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February commences the gem writer's new fiscal year. In many ways, the city-wide stone bazaar, known to thousands simply as "**Tucson**," signals an entirely fresh season of note taking, updates, and discoveries for a handful of writers like myself whose main focus is the gem trade. I trust that each year's **Tucson gem and mineral shows** will provide me with enough resources and contacts to launch another year's worth of writing and lectures. Of course, I add to and modify my research data later at other trade shows, but Tucson is the one-stop shopping site for much of my new material.

The sheer enormity of this unique trade show becomes apparent each time I drive around town during the show. That eye-opener is enough to remind me that I can actually collect enough material to sustain me for another year. One can travel for miles in every direction and happen upon tents and motel signs beckoning the gem enthusiast.

This year, the general consensus from vendors was of a more **moderately attended show** — it proved good for some, bad for others. Even so, for those trading in **rare mineral crystals**, it's always good. At the Arizona Mineral & Fossil Show at the Clarion Hotel I checked in on Fabré Minerals from Barcelona. Owner Jordi Fabré may have one of Europe's most comprehensive mineral collections, with much of his exceptional crystals coming from private collections that have never been shown publicly. One of his prize specimens is a **complex white fluorite crystal group** boasting a bright purple color haze on the exterior crystal faces that is reminiscent of air-brushed spray paint. A few miles away at the Westward Look Mineral Show, mineral dealer Rob Lavinsky from Garland, Texas, had no lack of buyers for his rare collection of minerals, but like an exemplary mineral lover, he bought as well. This was the place to have a close encounter with **rare red quartz from Russia**.

With fewer people crowding an exhibit, I found vendors more available to chat. Most of the time at shows, I quickly scribble notes and fill in with phone calls and e-mails after the show; this year I was able to **listen and learn from merchants** on the spot.

This was certainly the **year for Brazil**, which was clear from the fast-paced activity at many Brazilian exhibits. With a stronger presence than last year, their broad inventory allowed some retailers to stock all their colored stone requirements from one source. Brazilian dealers were very keen on learning what buyers were shopping for. They want to fill that order. And because their mines produce such a range of gemstones, they can do it. Duarte & Duarte Gems lists

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imperial topaz, aquamarine, emerald, tourmaline (including Paraiba), alexandrite, and rubellite on their banner, and they carry much more.

Pride in **lapidary arts** was apparent everywhere. After the stone, the cut is the thing. **Fantasy cuts** were displayed to showcase the lapidaries' skill, and also what the stone will do. Not all stones are built alike — some splinter, and others won't take a high polish due to their relative softness. Cutting in wildly fantastic designs pushed the limits of skill and imagination than previously seen. The casual observer may not realize, when savoring the ingenious cuts at booths and in the lush photographs gracing the halls, that the lapidary strives to save weight, eliminate inclusions, and force the best impression of color saturation, all the while creating fanciful eye candy.

When the **red feldspar group of stones** were a curiosity in non-calibrated ovals last year, this year they took center stage. While checking sunstone prices at a small booth, I was introduced to Dalan Hargrave, the extraordinarily imaginative gemstone cutter. I had seen his *Super Nova*, an elaborately carved **freeform sunstone** that took **Best of Competition** in Colored Stone's Gemmys competition. The complicated patterns created with a variety of cutting styles are well thought-out and bring to mind the intricate combinations used by Waterford Crystal — a style Hargrave has become known for, and which elevates his work above the other masterfully cut gems in competition.

Every travel destination has its **well kept secrets**, and in Tucson they are the **lectures** held in several conference rooms adjacent to the exhibit areas. So on an early Saturday morning, after sharing breakfast with gem author Renée Newman of International Jewelry Publications, we headed to the annex and soon found our desired presentation. I sat listening to industry experts speak about subjects not offered anywhere — the topics are more current than recently published material. While taking notes, I simultaneously counted heads. Why don't more people take advantage of these superb seminar opportunities and stay to ask questions afterward? In my experience, I've noticed that only one-half to one-third of the seats are filled at these informative, free events.

The milder form of chaos permeating this years' gem market provided an easier pace and less exhaustion as I left each evening at 6 p.m., when most shows finished for the night. After returning home, I heard from several exhibitors who felt their **time was well spent**, as I did. After all, if you're on that side of the table, **you're there to sell**. When you're on my side of the table, **you're there to learn**.

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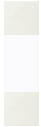
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