

Coober Pedy, a small town in the Australian outback, also known as the "Opal capital of the world" does brisk business in selling opals worth millions and gives fortuneseekers a chance to try their luck at unearthing the precious rainbow-coloured stones.

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Photographs courtesy
AUSTRALIAN TOURIST COMMISSION

THEY DIG THIS TOWN

The bleak lunar landscape, pockmarked by thousands of potholes, craters and chalky-white mounds, loomed up toward us as we gently descended in our little twin-engined craft. Astronauts on a moon landing? Not at all. But a similar sense of excitement gripped us as our Saab turbo-prop plane 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 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 accommodation we were headed for. My wife and I were booked at the Desert Cave Hotel, eager, yet a bit wary, to experience the advertised claim, "The world's only underground hotel."

But the mining of opals is really what Coober Pedy is all about. Chauffeuring us into town, Laura Campagna joked as she listed her diverse occupations: handling airline flights, shuttling airport passengers, helping her father run a sightseeing tour business and managing a souvenir shop. As for opals, Laura 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. "Worth \$20 to \$40 million a year."

Lured by the "Queen of Gems," fortune-seeking adventurers have trekked to Coober Pedy from all over the world. The town's population of 5000, Laura told us, comprised 42 different nationalities. This was no simple ethnic mix.

Probably the most motley work force outside the U.N. building in New York. Laura dropped us off at our underground hotel.

We knew that Coober Pedy's daytime temperatures, hovering between 35 degrees centigrade (95 degrees fahrenheit) and 47 degrees centigrade (115 degrees fahrenheit) much of the year, had brought about a lifestyle of "dugout" cave dwellings and a network of underground facilities, to escape the scorching heat, stifling dust storms and swarming desert flies.

Our room, a cube-like chamber burrowed into the side of a hill, reposed four meters 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, bore tell-tale marks of powerful tunnelling machines that had

DOWN UNDER



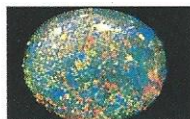
Coober Pedy's lunar-like landscape of flat-topped sandstone ridges

hollowed out this room. The same excavators, we understood, that burrowed into the earth in search of opal-bearing ore.

The dugout homes were the invention of returning World War I veterans who joined the Opal Rush here in the early 1920's. The ex-soldiers patterned the subterranean dwellings after the battlefield trenches they had lived in for long periods in France. In the outback, the idea was to escape the searing desert heat and smothering dust storms. Temperatures in the dugouts stayed at a comfortable 25 degrees centigrade (75 degrees fahrenheit) year-round. But it was the Aboriginals who named the town "Kupa Piti", meaning "White Man in a Hole." The name later became anglicized to Coober Pedy, but mail often arrives addressed to

Koopapeddie, Copper Peddy and Cuba Pity.

Venturing outside, we surveyed the scene on Hutchinson Street, the town's hub, named after Willie Hutchinson, the legendary 14 year-old who discovered opals in Coober Pedy in the year 1915. In February that year, during one of Australia's worst droughts, Willie was left to look after a desert base camp while a group of older gold prospectors, including his father, went in search of water. When the men returned empty-handed after dark and found Willie missing, they grew anxious and were preparing to light a signal fire, when a grinning Willie stumbled into camp, excitedly announcing he had found pieces of precious opal. And water too.

