

## Coober Pedy – get outback, get underground

They say that after two days in Coober Pedy, you'll start dreaming in colours of opal.

But the real treasure here is an experience you won't find anywhere else.

Drive into town and you'll think you landed on the moon, or maybe the Australian outback equivalent of the wild west. There are small mounds of opal mine tailings everywhere, and a raw, anything-goes edginess to the town.

The beautiful colours of the desert hit you – every shade from dusty apricot to dark tan. And there's the incredible smell of the ancient outback. It's impossible to describe, and impossible to forget.

Despite the town's rugged appearance, it's a relaxed and friendly place, with many charming quirks and people. Locals love showing visitors their home and the diversity of the town is huge, with more than 40 different nationalities living here.

### **A 14-year-old discoverer**

Around 150 million years ago, Coober Pedy was covered by an inland sea. When the water receded, minerals from the seabed flowed into cracks and solidified over time to form beautiful, multi-coloured opals.

Fast forward to 1915, and 14-year-old Willie Hutchison was in the desert, helping his father look for gold. Willie was searching for water for their camp when he stumbled across not gold, but opals. Little did he realise he was kick-starting what is often described as the opal capital of the world.

One of the beauties of opal mining is that anyone can have a bash, including visitors. "Noodling" - in local language - is searching through the mounds of tailings from established mines to find opals that others have missed. Some people even make a full time living from it.

For visitors, noodling is full of the excitement of the hunt and offers a genuine chance to find your own opal. Sifting your way through dusty outback rock, you wait for a glimpse of that elusive, coloured stone, and the adrenaline rush if you find one.

If you don't find your own opal, there's plenty of options to buy one in town, and maybe even chat to the person who found it or cut it.

### **Go underground**

Because Coober Pedy is located in one of the hottest and most inhospitable climates in Australia, many of its people live underground in what the locals call "dugouts".

And it's underground that some seriously unique experiences await.

Try the adrenaline rush of taking the winch up and down a shaft, just like the old-timers used to do. Follow their footsteps through narrow tunnels and alcoves in the underground rock, making sure you wear a hard hat. In some places, gleaming in the walls right there beside you, are fossils and seams of opal.

At night, there's literally nothing in Australia like pitching your tent or rolling out your swag in an underground campground. Tucked away into your own private alcove, surrounded by thick walls and ceilings of rock, it feels like you've been wrapped in black velvet. (and for anyone who is claustrophobic, there's plenty of options to camp above ground under a million bright stars, or stay in a motel).

**Get outback**

If you think the outback landscape here looks a bit familiar, there's a good reason. You've probably seen it in one of many films made here.

Get out into the vastness of the outback by touring some of the many local landscapes. Often you'll be the only ones there, feeling the desert wind in your hair and the energy of the land filling your soul, knowing there is nothing quite like this anywhere else in the world.

There's adventure to be found in everything from driving the Dingo Fence to playing golf on one of the world's most rugged golf courses (hint: don't expect grass, and watch those rocks).

**Meet a local**

There are nearly 2000 locals to meet in Coober Pedy. Dave is one of them, sporting a bushy beard and outback tan, splitting his time between noodling, mining and maintaining machinery. He came to Coober Pedy in in the 1980s and fell in love.

"Coober Pedy is a town for people who don't like the mainstream," he said. "There's people from all walks of life, and so many cultures you couldn't poke a stick at them all.

"There's some pretty rugged individuals, and they all have a story to tell. It's a great way to show kids that not all Australia is the same."

It may be outback, but you can easily get to Coober Pedy via car, plane or bus. Why not take the journey and find your own adventure in this quirky, unique outback town?

And don't be surprised if you start opal dreaming.