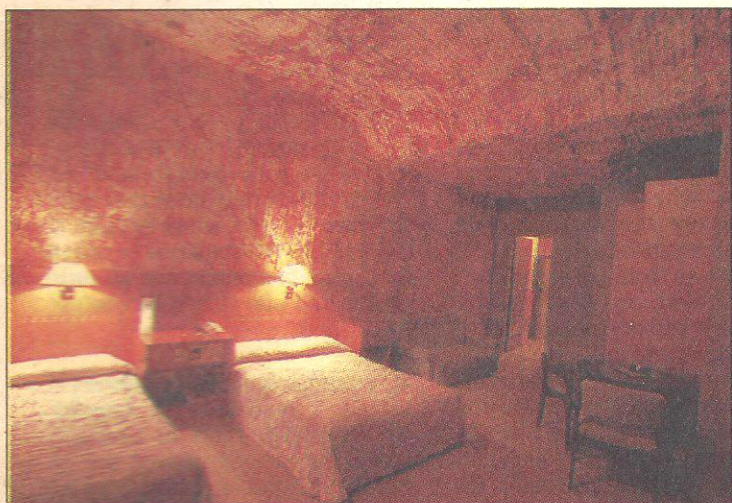


Destination: Australia

Dig this Town

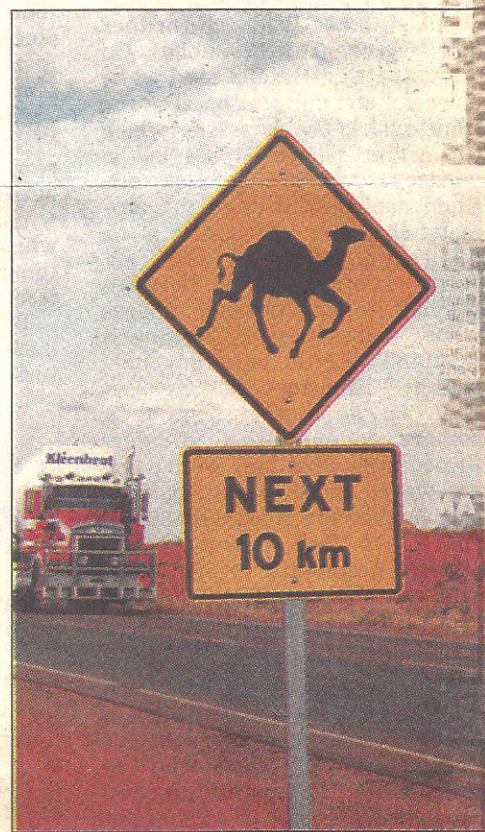
Visitors Venture to
the Outback's Coober
Pedy to 'Noodle' for
Opals and Stay in
Underground Hotels



Rock stars: Clockwise from left, a subterranean room at Desert Cave Hotel; an alert for wild camels; Coober Pedy opal shop owner with gemstones worth about \$500,000 apiece, and "noodlers" in front of mullock mounds.



MISSING



Photos by RICK BROWNE

BY
JACK GOLDFARB

COOBER PEDY, Australia—The bleak lunar landscape, pockmarked by thousands of pot-holes, craters and chalky white mounds, loomed up toward us as we gently descended in our little twin-engine craft. Astronauts on a moon landing? Hardly. But a sense of excitement gripped us as our Saab turbo-prop plane from Adelaide touched down at Coober Pedy, the unique "underground town" in the arid outback of South Australia. A hand-lettered sign on the shack-like terminal building spelled out: "Welcome to Coober Pedy—Opal Capital of the World."

A lone airport worker, a dark-haired young woman, met our Kendell Airlines flight—the drowsy airport's total traffic for the day. She tossed our hefty suitcase into a mini-van, climbed behind the wheel and asked which of the town's half-dozen accommodations we were headed for. Our slung cameras and bug-eyed looks served to emblazon the label "Tourist" across our chests. My wife, Simone, and I were booked at the Desert Cave Hotel, eager, yet a bit wary, to experience its advertised claim: "The World's Only Underground Hotel."

