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I Welcome COOPER PEDY to the JEWEL of the OUTBACK

by Kevin Raub

Underground living quarters. The world's longest fence. And the moniker of Opal Capital of the World. This is Coober Pedy.

ON HANDS AND KNEES, I shift the crumbled earth in all directions, searching for a glimmer of hope amid the diesel and dust of a windswept opal field. All around me, long--abandoned and thoroughly scoured opal mines can be seen in every direction, evidenced by the countless piles of discarded dirt that pop up from the earth like mutant anthills in all directions — and the 80-foot-deep shafts all around them that sink into this dry country like tunnels to China. Amazingly, there is opal here, despite the rampant dissection of this land since 1915, when 14-year-old William Hutchison first found an opal floater (the name for opal that sits on the earth's surface for hundreds of years) while on a gold expedition with his father. More amazing, though, is the fact that some of it has found its way into my pocket.



IF I DIDN'T KNOW BETTER, I'd think I'd gone back in time. But this is 2005 and the Wild, Wild West is alive and kicking — except these days, it's way, way out west. The gold rush, albeit for opal, continues to this day in Coober Pedy, a strangely unique dust bowl of a town located deep in the South Australian Outback, a sort of cross between the Old West and an *X-Files* episode.

Since opal was first discovered here, people from all over the world have flocked to Coober Pedy with hopes of striking it rich. In a town whose population doesn't even tip 4,000, there are, by current estimates, more than 45 nationalities represented (with Greeks, Serbs, and Italians leading the way), most of whom live in underground homes called dugouts to escape the extreme Outback heat (the temperature can easily hit 120 degrees in the summer).

The vibe here is understandably peculiar. Think about it for a moment: What kind of person does it take to uproot his or her life and move

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Author

Kevin Raub is a Los Angeles-based travel and entertainment journalist. His work has appeared in *Travel+Leisure*, the *New York Post*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, among other publications. He found more dirt than opal.

Opal Game

Feeling lucky? Try your hand at the opal game. American Airlines offers codeshare service with Qantas Airlines from North America to Sydney. From there

arrived to Sydney. From there,
it's a quick domestic flight to
Adelaide, followed by a scenic
ride on the famous Ghan train.

halfway across the world to a near-barren desert that is 95 miles from the nearest anything (and even that's just a pub) with hopes of maybe striking it rich? Quite a character, that's what kind. The folks here worship in underground churches like the Catholic or Serbian Orthodox ones in town and play golf on one of the world's only bare-earth courses (greens are made from a mix of dirt and motor oil). Incidentally, the Opal Fields Golf Club is the only course in the world with reciprocal rights at St. Andrews. How's that for strange?

Everyone here is a miner, an ex-miner, or the son, daughter, or wife of a miner, and every single one of them has a story to tell. "Not to sound blasé about it or anything, but Coober Pedy is one of the few places left on earth where you can go to work broke and come home a millionaire," says ex-miner and tour guide Peter Rowe, one of a gaggle of characters I meet during my stay in Coober Pedy. "I reckon there is as much opal still in the ground as has been brought up."

It's exactly this mentality that fuels the opal game. Many, many people have struck it rich here (tales of \$600,000 opal finds are routine), but just as many have gone broke too. It's a bit like gambling: Those who walk away win, but it's very, very hard to walk away from Coober Pedy. Since 1915, it's estimated that nearly \$8 billion worth of opal has been found here, with no end in sight — about 85 percent of the world's opal is mined here in Coober Pedy and in nearby Andamooka and Mintabie. When someone hits pay dirt, they generally sink the money back into bigger and better machinery and then never find opal again (anyone who's spent time at a roulette wheel in Las Vegas knows the feeling).

When I arrived in Coober Pedy via an 11-hour, 525-mile train ride on Australia's famous Ghan train from Adelaide, the gateway to the South Australian Outback (you can also fly there), I couldn't have told you the difference between opal and an opossum. By the time I left, I was determined to not only find opal but to retire on it (why not, right?). It's very easy to get caught up in the frenzy here. But there is also plenty more to do in Coober Pedy than dig holes in the ground.

I CHECK INTO the Desert Cave Hotel, billed as the "world's only underground international hotel." It's not so much *under* ground as it's burrowed into the side of a hill, but we won't get hung up on technicalities. Rooms here are carved from sandstone (as the dugouts) and then sprayed with a brick sealant to combat dust. The result, believe it or not, is less dust than a traditional aboveground home. Go figure.

The best thing about sleeping underground is that there are no windows in the underground rooms — so it will unequivocally be the darkest night you will ever spend anywhere. Which is great unless, of course, you need to go to the bathroom. (Note to self: Memorize location of the light switch.) When I do emerge into the light of the Outback sun, there's something strangely familiar about Coober Pedy.

Not only are the town and its surrounding areas famous for opals, but Hollywood thinks it looks a lot like the moon, or Mars, or any other futuristic landscape that might be out there somewhere. It all started with *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* and has continued with *Pitch Black* and *Red Planet*, among other films. Leftover props, including a large spaceship from *Mad Max*, are scattered about town and add to the strange appeal of

the place.

