

My Coober Pedy Opal Adventure

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At the time I left Ballarat in Victoria and made my way up through to South Australia stopping overnight here and there at places of interest along the way. The road to Coober Pedy was pretty good and sealed all the way.

My first trip there was in 1965 and believe me it was as primitive as it could get in those days with no sealed roads and the only water available in the town then came from a distillation plant. Today with sealed roads, town water and a host of stores and excellent public facilities it's as good as it gets as far as an isolated part of Australia is concerned.

You'll either like Coober Pedy or you won't it's that sort of place. At best I must say it has an affinity to some and I'm one of the people whom is continually drawn back from time to time. It's no metropolis, but it has a feeling about it, which is hard to explain. I suppose this is why I love it so much.

You can walk out into the desert here and die or you can discover yourself and find a different style of living that you've never experienced before. To experience Coober Pedy you just have to become part of it. The mixture of nationalities that makes up the mix here is diverse to say the least. There are permanents, travellers, people with pasts they like to hide, business people, get rich quick schemers, people of all different nationalities, tourists that have come and never went away and the list goes on. I suppose it's Australia's version of a type of Mexico with hidden treasures that can be found.

Why are they all drawn here? Well it's the unique Australian opal, which can be found. The opal comes in many forms here from fossilized shells, prehistoric bones and in opal seams. Opal has a life of its own in that when it's moved in the light it can reflect all colors of the rainbow or its own individual flashes of color. And the value of opal can make a person rich if they find the lucky strike. On this particular trip here I did well to find a seam of grey opal patch which I followed with a pick in the wall of an open cut. It was hard work and I had to team up with another local so I could blast away to get to the better quality opal.

It wasn't rich seam but it paid for my holiday on this occasion which I suppose others living there would be happy to find at any time. You hear so many hard luck stories there where wives and families have split up because of the opal fever that strikes the men. And believe me when you find a seam of color people can change in seconds. Those seconds could change your life forever, which for some it had. Not always good for some though.

Coober Pedy can get hot and I mean real hot like 45 degrees in the summer months so the lesson there is go in the winter months if you want to dig for opal. Depending on how fit you are and your commitment there are several ways to look for opal.

1/. You can just look through the mullock heaps. Good luck with that one because most of the heaps have been sieved with blowers now and there's not much to be found this way anymore.

2/. You can set up your own claim as I did at the time. You can pay someone to either dig an open cut for you with an excavator or back hoe or have a shaft drilled straight down 30 feet or so. And dig a horizontal shaft tunnel the rest of the way by hand with a Kango hammer and winch the mullock up by bucket. All are very hard work but this is how it's all done in most cases there.

3/. You could pay to look through the tourist type claims and see if you find a piece or two.

4/. Let someone else do all the hard work and buy some rough opal direct from the

miners.

A word of warning about Coober Pedy in that it can be an extremely dangerous place if you're not familiar with mines. There are open shafts everywhere so never take a step backwards without looking first. And the same goes for driving in that it's easy to just drive into a shaft hole and you'd have all sorts of problems if you got stuck that way. There are many drill test holes, which are all over the place as well. If you blast you'll need to have a license to do so. And to get a lease you again have to pay the various fees and know the regulations, which you can find out about at the local department of mines in the town.

I'd probably say don't commit yourself to full-scale mining until you've done your homework first because it can cost you heaps. Many people have gone there and sold their homes and only ended up going broke so it's a very big commitment. People that live here may live underground in dugouts or above ground homes or a combination of the two. The underground homes can be very beautiful inside with every comfort the same as any other home. The big advantage with these homes is that if you need an extra room you just have to dig it out and many have struck opal in the process of doing so. The temperature also remains at a constant bearable level underground as well.

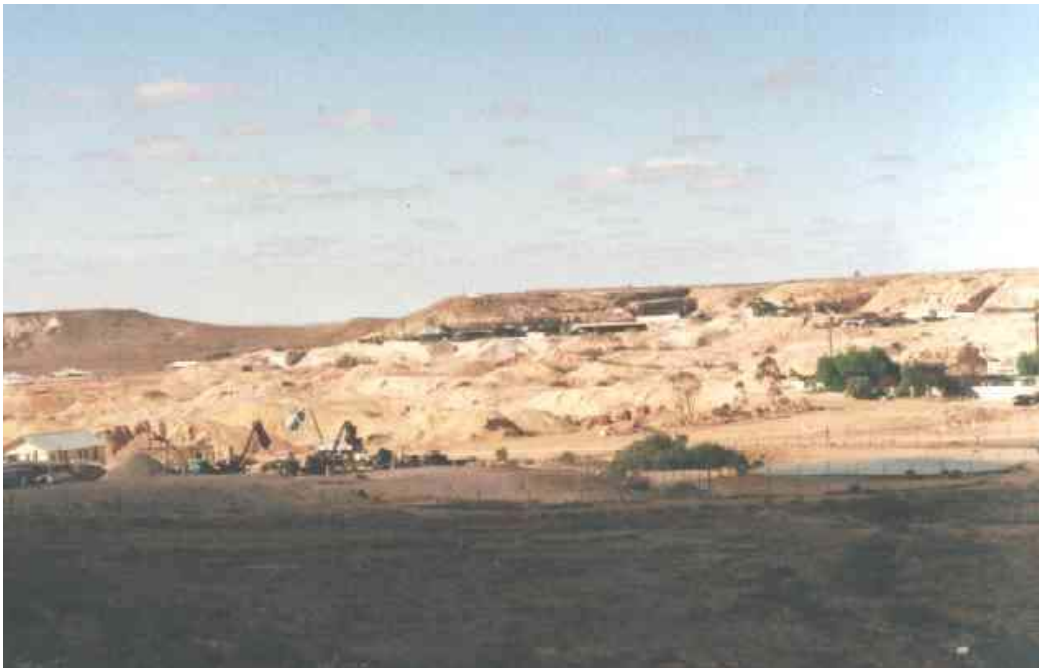
Coober Pedy also has plenty of fine quality jasper to find in the desert areas away from the mines near the town. But be extra careful of trap door spiders as they are everywhere in this area as well. Various types and forms of Gypsum can also be found in the mining areas as well as the desert areas. Fibrous, crystals and sheet type gypsum can make nice specimens to take with you. I found some nice transparent gypsum on this last trip. If you start walking and fossicking in the desert areas you'll find it an advantage to where good solid boot type foot ware as the rocks can be very sharp underfoot.

