



The hunt for crystal mountains

A long hard journey through China in search of Mother Nature's jewels

SIMPLY PUT, FENG shui is about how the environment affects a person's luck. In other words, how a person is oriented to his environment can impact his fortune. Still, the beauty of feng shui goes beyond reading a person's fortune within a confined space. It is about the knowledge of orienting a person to his environment to harness beneficial energies and avoid the harmful ones in order to bring him good fortune.

It is common knowledge that location and direction are key factors in classical feng shui. In ancient times, where man lived closer to nature, orientation to environmental features such as mountains and water were of particular importance. This still holds true for the San He (Three Combinations) school of feng shui — which requires an understanding of Man (home) with respect to surrounding mountains and water — as well as the San Yuan and Yi Jing Ba Gua schools of feng shui.

Typically, depending on the location of the property itself or the direction of the main door of a property, there are certain prescribed positions for a mountain or a body of water that can bring good fortune or misfortune.

According to the feng shui lineage I belong to, we not only consider the external environment (macro-feng shui), but also the internal environment (micro-feng shui). We also look at natural and man-made features. This is part of the practical evolution of feng shui to keep up with the times.

I usually ask my client to acquire a crystal rock to symbolise a mountain and a little table fountain as a water feature when a San He formation is called for to enhance a client's feng shui. A beautiful rock that looks like a mountain will usually suffice, as the aim is to get something that resembles a mountain but please do not get something that is made out of polymer or papier mache. Also, crystal instead of ordinary



This massive solid block of Red Beryl is of a very rare red variety. Gemstone quality of this mineral are faceted into what is known as rubies.

mineral rock tends to combine the placement concept of feng shui with the beneficial effects of crystal energy.

However, my work often does not end there because it is not so easy to purchase these crystalline rocks in the different cities and countries that I consult in, especially those that are beautiful and worthy of the interior of my clients' properties. Thus began my hunt for rock crystal mountains.

Last December, together with a geologist friend of mine, we travelled into the interior of southern China near the border with Vietnam to source Mother Nature's jewels, ranging from the ubiquitous quartz crystals to the precious gemrocks — a journey of 8,000km in 15 days.

China's train service has improved a lot in recent years (if one knows which train to take). They range from modern express trains that are well serviced and clean to those that crank along at snail's pace with narrow hard bunks squished one above the other and filled with unpleasant odours. I prefer the train because I can travel through the night in sleepers, thus saving time. Furthermore, for me, the view from an elevated train track snaking through a countryside is always much more interesting and picturesque than highways and the people make for a good way to gain the flavour of a place travelled.

My journey began from my base in Beijing to Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, an overnight journey of 1,600km to meet up with my geologist friend. From Changsha, we travelled southwest by train to Guilin, Guangxi, to rendezvous with another rock hunter friend. Together, we headed south to the southern crossroad town of Nanning. Guilin, with its limestone scenery, remains one of the more unspoilt cities in China. Nanning, in contrast, is a very modern, spacious and clean city. Beyond Nanning, we journeyed back in time.

Our journey into the remote parts of Yunnan started from Nanning on a different mode of transport (which was my first experience and I promised myself that it will be the last!).

The familiar interstate air-conditioned coaches were inter-

Crystal country

China is a huge country and a good part of it is mountainous. It is in these remote high mountains where beautiful and rare rock crystals can still be found. In the mountains of Yunnan, the most exquisite tend to be found in caves, typically formed millions of years ago from fluids that escaped from the magma flowing through the fractures and cavities that exist at the interface between the earth's crust and mantle. With the right conditions, crystal growth occurs. Eventually, these crystals are brought to the surface during volcanic eruptions, or reach the surface through mountain building and erosion. Due to the length of time required for crystal growth and our geologically active earth, it is quite difficult to find a good piece of crystal rock. In China, knowing the right rock hunters can be very helpful as we managed to find the most incredible masterpieces by Mother Nature.

In recent times, crystal rocks have become popular with museums, academic institutions and private collectors. Some of the pieces we saw would sell in the collector's market for hundreds of thousands of dollars, particularly after they have undergone intricate carving by master craftsman. Eventually, these treasures go into the collections of those who value their beauty and have the means to acquire them. They become progressively more expensive as they become rarer.



A vein of natural emerald in matrix has gray translucent quartz with biotite mica schist

nally fitted with double-decker beds. However, the bedclothes provided most probably never saw the light of day for years. With good intention, the owner-operators required passengers to remove their shoes upon entry — huge mistake!

The resulting foul stench on the 16-hour, 800km trip into the heart of Yunnan's Wenshan prefecture defies description. We barely survived with mandarin peels stuck up our nostrils. With cast-iron stomachs developed from much travel, we bumped through the night without any mishaps, having had a meal of pond-fish cooked with water from the same pond, no doubt. We couldn't exit the bus fast enough on arrival at a small provincial town, which boasts about 50,000 inhabitants (a tiny city by Chinese standards). It was here that we visited other rock hunters and took a look at their precious collections of rubies, emeralds and sapphire crystals and varied enchanting rock crystals of every form and colour — just an inkling of what was to come.

Our next destination was to a hilly bordertown with a name that conjures up "slopes of hemp and chestnuts", where another crystal hunter showed us his treasures. Due to the specific geological activity in the vicinity, each location saw a different selection of crystals on offer. Here, we saw purple and green jade as big as a boxer's clenched fist, and blue jade that I had never come across before. But the most intriguing piece was a boulder that proudly held out five to six different precious gem crystals such as topaz, tourmaline, aquamarine crystal clusters, with each cluster the size of a coconut.

