

The Thrill of the Hunt

Gem mining enchants all ages



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Deep in the foothills of **West Virginia**, history oozes from the rock formations that many take for granted, but along with that history, treasure lies beneath the earth. The hunt for buried treasure captures the fascination of both young and old alike hoping to find the spectacular, sparkling gems of their dreams and West Virginia offers several scenic and gem-rich destinations for all ages to study and collect rocks and minerals from their natural environment.

While searching for treasure is nothing new, the excitement over gem mining has grown to include many social media groups and websites dedicated to rock hounds, which are people dedicated to the collection of rocks, fossils, or minerals. A popular activity for decades, one of the earliest accounts of gem mining comes from the Pueblo, a Southwestern tribe that began mining for turquoise around 2,600 years ago.

Today, there are many ways rock hounds find and collect their specimens, but many enjoy spending an afternoon sifting through dirt to find potential treasure. Fee-based mines around West Virginia, along with many other states, offer collectors the opportunity purchase buckets of pay dirt that is dripping with treasures. A sluice channels a continuous stream of water through a wooden trough, which gem hunters use along with a sieve and small shovel to sift and

sort through the dirt and rocks. The process is reminiscent of mining during the Gold Rush.

Young rock hound Alex Chandler explores gem mines in West Virginia with his family as part of his homeschooling curriculum to learn more about geology as well as history. "It's the thrill of the hunt," Alex said as his eyes light up with excitement. "I love to sort through the buckets of what looks like dirt and find a treasure."

His mother Stephanie said the experience brings what he is learning to life and that he has learned to identify many rocks and stones during the process.

"It is great family time, but also a wonderful learning experience," she said. "And what kid doesn't like playing in dirt and water?"

After a day of digging and searching, rock hounds can get help from on-site gem experts in identifying their treasures and assessing whether the rough gemstones have the potential to create magical pieces to memorialize the experience. Lapidaries who specialize in many gem-cutting techniques cut, grind, and polish and set into custom jewelry that often-become treasured family heirlooms.

"My mother and I share rubies that were cut from the same stone," said Aimee Sutphin, who travels to West Virginia gem mines with her granddaughter Brooklyn. "We both wear almost daily the pendants that I had made from one of my trips and surprised her for a birthday."

The hunt for buried treasure is so interwoven into American history, that now every state has either a state gem or mineral, or both. Not surprisingly, West Virginia designated its official state stone bituminous coal in honor of the significance of coal in the state's economy, history, and geology. The state's gemstone is



Rock hounds also can find more about West Virginia's rocks and gems during the **Kanawha Rock and Gem Club Show and Sale** each year in Charleston. The club meets the third Sunday of each month from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the Rock Lake Presbyterian Church in South Charleston.

www.kanawharockandgemclub.org

West Virginia Fossil Club meets the second Thursday of each month at 7 p.m. at Harrison County Parks and Recreation Complex in Clarksburg.

www.westvirginiafossilclub.com

Prehistoric West Virginia's meetings depend on weather conditions since they meet at a pre-determined location in the field.

prehistoricplanet.com/wv

Make sure to include the **West Virginia Geological and Economic Survey – Museum of Geology and National History** to see rock, mineral, and fossil displays. The museum is in the Survey's headquarters on Cheat Lake, near Morgantown.



Adventurous, and somewhat favored, miners can turn buckets into bucks with the right finds.

lithostrotionella, which is a fossilized coral that lived 340 million years ago when West Virginia was covered by shallow sea during the Mississippian Period.

In addition to the state's gem mines, geologists and rock hounds travel to West Virginia to study the state's fascinating rock formations. Since the state's rocks are sedimentary and formed from pre-existing rocks or pieces of once-living organisms, they form deposits that often have distinctive layering or bedding.

Plant fossils also can be found in the seams of coal that inundate the state, particularly in the Silurian, Devonian, and Mississippi formations. Fossils are commonly found in shales that overlie coal beds which are exposed along highways in the southern, northwestern, and north-central parts of the state. Most of the state's Ice Age fossils are found in the 4,000-plus limestone caves.

Happy Hunting!



Map a gem mining expedition in West Virginia by visiting these scenic locations:

- Seneca Caverns in Riverton
- Someplace Special Gem Mine in Shady Spring
- Brushcreek Falls in Princeton
- Smoke Hole Resort in Cabins
- Clarke's Gem Mine in Moorfield
- Award Art Gems in Smithville

