bhughes@shaw.ca