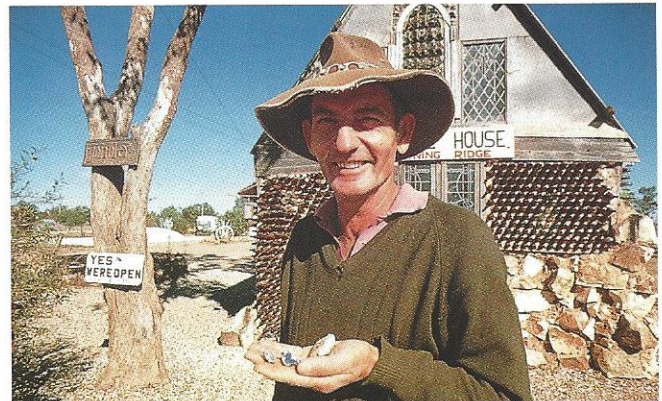
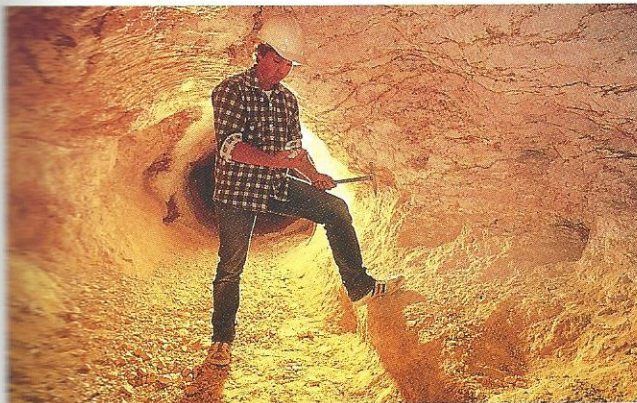




(left) Noodlers or fossickers scouring the mullock for any overlooked leftovers.

(Below left) A miner examines a section of a cavern wall for any valuable deposits.

(Bottom) A veteran miner displays his booty



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

Dustblown Hutchinson Street, astir with general stores, gas stations, cafes and pickup trucks, has the atmosphere of a frontier mining town, the feel of the old American Wild West. There are no sidewalks on Hutchinson Street, but the street is virtually paved with opal. They say there's one opal dealer in Coober Pedy for every tourist. An exaggeration, maybe. But 1,00,000 visitors flow through here every year, most of them en route to the famed tourist attractions of Ayers Rock and Alice Springs. 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 are legendary.

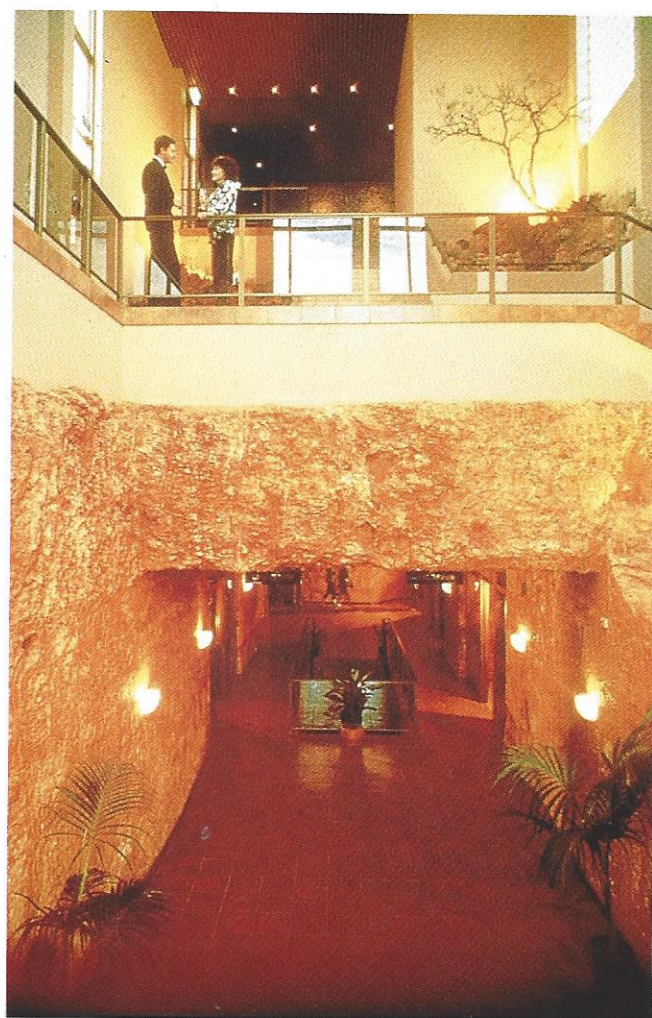
Although opal mining is not allowed within the town limits, the perimeter and beyond are littered with conically-shaped heaps of mullock (waste dirt) piled next to thousands of mine shafts. A permit to dig in one of the fields around Coober Pedy is easy to obtain. For a modest price, the Department of Mines and Energy will let you peg your claim to a 50 square-metre area for a year. But only individuals can





(Above) Polished opals in a variety of colours sell for thousands of dollars

(Right) Interiors of the The Desert Cave Hotel which claims to be the world's only underground hotel



mine. No companies. And you must be at least 16 years old (Willie Hutchinson wouldn't qualify today).

