

## COOBER PEDY — The Opal Town

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Even when you see Coober Pedy, it is hard to believe. This town fries or freezes — an incongruous clutch of buildings in the middle of a vast desert — a landscape marginally more hospitable than the moon.

What looks like meteor craters are opal diggings, for Coober Pedy is the source of 90 percent of the world's opal. Nobody knows just how much opal each year comes out of the tunnels in a 126,000,000-year-old rock-hard sea bed, some 900 km (560 miles) north-west of Adelaide.

The official census shows that 1,740 people live in the township. Actually there are more than 5,000 residents.

Opal and isolation attract people who want to get away from other people, with the thought that they might also strike a fortune.

About 20 percent of the population is aboriginal, and 60 percent is of an ethnic origin other than British or Australian.

The past history of conflicts

between many of their original countries seems to have been altogether forgotten.

Accent or origin means nothing, but substance and character are everything.

Temperatures may rise to 54°C (130°F) in the shade in summer and drop to freezing point on a winter's night.

The average rainfall for the past 25 years has been 50 mm (two inches) and it costs \$A64 to have a household tank filled from the township's only water supply — brackish and scarcely drinkable after being pumped from an artesian basin.

The local area school, which caters to 525 children from pre-school to university matriculation, has an annual water bill of \$A25,000.

Lawns are out of the question. However on the rare occasions when it does rain, the desert turns green overnight and carpets of wildflowers stretch to the horizon.

Five years ago there were five trees



Coober Pedy Supermarket, differing from the supermarkets most of us shop at in that this market also sells high explosives. (Note list in top center of photo.)

in Coober Pedy over five feet tall. Now there are about 100 planted at the school.

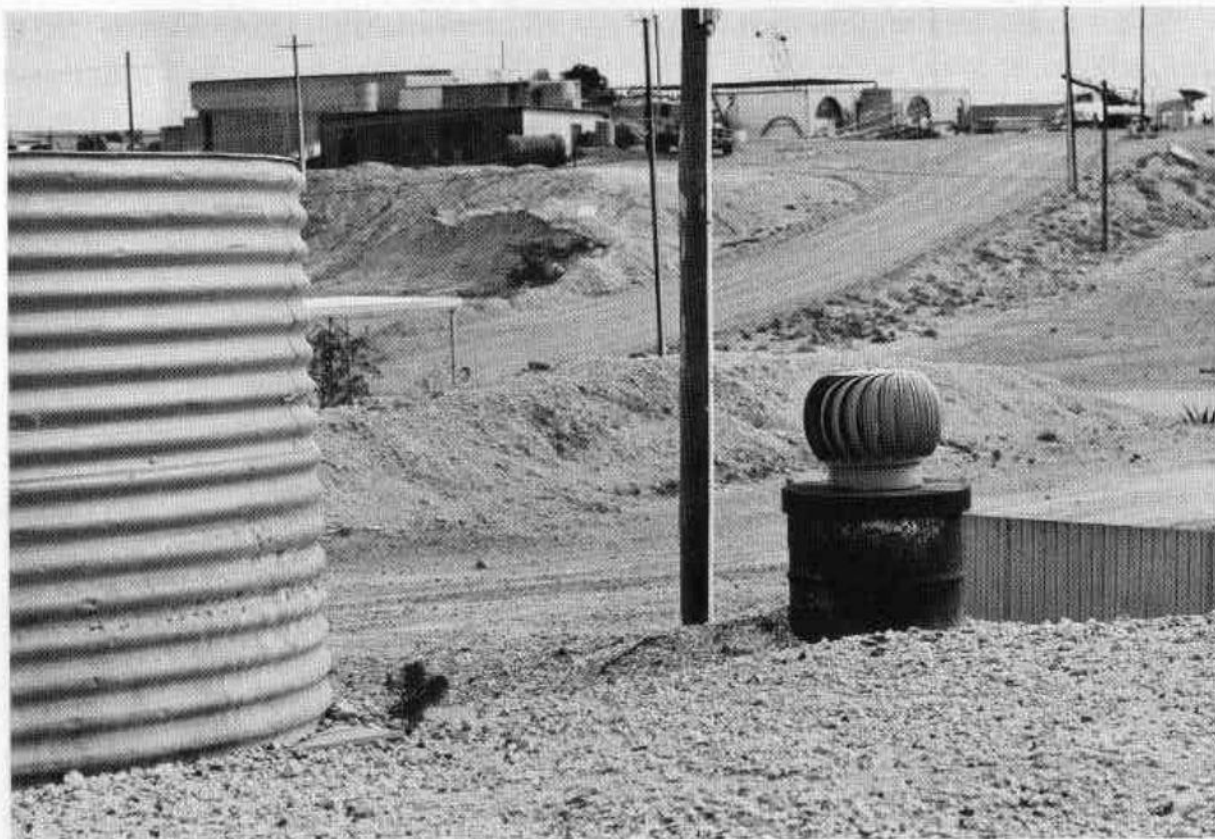
So important is the sight of trees to children that the school will use some of its precious water to maintain a drip irrigation system.

