



BY WENDY RUBICAM

The Crown **Jewel** *of Arizona*

The dazzling Four Peaks Amethyst may be one of the Valley's best-kept secret treasures

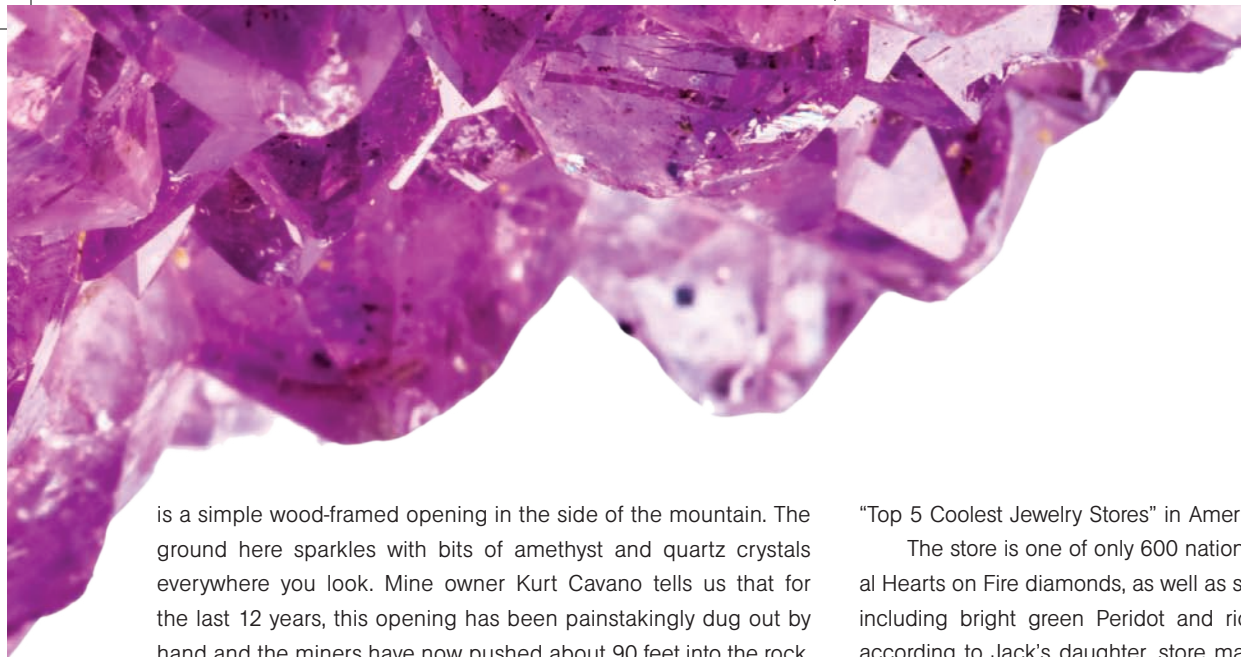
Four Peaks rises to the east—a coveted and distinctive mountain view from prime properties throughout Scottsdale and Fountain Hills. Today, it seems slightly surreal to be in a helicopter, the peaks looming large as we head straight towards them to see the source of the Valley's hidden treasure, the Four Peaks Amethyst. This exceptional precious stone is found in only two places in the world—the rugged mountains in the heart of the Tonto National Forest and the far reaches of Siberia. The stone's rich, deep purple color is highlighted with flashes of red from the iron and manganese found in the Arizona soil, giving it a unique vibrancy.

The helicopter touches down on a narrow ledge at close to 7,000 feet, just below the craggy third and fourth peaks, and we run for cover behind a simple shack used to house supplies for the miners. After a bag or two of precious stones are loaded onto the helicopter, it takes off and we begin our exploration of the mine that produces some of the most distinctive amethysts in the world.

The Four Peaks mine is one of the most remote commercial mines in the country, and the last active commercial amethyst mine in North America. The handful of dedicated miners who work here have a challenging commute—a nine-mile round-trip hike, much of which is extremely steep and unimproved trail littered with obstacles like deadfall and boulders. The last 200-yard stretch is almost straight up.

In the early days, miners were required to carry in supplies and carry out up to 80 pounds of amethyst on their backs. Today, supplies are brought in and stones brought out just twice a year by costly helicopter transport, which is one of the mine's major expenses. The miners stay on the mountain for a week to 10 days at a time, and work year-round, except when snow makes navigating the trail too difficult.

Putting ourselves in the miners' shoes, we make a short hike along the edge of the steep drop-off to the mine opening, which



is a simple wood-framed opening in the side of the mountain. The ground here sparkles with bits of amethyst and quartz crystals everywhere you look. Mine owner Kurt Cavano tells us that for the last 12 years, this opening has been painstakingly dug out by hand and the miners have now pushed about 90 feet into the rock, following a particular vein of amethyst crystals.

Cavano gives us an overview of how the amethyst formed from what were originally compressed layers of sand, shot through with super-heated water and the minerals that gave it its rich purple hue.

"The mine is actually a giant geode," he explains. "When you walk into the mine you are inside a geode and you'll see the roof all covered with amethyst that formed tens of millions of years ago."

Outfitted with hard hats and headlamps, we enter the side of the mountain and, as promised, are surrounded by dirt walls stud-ded everywhere with crystal formations. We grab screwdrivers from a bucket and like excited kids on a treasure hunt, begin picking at the purple veins with the guidance of one of the miners. Although the mountain is rich with amethyst, the mine ships out only about 1,200 pounds of hand-dug stone per year.

After it is cleaned and tumbled in Scottsdale, only about 30 to 50 pounds contain promising amethyst, which is then shipped to China to be cut into gemstones.

"What comes back a month later you can fit in two hands," Cavano says, cupping his hands in front of him.

And where does that handful of precious stones end up? Much of it can be found at Sami Fine Jewelry in Fountain Hills. Store owner, Sami Jack, has retained right of first selection of the Four Peaks Amethyst, and Cavano says, "There are lots of jewelry stores all over the world that use our stones, but Sami does some of the most original designs and gets some of our biggest and best stones to do some really cool jewelry." So cool that the store was actually voted one of the

"Top 5 Coolest Jewelry Stores" in America.

The store is one of only 600 nationwide to carry the exceptional Hearts on Fire diamonds, as well as specializing in Arizona gems, including bright green Peridot and rich red Anthill Garnets. But according to Jack's daughter, store marketing manager Stephanie Bjorkman, the Four Peaks Amethyst is the heart of the store.

"As soon as Sami saw it, she fell in love with it. I would say the amethyst has become a lot of what it is today because of our advertising."

From the purple décor to the welcoming purple-clad sales associates, the amethyst's appeal is infectious at Sami. It is hard to leave the store without wanting a flash of deep violet in a unique design on your finger, wrist or earlobes.

Fortunately, there are Four Peaks Amethyst creations at every price point—from sterling silver pieces starting at around \$25 to an 118-carat, museum-quality stone priced at \$30,000.

It's worth the drive to Fountain Hills just to see the selection of Arizona jewels, but Sami also offers a steady stream of events for its customers. From Glamour Girl parties with wine and cheese to hands-on educational gatherings for those interested in learning more about gemstones, there is always something happening at Sami.

Once your interest is piqued by the gorgeous Four Peaks Amethyst, you can also visit the store for Meet the Miners night, a meet-and-greet session with those hardy souls who hand-plucked your stone out of the mountain. For the more adventurous,

twice a year Sami sponsors the helicopter trip to explore the mine.

Once you have made that trip and seen the treasure glowing deep within the mountain, I promise you will never look at Four Peaks the same way again.

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