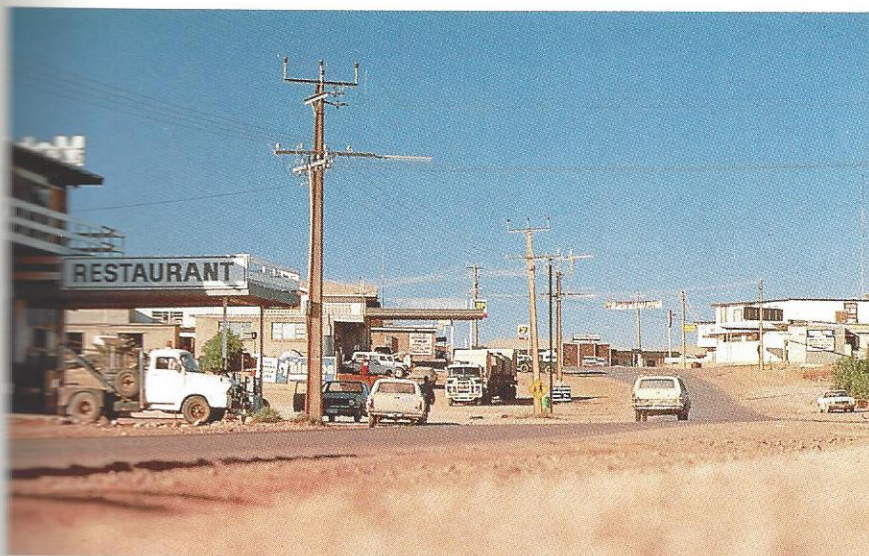
Miners often pool their efforts, share equipment and split profits. Instead of the old method of dynamiting and hauling the ore to the surface in bags or buckets, the more effective technique nowadays employs a high-powered tunnelling machine with a steel-bladed rotating head that chomps into earth and rocks with a meter-wide bite. A truck-mounted mechanical blower, thundering like a huge vacuum cleaner, then moves in and whooshes the debris to the surface to be scrutinised for traces of opal. When all the opal is believed to have been 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."

Unique among gemstones, opals gain their beauty from the brilliant play of colours created by the breaking up of white light into the iridescent colours 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 grey) background enhances the flaming burst 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





Coober Pedy has the atmosphere of a frontier town with a casual lifestyle and friendliness that cuts across ethnic lines.



opals, the Hutchinson Street experts are quick to instruct you that solid opals, cut in rounded cabochon style, will cost you much more than a "doublet", thin slices of opal glued to a dark backing or a "triplet", a clear quartz cover topping a "doublet" to intensify the stone's lustre and shield its delicate surface.

If the opal sellers perceive you as a connoisseur, they'll bring out the expensive trays of Harlequins, with dazzling patchwork patterns or Pinfires, with closely-spaced blazing specks of varied colours. 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.

Though isolated in the parched, infertile outback, in

the heartland of a vast desert, Coober Pedy is a surprisingly liveable place. Its foreign-born residents, mostly Central Europeans, Mediterraneans and Asians, mingle peacefully with the local Australians, including the aboriginals. The town is well-known for its friendships that cross ethnic lines and for its casual lifestyle. The mining community toils hard but also enjoys the leisure hours: a drive-in theatre, race track, golf club, casino, sports and social clubs. Sharing the underground troglodytic life in their dugout homes has somehow drawn the Coober Pedians closer to each other, rather than made them unsociable and reclusive. As one resident put it – "We are laid back in the outback."