Rowe and I head out to the Moon Plain, a stark landscape outside town that looks so much like Mars, some people out there think the 2004 Mars landing of NASA's robotic explorer *Spirit* was filmed right here in Coober Pedy. "The BBC rang me up last year," says Rowe. "They said they had two pictures in front of them, one of the Moon Plain and one from NASA's Mars landing. They couldn't tell the difference between the two. I said, 'I can't tell the difference either!' and they said, 'Do you think the Yanks are pulling our chain?'" These are the sorts of stories that flow freely through Coober Pedy.

The only thing that breaks up the dry, cracked, reddish dirt in all directions is the Dog Fence, billed as "the longest fence in the world." (Coober Pedy is full of such claims.) The Dog Fence (not to be confused with the rabbit-proof fence, the subject of the brilliant Australian film of the same name) cuts a line through the center of Australia, beginning in the Bunya Mountain National Park in Queensland and ending nearly 6,000 miles later on a beach in Western Australia. It is one of the longest structures on earth and its sole purpose is to keep wild dogs (known as dingoes) on one side of the country and sheep on the other. It seems the dingoes, which are otherwise harmless, get a hankering for a little wool every once in a while.

The trouble is, wild camels don't give the fence much respect, and they routinely walk right through it — carrying large lengths of wood and wire with them when they do. So there are folks along the way who are in charge of the fence's upkeep (the man in Coober Pedy looks after more than 175 miles of the fence). There was no word at press time on whether a camel-proof fence was under consideration.

As we gaze out over the harsh Outback, Rowe tells me of all kinds of opal near misses — sometimes the difference between going home broke and going home a millionaire is just a matter of inches. Since I wouldn't know opal if it brought me breakfast in bed, Rowe takes me to see Yanni Athanasiadis, a Greek transplant who runs the Umoona Opal Mine and Museum.

ATHANASIADIS IS EXPERIENCED at guessing a few inches to the left or right, and he's been right his fair share of times. I don't know if he was ever broke, but he is no doubt a millionaire now. Piled around his desk are opals of varying qualities and forms. He launches into an explanation best summarized as this: Opal is a mineral derived from silica. It occurs naturally in places like Australia because, at one time — like a million years ago or something — the entire country was entirely under water.

Opal is divided into categories of black, black crystal, crystal, dark, light, boulder, and matrix. But it's the kaleidoscope of brilliant colors within the opal — embedded there by a phenomenon similar to the spectrum of colors seen when oil mixes with water or a rainbow crosses the sky — that makes it retirement quality. In general, the darker the background and the more color within it, the more valuable the opal is.

We start at the bottom of the opal chain with a piece of light opal that is a dull, translucent white with faint traces of green and red throughout. Value? About \$1,500. From there, we make our way to the good stuff.

Athanasiadis pulls out a single black opal barely bigger than a thumbnail that radiates with a breathtaking array of colors and that looks so wholly unnatural, you'd think it was from another planet. This piece alone is worth \$250,000, and he has many, many more where that came from.

It makes Rowe shudder. For an ex-miner, a find like this is what it's all about. It's the jackpot. And it is surely one of the most beautiful things Mother Nature has ever created. I want one. Tomorrow, I'm told, I will go "noodling" — the term used when average Joes go out and try to find discarded opal that the miners might have overlooked (as if) — for my own.

I SPENT THE NEXT MORNING with Günther Wagner, a German transplant and ex-miner who now takes tourists out to noodle for opal. We head to a discarded opal mine and I quickly learn how difficult it is to find this stuff, mainly because there are so many rocks and minerals — most noticeably gypsum — in the ground in Coober Pedy that look like opal to an untrained eye.

Gypsum is a rock-forming mineral that's white in color (like opal can be) and is nearly everywhere in a sedimentary environment like Coober Pedy. When the sun hits it, it gives off a commanding shine that grabs your attention and tricks you into thinking you've struck it rich. Unfortunately, gypsum is worthless unless you're in the plaster business (it's a major ingredient of the stuff), which I'm clearly not.

Eventually my eyes do make the appropriate gypsum-filtering adjustments, allowing me to not pick up every shiny piece of rock I see. And once they do, finding the opal is a little easier than I expected. I uncover several minuscule pieces of light opal, and even some with a few small rays of color. From what little I know, though, I can tell it's nothing to get excited about, and I half wonder if it wasn't planted here to give tourists a tingly feeling inside when they find it. Wagner assures me it's not, but he concurs that it's more a token piece of opal than anything that will allow me to relocate to the Tuscan countryside anytime soon.

Back on the Moon Plain with Rowe, however, I see something. It's shining bright white in the midday sun and is big enough to buy me a very nice yacht. I pick it up. There's nobody within miles besides Rowe and me. "This is white opal, mate; I'm going to have to shoot you now," I joke. Rowe is unfazed. He's been in Coober Pedy long enough to know the difference between poverty and wealth.

"Get a second opinion before you pull the trigger."