On earlier visits Down Under, we had talked of getting away from Australia's big coastal cities and heading for the red desert heartland. Especially intriguing was the legendary Coober Pedy. We knew that maximum daytime temperatures here, capable of soaring from 95 to 115 degrees for eight months of the year, had brought about a lifestyle of "dugout" cave-style dwelling. A network of underground shops, accommodations, restaurants and churches sheltered the Coober Pedians from the scorching heat, occasional stifling dust storms, and swarming desert flies that afflict the austral summer between December and February. We had planned our trip for the relatively "milder" Australian winter (June-August), and the temperatures hovered in the 70s during the day.

But the mining of opals is really what Coober Pedy is all about.

Chauffeuring us into town last July, Laura Campagna was a mine of information. "Most of the world's opals come from Australia, and most of those stones are dug up right around here," she said. "It tallies up to \$20 to \$40 million dollars' worth a year."

We had heard that fortune-seeking adventurers trekked to Coober Pedy from all over the world, lured by the "Queen of Gems." The town's population of 5,000, Laura told us, included 42 different nationalities. This was no simple ethnic mix. It was probably the most motley work force outside Babel or the U.N. Building in New York. Laura dropped us off at the hotel, in the heart of town. With typical outback friendliness she invited us to stop in to the sightseeing office or souvenir shop any-

time, even if just to say "G'day!"

Our underground hotel room, a cube-like chamber burrowed into the side of a hill, reposed about 13 feet below a solid rock surface. A door led out into the open air, but the pink sandstone walls produced the effect of a snug crypt—complete with air-conditioning, television and international telephone. Whorled patterns on the striated walls, like giant fingerprints, were the telltale marks of powerful tunneling machines that had hollowed out this room.

In the rambling subterranean hotel arcade, illuminated only by electric lights, we found an art gallery, a well-stocked bookshop, cozy bar, theatre, and, for sure, shops selling opals. The hotel also maintained aboveground rooms for claustrophobic guests. Upstairs, a first-class restaurant featured international cuisine, as well as local dishes such as pan-fried crocodile tail, oven-baked kangaroo fillet with strawberry and cassis sauce and medallions of char-grilled water buffalo.

Venturing outside, we surveyed the scene on Hutchinson Street, the town's main drag, named in honor of Willie Hutchinson, the 14-year-old youngster who "founded" Coober Pedy.

On Feb. 1, 1911, Willie was left to look after a desert base camp while a group of gold prospectors, including his father, went in search of water. It was during one of Australia's worst droughts. When the men returned empty-handed after dark and found Willie missing, they grew anxious and prepared to light a signal fire. But a grinning Willie stumbled into camp, announcing he had found pieces of precious opal. And water too.

Within days more opal was discovered, eventually leading to the establishment of the town. Tragically, young Willie drowned five years later in a swimming accident in Queensland.

Dust-blown Hutchinson Street, astir with general stores, gas stations, cafes and pickup trucks, has all the atmosphere of a frontier mining town, the feel of the old American Wild West. But a close-up look reveals how different it really is. Worshipers emerge from an underground church hewn out of solid sandstone; at the busy post office wall notices advertise: "Dugout Home for Sale, 3 bedrooms, large lounge, office, wall-to-wall carpeting, rainwater tank, fully-tiled bathroom, \$55,000." (About half of Coober Pedians live in private homes underground.) Other ads suggest miners ready to move on, having made their fortunes, or gone broke: "For Sale, Second-hand opal-cutting machines. Tunneling machine. Blower/Extractor."

But 100,000 visitors pass through here every year, most of them en route to Ayers Rock and Alice Springs, 450 miles north. The opal dealers of Hutchinson Street transact a brisk business, often entertaining bargain-hunting customers with embellished tales of Coober Pedy's rough and ready past. Stories about "Moonlight" Burgess, the notorious opal bandit, or "Carney" Jimmy, the miserly miner who

feasted on lizards. At both ends of Hutchinson Street's half-mile stretch lies the harsh, treeless desert that surrounds the town. An inland sea 100 million years ago, the outback in South Australia, the driest state in the world's driest continent, is inhabited today by dingoes, wild camels and kangaroos. About six miles north of Coober Pedy stands the 5,950-mile-long "Dog Fence," a chain-link fence winding across Australia from coastal Queensland to South Australia to protect grazing sheep in the eastern part of the country from dingoes, the fierce desert dogs that roam the outback. Aussies claim it's the longest fence in the world.