But nothing can be done about the remorseless bush flies, and dust is an ever-present irritation.

To escape the extremes of climate, many people live and conduct their business underground. A further incentive is the ever-present possibility that these diggers will strike opal.

These dugouts are also good investments because hillside sites are becoming scarce.

Dugouts don't need air conditioning. Despite the variations in outside



A ventilation shaft and a water tank mark the location of an underground house in

Coober Pedy. (Australian Information Service photograph.)

temperatures, dugout temperatures generally vary no more than two or three degrees from 22°C (72°F).

At night, the dugout walls and ceilings, which look like red-veined marble, reflect artificial light, and seem to sparkle with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires.

In fact, the marble-like walls are silt of an ancient sea bed, compacted so hard that only a pneumatic drill can dig through it.

The red veins are the remains of worms which lived in the sea bed 126,000,000 years ago. The diamond-like sparkles are reflections from gypsum chips and the reds, blues and greens are reflections from opalised sea shells.

On the surface are two modern motels, one with a disco group whose lead singer and guitarist has studied music and composition in the U.S.A.

The post office, supermarket,

several shops and restaurants are also above ground.

Virtually all business is done in opal or cash, and it is common to see bundles of notes totalling between \$A100,000 and \$A200,000 across the counter of the only bank.

The biggest surprise of Coober Pedy is that 5,000 individualists, from divergent backgrounds, have developed a cohesive community spirit.

There is no municipal government or no formal civic organisation — and the people want to keep it that way.

The township is run by a Progress Association and a Miners' Association which own the drive-in theatre, the main source of revenue for community improvements. Last year, its donations enabled the completion of a \$A70,000 sports centre.



In many places in Australia's vast outback, landing strips are located on the nearest clay pan — the dry bed of a shallow lake. This one is at Andamooka, the small opal

mining settlement about 320 km (200 miles) southeast of Coober Pedy. (Australian Information Service photograph.)

Other Miners' Association gifts last year included \$A6,000 to the hospital, \$A1,000 to the school library and large contributions to sporting bodies.

The school, well appointed and equipped, is the town's central meeting place for sports and other community organisations. At night it is used for adult education classes.

Most of its teacher aids, technical and electronic equipment is provided by community effort.

It seems unlikely that a government or major company would be bothered with Coober Pedy because there is no way of finding opal except by random digging, which is uneconomic on a large scale. Pockets of

opal are usually small and not necessarily an indication of others in the immediate area.

Expensive machinery is neither necessary nor an advantage. More ground can be dug up with a bulldozer, but an opal level may be found perhaps just as quickly by a miner sinking a single shaft.

The sheer outlandishness of Coober Pedy, the possibilities of doing a little fossicking or buying opal cheaper on the spot, attracts many tourists during winter months.

Visitors usually come by air, and pilots of the local commuter service, called Opal Air, have opal wings pinned to their uniforms.



Notices on the window of the Coober Pedy Post Office. Note Mine Rescue Squad poster and Explosives Information Chart.