

Herkimer Diamond Mines

Middleville, NY



The incessant clanking of steel against stone greets visitors to the diamond mines of Middleville, New York.

Two competing attractions -- the **Herkimer Diamond Mines** and the **Ace Of Diamonds Mine** -- occupy adjacent lots along the west side of Rt. 28 south of town. The word "mine" here is in the sense of a strip mine or a gravel pit; there are no shafts here, no carts of ore being hauled by burros, although there are a number of grime-faced prospectors who look as if they could use a bath.

The treasures mined here are "Herkimer diamonds" -- really faceted quartz crystals with points at both ends, and this is supposedly one of the few places in the world where they can be found. For many years they were merely attractive curiosities, but over the last two decades they have also become "metaphysical essentials," according to a guidebook that you can buy at the Herkimer Diamond Mines. "It is thought that the double-terminated points allow for multiple locations for energy to enter and exit from the crystal, resulting in a more powerful energy flow." Some have dubbed the diamonds "dream rocks" and claim that sleeping with a Herkimer in your pillowcase will enhance your dreams; others use them for meditation and healing, which you may need if a pointy dream rock pokes a hole in your scalp.



Two types of people visit the diamond mines: casual tourists, who may be on the lookout for a cheap way to burn out the kids; and power prospectors who are after a mother lode to sell to New Age crystal shops. Both mines accommodate both types, although the Ace Of Diamonds mine caters more to the serial digger.

Diamond Mines gift shop will rent you a crack hammer and buy you safety goggles, which we recommend, as nothing ruins a vacation faster than a rock chip in your eye. You can watch the explanatory video upstairs and peruse the scientific displays if you want. But the art of diamond prospecting, at least for the day-tripper, is simple: you walk up the dirt road to one of the two pits, find a craggy expanse to your liking, and start pounding (In the interest of fairness, both mines prohibit jackhammers and dynamite.)

It is fun to see what appear to be sparkily, hand-faceted diamonds emerging from otherwise dull, gray, dolomite rock -- although your interest may wane, depending on your tolerance for pounding rocks in a dusty, open pit that looks like the surface of Mars. Both pits were full of people when we visited, no one seemed to have any plan, and the whole setup seemed to work on the same principle as slot machines in a casino; the loud success of the few ("I found



one!") encouraged the continued effort of the many. After a while, we suspect, most people give up and plunk down 20 or 30 bucks for a nice example from the expansive gift shop. A lot of New Age healers visit the mine - - but, according to Herkimer owner Rudy Scialdo, they never go into the pit, they just buy 'em.



A very different scene can be found next door, at the **Ace Of Diamonds** mine. Its pit is, in fact, just a few feet of dolomite from the second pit at Herkimer, although you have to go back onto Rt. 28 and negotiate a hairpin turn - - marked by a giant, cheesy, silver Herkimer diamond dangling from a crane -- to get to it.

In the mine office, owner Ted Smith is bemused by the many New Agers who visit. "If you stay here long enough," he told us, "you'll meet every type who ever stepped off a starship." One "doctor" from Switzerland, he said, visits every year to buy crystals -- which he then exposes to light from a particular star before reselling them at a hefty markup.

Ace Of Diamonds seems to offer better odds at actually finding diamonds, although this is probably because it caters more to obsessed adults than families with kids. For \$7.00 a day you get to stake a "claim," bring in sledgehammers and pry bars, and quarry into the hillside in hopes of finding "vugs" -- pockets, sometimes several feet wide, containing hundreds of diamonds. Generations of similar-minded shelf-workers have moved the hillside far back from the road cut that originally exposed the diamonds in the 19th century. Dowsers, too, visit the quarry with divining rods to find diamond pockets; Ted accepts their money as well as anyone's, although he recommends a sledgehammer.

One wall-worker who caught our eye at Ace Of Diamonds was W.G. Hagglund from Canada, with his shade tarp and variety of tools. He told us he'd been pounding rock for 16 straight days and had quarried several tons of dolomite in that time. He saw this as a vacation from his normal job as a school bus driver (he used to build replicas of the Starship Enterprise bridge -- series I and II -- for corporate events. "CEOs love to sit in the captain's chair," he explained.).

W.G. was not shy in expressing his opinions to us, as, we suspect, would be anyone who voluntarily pounds rock for 16 days. "You live in a country that harbors a known terrorist organization," he cautioned us, explaining that this organization was the Scientologists and that he was currently sheltering a fugitive from them in his Canadian basement. "They believe in Yog, a space demon," he snorted, picking up his sledgehammer and walking back to the rock wall. "That's what that 'religion' is really all about."

