A Pictorial of An Incredible Place

Figure 1. View down the main road through Merelani.

Figure 2. Miners’ housing outside the big gate leading to the Merelani mine area.
For nearly three weeks in August and early September 2012 I traveled to the village of Merelani, Tanzania, along with my wife, Federica Quaglieri, and my business partner, Giovanni Lombardi. Having been to Tanzania many times since 2007, I have come to know the local miners and have learned much about Merelani’s history.

Fabio Americolo is a mineral dealer, researcher, and avid mineral collector who has explored pegmatite localities in Italy, Pakistan, Mongolia, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Iceland, Tunisia, and Morocco, in addition to his most recent love, Tanzania.
Merelani, located in the Arusha region’s Simanjiro district, was named after the mirera, a famous Maasai tree used for herbal purposes including aphrodisiacs. The village was first called “Mirerani,” then evolved to “Mererani,” and eventually to the current “Merelani,” which originated with southern Tanzanian people who pronounce the letter r like the letter l. Merelani is a unique place where the people are like a rainbow in a storm, with many different cultures all in the same somewhat chaotic place. It is a colorful world in which poor people live on the street, but where the cheerfulness of even the poorest people is addictive. Today, it is estimated that more than 200,000 people live in Merelani and around the mines, where everyone works together with one common goal: to find, collect, and sell tanzanite.

Outside of TanzaniteOne Mining Ltd. (Arusha, Tanzania), one of the big mining companies, the miners’ lives are very difficult, working in extremely harsh and dangerous conditions. Not only are the mine pits and galleries often unsafe, but graphite dust is also a problem for the miners. Many miners do not have enough money to buy tools, and frequently even food, which usually consists of ugalì (maize flour) and marague (beans). Adding to the hardships, miners work without a salary, and they can labor for several months without finding anything of value.

Small-scale miners, who have access to the less productive zones in the area, compete with several big companies that have the rights to the richest zones. These miners frequently work their way toward the larger mines as they follow the best veins. Being too close to the larger mines underground sometimes leads to accidents and deaths due to unexpected blasts in the company-owned mines. Occasionally, private police have shot miners inside the galleries.

Organization in the small-scale mines is simple. There are usually one or two chiefs in charge of all miners in a gallery, and there are two types of workers: the first group works on drilling and blasting, and the second group removes the rock. When workers find a pocket, the chief collects all the best tanzanite first, followed in order by the first and second groups of miners, respectively. Because tanzanite crystals are the only salary the miners have for survival, violent fights sometimes occur among miners trying to collect what remains inside a crystal pocket. Often the mine chiefs appeal to sorcerers (mchawe) and magic to control the miners and to bring good luck in finding the elusive pockets of tanzanite crystals.

During our recent trip, in August 2012, we were able to gain entry to the Karo area itself and were able to take some rare photographs. The Karo mine, located in the eastern part of Block D about 300 meters beyond the Opec mine complex, is not one pit but is actually an area with many pits. It has been particularly productive in recent years for producing many interesting mineral specimens besides tanzanite. We were fortunate to be able to acquire some excellent specimens from this area, including gemmy green diopside, lustrous drusy graphite, gemmy blue fluorapatite, drusy stilbite with tanzanite, bladed laumontite, brown rhombs of chabazite, fluorescent crystallized calcite, pink and violet axinite-(Mn), and nicely crystallized quartz. We also obtained several striking specimens of prehnite with crystals to 3.5 cm long, associated with crystals of laumontite, chabazite,
calcite, pyrite, graphite, diopside, and tanzanite. The prehnite crystals appear sky-blue in sunlight but are distinctly more purple in tungsten lighting. It is a rewarding challenge to find good-quality mineral specimens at Merelani, and we are eager to visit and try once again.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
I extend thanks to my wife, Federica Quagliieri, and my partner, Giovanni Lombardi, for making this trip a success. I am grateful to John A. Jaszczak for suggesting I write this note and for assisting me in the process.

Figure 9. View down a mine shaft in the Karo area.

A few specimens obtained during the author’s trip to Merelani in August 2012...

Figure 10. An unusually large (10 × 9-cm) crystal of axinite-(Mn) from the Karo mine area.

Figure 11. Pyrite (8 cm tall) with diopside, apatite, and graphite from the Karo mine.

Figure 12. A superb 7-cm-tall yellow tanzanite crystal from the Merelani mine district.

Figure 13. Prehnite crystals associated with crystals of laumontite, calcite, and graphite. It is shown photographed in fluorescent light (top) and tungsten light (bottom). The specimen is 3.5 cm wide, John A. Jaszczak specimen and photo.