The return journey wound through 150km of treacherous mountain roads in the freezing night air. My frozen face eventually thawed out with a local delicacy of chicken hotpot

cooked with coconut milk and mountain herbs that Yunnan is famous for.

Onward, we travelled, in cloud-laden weather typical of this province known as "Southern Clouds" since the days of Genghis Khan. Our minibus was fully laden with live chickens in gunny-sacks strapped on the roof and local Miao minorities balanced on tiny stools where seats were not available. They were obviously unused to bus travel, as two thirds of our busload ended up being sick. My experienced rock hunter friends were quick to jump to the front at the first sign of trouble but I was very much dependent on a window under my control. Between opening the window to escape the cigarette smoke and closing the window to escape the backflow, it was not easy to doze on this six-hour journey.

Along the road, a clear sparkling waterfall appeared from the jungle, and we followed its meandering course until it joined the reddish-brown silt-laden river called the Hong He (Red River) that forms the border between this stretch of Yunnan and Vietnam. As we neared Hekou, the border town with Vietnam, the rice fields were replaced by banana plantations for as far as the eye could see, their lush-green fronds set against a backdrop of blue mountains. Mule carts laden with bananas for the market blocked the narrow mountain roads.

We arrived at Hekou in the evening to the bustle of a lively night scene of stalls and people dancing in the quaint esplanade that ran along one side of the Hong He. Here were shops selling all sorts of Vietnamese goods. It was rather strange travelling through kilometres of seemingly deserted country, to then suddenly stumble on a busy township with trade crossing the borders at all hours. Here, I sampled crunchy bee larvae for lunch.

Travelling on a Malaysian passport in this region has its advantages, for I didn't need a visa into Vietnam while everyone else did. So I ended up being the carrier pigeon where I crossed the border twice a day to help take the rest of our luggage across when two of us decided we would



Viewing my Miao friend's clothes for sale in Bacha Sunday market



Rock crystals

These are essentially rocks with crystallised mineral content found in areas that used to be geologically active. They are formed from the very slow cooling and solidification process of minerals. The crystal shape they take on reflects the molecular structure of the major chemical that makes up its composition. The larger the crystal the longer it would have taken to form (we are talking about millions of years).



From top A 20cm-radius matrix block containing at least several varieties of semi-precious stones such as yellow beryl, tourmaline, aquamarine and topaz • The transparency of a fist-size cluster of tourmaline crystal

We are familiar with quartz crystals which are essentially silica with traces of chemical impurities that lend it the myriad colours, like trace iron in amethyst (purple) and citrine (yellow) to those that contain gem materials like chryso-prase (green), onyx (natural cream/tan colour going to black and other colours), amazonite (mottled green), and chalcedony (blues, and other colours). Other semi-precious and precious crystals such as topaz, aquamarine, sapphire, ruby, emerald tourmaline, aquamarine, garnet, green and red beryl (lesser-quality emeralds and rubies) in their raw forms can also be found clustered to the rocks from which the crystals grew.

I prefer to use rock crystals to just rocks as the mountain feature in my feng shui placements. This is because crystals, being a uniform solid material with a regular lattice of atoms, can have vibrational energies that ordinary rocks do not. These allow the crystal's vibrational energy to complement the energies evoked from my feng shui placement of the mountain.

rather tackle the unknown alternative route back into Nanning than to suffer in the sleeper bus again.

Across the border in north Vietnam, we went to a Miao market town. The Sunday market in Bacha, where villagers from miles around gather to socialise and shop for the week, was in full swing. There were five Miao groups to be found, easily recognisable from their traditional clothes. The market offered clothes, bags, bedding, all hand-made with some of the most intricate needlework, home-brewed alcohol, all kinds of food for sale, including the heart-wrenching sight of crying puppies huddled and shaking, plus almost anything that is required for their simple lifestyle. We ate and chatted with two Miao women who were aunt and niece from two different villages who come weekly to Bacha to sell clothing and alcohol. They shared our meal of horse meat and doufu, although I noticed they didn't eat the horse meat.

We then ventured to Sapa, a rather rundown French colonial hill resort. French influence can be seen in the buildings once we entered Vietnam, which we find quite unique. The countryside around are dotted with villages of the Black Hmong, a Miao minority group, set among mountains with terraced fields. We visited their villages, saw their schools and bought their handicraft. We then made our way to Ha Long Bay, a World Heritage site of the most beautiful and tranquil setting of limestone karsts islands rising from the turquoise seas for as far as the eye could see. Our journey there and out

by train, taxi, local bus and motorbike was an adventure and challenge because beyond the Chinese border and outside the suburban reach of Hanoi, no one spoke any of the southern Chinese dialects or English. And as this trip was impromptu, we never learnt the Vietnamese names for these places. To make things more difficult, every Vietnamese we met tried to take advantage of our lack of familiarity with the place. Through sheer determination and travel wiles, we made it to this magnificent place.

My return to Beijing was at a record pace. We were almost stranded on the border crossing into the Chinese part of Pingxiang, but we bribed our way through. We were glad to leave the deserted pitch-black border area deep in the night and spent the night in Nanning. A 30-hour train ride then took me back to Beijing. ■



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