Although opal mining is not allowed within the town limits, the perimeter and beyond are littered with conically-shaped heaps of mullock (waste dirt) piled next to thousands of drill-holes where mine shafts have been sunk.

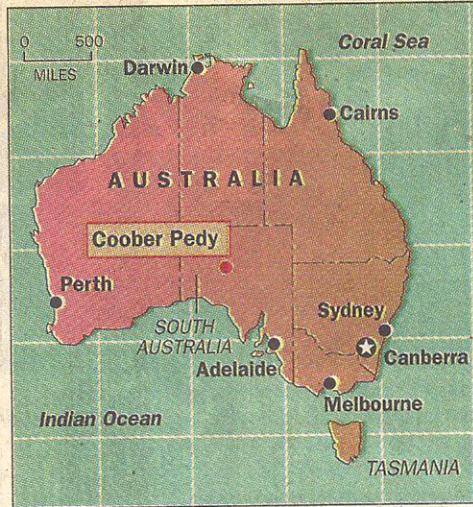
A permit to dig in one of the 75 fields around Coober Pedy is easy to obtain. For \$35 the Department of Mines and Energy will let you "peg" your claim to a 50-square-meter area for a year. But only individuals can mine. No companies. You must be at least 16 years old (Willie Hutchinson wouldn't qualify.) In fact, according to locals, many Coober Pedy visitors have stayed on, enticed by the prospect of unearthing lodes of the rainbow-colored gemstones.

Miners often pool their efforts, sharing equipment and splitting profits. Instead of the old method of dynamiting, the modern mining technique employs a high-powered tunneling machine with a steel-bladed rotating head that chomps into earth and rocks with a meter-wide bite. A truck-mounted mechanical monster, thundering like a huge vacuum cleaner, then moves in, whooshes the debris to the surface and spits it into huge piles to be scrutinized for traces of opal. When all the opal is believed removed, the rubble is abandoned to the "noodlers."

"Noodlers," (or "fossickers") are those hopeful souls, mostly housewives, tourists, children, even miners on their day off, who scour the mullock mounds with tin sieves, trowels or bare hands for any overlooked leftovers. More sophisticated noodlers use a conveyor belt to pass the discard under an ultraviolet light that makes opal look yellow.

Unique among gemstones, opals gain their beauty from the brilliant play of colors created by the breaking up of white light into the iridescent colors of the spectrum. Layers of tiny silica spheres produce this diffraction when the stone is rotated in a bright light.

Most treasured of all are the black opals whose dark (black, blue or gray) background enhances the flaming bursts of red, gold, blue and green. Lesser in value are the crystal clear and milky-white opals. If you are not *au fait* with the world of opals, the Hutchinson Street experts are quick to tell you that solid opals, cut in rounded cabochon style, will cost you much more than a "doublet" (thin slices of opal glued



VICTOR KOTOWITZ / Los Angeles Times

to a dark backing) or a "triplet" (a clear quartz cover topping a "doublet" to intensify the stone's luster and shield its delicate surface).

If the opal sellers perceive you to be a connoisseur, they'll bring out the expensive trays of harlequins, with dazzling patchwork patterns, or pinfires, with closely-spaced blazing specks of varied colors. Quality stones like these sell for hundreds, even thousands of dollars per carat. Afford it or not, few tourists leave Coober Pedy empty-handed, as crude bits of flawed opal are freely available to take

home as souvenirs.

