

Willis Mountain Kyanite Mine - Dillwyn, VA

By Susan Knowler

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When Kurt and I signed up for this field trip I admit I was a little nervous. This is the world's largest kyanite mine and there would be up to 150 rockhounds there. I am just a newbie at this, having only gone on one previous field trip. I am so glad that I got over my nerves and went!

Saturday morning dawned partly cloudy and just a nip in the air when Kurt and I left our hotel in Farmville, Virginia for the 20 minute drive to the mine office. When we got there about 7:45am there were already a couple dozen rockhounds there from clubs from several states, all chatting about that day's adventure, signing the requisite safety/liability forms, and what other trips they'd been on. The question of the morning was, where is the bathroom? Once located, a line quickly formed! By 8:30 about a hundred of us assembled in our safety gear to hear the briefing by Mike, the mine manager. He mentioned several times, remember, gravity works here!



We headed to our vehicles to caravan to the top of the mountain at a slow but steady pace. At one fork in the bumpy dirt road, Mike was standing to make sure everyone took the road to the left to the main collection site. It was rather steep at that point and there were holes and rocks, but the two cars ahead of us made it up on the right side so I followed in my little SUV. Bump! Bang! Stop! Stuck! Mike motioned for me to back up, which I did, and then inched my way up on the left side of the road. Whew!

When we got to the top, the view was spectacular! There were berms of rocks to make sure no one went over the edge, but you could see over them for miles and miles. A short distance from where we stood was another peak of rock at about our same height. I later learned from Dave that Willis Mountain is what's known geologically as a "monadnock". The kyanite exposure resisted weathering and, as the surrounding area was eroded and weathered away, the mountain outcrop was left standing. Hearing that made the peak we were looking at even more spectacular.



We parked our vehicles and unloaded our gear and started looking around. Despite the large number of people, there was plenty of space to spread out and get working. Some used hammer and chisel, some used small shovels, but I mainly used my eyes and gloved hands. So many colors, layers of colors, and sparkles! So much mica that the ground we walked on even sparkled, especially once the cloud cover burned off and the sun was shining brightly in the bright blue sky. I picked up one rock and turned it over and realized it had pyrite crystals in it, which also added to the sparkly environment.



Rich pulled his truck closer to where Dave and he had been working a huge boulder and brought out a sledge hammer so large I don't think I would even be able to lift it high enough to swing. They worked the side of the boulder until a big chunk broke off and fell to the ground, right where Dave's steel toed boots had recently stood (remember that gravity thing?!). Dave and Rich continued to work that boulder for a couple hours and were rewarded with beautiful chunks of turgite, one of which he gave to Kurt and me. Kurt found a few pieces later not far from that area. It really looks like someone has painted the rock with multi colors!





One participant found a loaf of bread sized rock with one surface covered in a smooth blue mineral material so that it looked like a blue lagoon in the Caribbean. Several folks gathered around it, including Mike and another gentleman from the mine, trying to determine what the blue stuff was. I don't know if they ever figured it out, but it was beautiful!

I pulled our vehicle closer to where we were collecting so it was easier to load up our treasures, and while Kurt collected more, I took more pictures of rocks I liked but were too big to bring home, the people, and the view. Alton offered to take my picture with the nearby peak in the background, and then I took his picture at the same spot.

About 30 minutes before the end of our stay on Mt Willis, Dave suggested we go up another road to a slightly higher spot where blue kyanite crystals might be found so Rich, Dave, Bernie, Kurt and I piled into our vehicles and headed there. It turned out to be the right fork of the road at the spot where I had gotten stuck earlier. We headed up that path a couple hundred yards, parked, and walked up a steep clearing in the trees where it was obvious recent rains had been washing material down from the highest part of the mountain. It was almost like kyanite sand, with so many tiny crystals of kyanite in each handful. While we walked, Rich explained that kyanite is a particularly useful mineral because of its heat resistance qualities, and has been used in many industrial applications such as the ceramic tips of spark plugs and space shuttle heat tiles. I walked up the ravine to near the top and found a palm-sized chunk of matrix with multiple spikes of blue kyanite in it. That one was my favorite piece of the day!

A few minutes later when we got back to the vehicles the Mike the mine manager reminded us it was almost 1pm, time to head back down to the mine office. We carefully caravanned back down the mountain road, past the heavy machinery and hills of gravel, to the parking lot. Some folks headed home but many of us assembled under the picnic pavilion to eat the lunches we'd brought, look at specimens people had found, and just hang out to talk rocks. While the collecting was pretty good, what I enjoyed the most of the day was the view, meeting people from a dozen or so rock clubs from 6 or 7 states, and getting to know folks from our club better! I highly recommend going on a rock hounding field trip!