Before ending our five-day stay, Simone and I called on the mayor at City Hall. We had met tall, affable, Cyprus-born Eric Malliotis the night before at his cheerful little restaurant on Hutchinson Street. He had not only cooked our tasty fried fish dinner—of locally popular barramundi—but had personally served us, adding on a huge pile of French fries and ice cream for dessert. Neither did he spare the wine. Our extended conversation had ranged from Middle Eastern politics to Aboriginal folk medicine. As we left at midnight closing time, Malliotis asked us to stop by his office in the morning. He had something "special" to show us.

In his brick-walled, aboveground cubbyhole office at City Hall, Malliotis, in open-necked shirt, welcomed us warmly, proudly holding a letter on White House stationery signed by President George Bush. The mayor explained that he had presented an opal and a wooden nameplate to the President at an official reception in Canberra when Bush visited Australia in early 1992.

"Mrs. Bush and I had a memorable visit to Australia," wrote President Bush. "The only drawback was we missed the pleasure of visiting Coober Pedy . . ."

I looked at my wife and smiled. I'm glad we didn't, I said.

Goldfarb is a New York City-based freelance writer.

GUIDEBOOK

Underground Down Under

Getting there: From Los Angeles, United Airlines, Northwest, Qantas, Air New Zealand and Canadian Airlines International fly via Australian gateway cities to Adelaide (about 17 hours). Lowest current, high-season, round-trip fares range \$1,230-\$1,280 for 14-day advance purchase tickets: From Adelaide, Kendell Airlines operates daily 2½-hour flights into Coober Pedy for about \$196 round trip. Daily bus service by Greyhound Pioneer costs \$60 one-way for the nearly 12-hour trip. The celebrated Ghan train from Adelaide takes 13 hours to Manguri, a whistlestop 24 miles west of Coober Pedy. From there, transportation by hotel car or taxi from Coober Pedy costs about \$60.

Where to stay: The Desert Cave Motel (P.O. 223, Coober Pedy, South Australia 5723; tel. 011-61-86-725-688, fax 011-61-86-725-198) provides both underground and aboveground rooms and first-class facilities, around \$85 single/double/twin. The Opal Inn (Coober Pedy, South Australia 5723; tel. 011-61-86-725-054, fax 011-61-86-725-501) offers motel-type accommodations for \$45-\$50 singles/doubles. Under- or overground

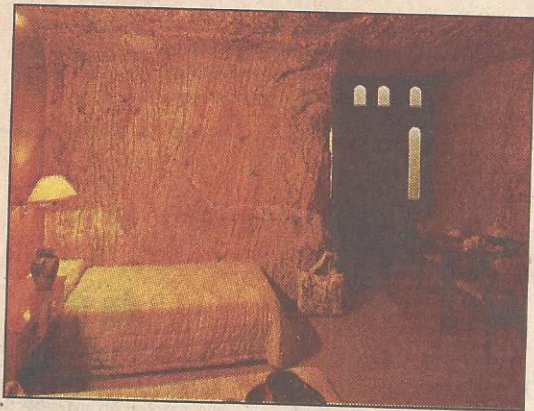
lodgings for budget travelers/backpackers are available at Opal Cave Bedrock, Lookout Cave and Radeka Underground Hostel for less than \$25.

Where to eat: Umberto's at the Desert Cave Hotel offers an elegant menu: dinner for two with wine, about \$70. The Last Resort Cafe, just behind the Desert Cave, serves superb food prepared by its Swiss owner-chef who grinds his own coffee, bakes pastries and makes his own ice cream; moderately-priced, breakfast and lunch only. Also in town, a plethora of Greek restaurants offer traditional Hellenic dishes, even the mayor operates one, the hospitable Blue Marlin, where he cooks and waits on tables.

Getting around: Among the half dozen local tour operators are Coober Pedy Tours and Prospectors Opal Tours, who excel in showing off the town's unique features: working opal mines, underground living styles and heaps of discarded opal ore where you can hunt for overlooked gemstones.

For more information: Contact the Australian Tourist Commission, 2121 Avenue of the Stars, Suite 1200, Los Angeles 90067; (310) 552-1988.

—J.G.



RICK BROWNE

Australia

Underground hotels, opal
'noodling' in the outback. L15