There's various open plains and escarpments to explore some kilometres outside of the town, which are most beautiful if you like nature. And again keep your eyes open for the colorful jasper as its everywhere. Always take water with you and remember mobile phones only work in the town area and a satellite phone is advisable if you go further a field. The road right into Coober Pedy is sealed but once you go in between the mining areas they are all dirt and corrugated roads.

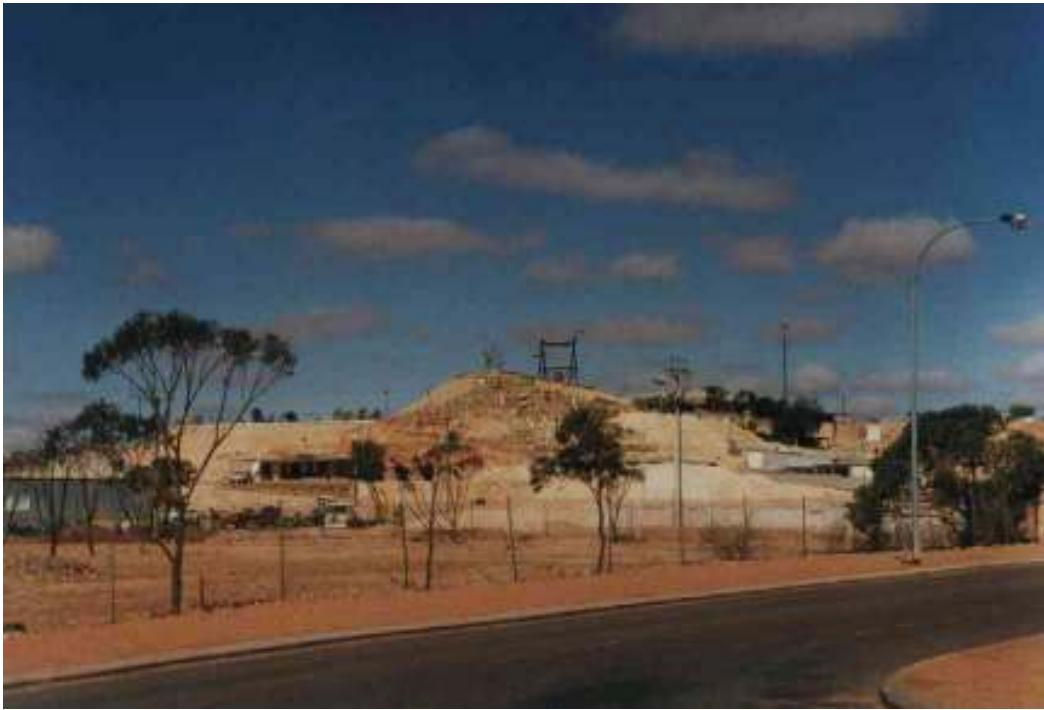
You can use a car in most areas around Coober Pedy and the town has a few caravan parks, hotels and various rental options etc. There is a good supermarket and prices aren't too bad. There are hotels, cafes several stores, laundromat, book store, churches, clubs and just about everything you'll need to have a really good holiday there. I stayed at the Oasis Caravan Park on this last trip and made good use of their pool as well. I've supplied some photos of the area. Please excuse the quality of these photos as they are scans of actual photos as I didn't have a digital camera at the time. **Remember that this is desert area and you ALWAYS need to have plenty of extra water with you!**

The opal strike story continues after the photos....

Coober Pedy Photos





















Another view of my mine.



View of the outside of my open cut mine area.



This was my mine where I found the opal in. The opal seam was about a third up from the bottom of the picture under the lip of the more solid looking rock. There's a blue tinge in then photo but its hard to see in that area.





Just a small sample of what I found at Coober Pedy.

The Opal Strike!

When I found the actual opal seam I couldn't believe my luck in that I thought this may be the big one. But like everything the Opal Fever can get you really hyped up at the time. It was just a grey potch seam at first but I stuck with it picking and chipping away in the hard limestone rock. A piece of opal flew out of the seam when I hit it with my pick and made a nice neat slice in my arm at the time. It was long sleeves after that episode as it was hard to stop the bleeding in my arm as I was on very strong blood thinning medication at that time so I had to be extra careful. But you only live once so I persevered.

Anyway it eventually paid off because the potch was starting to show color. I thought to myself at the time I'll never get this stuff out with just a pick so I went back into town and started asking around to get someone interested enough to partner up with. This alone was already talking a big risk because lets face I never knew anyone in the town and perhaps they could just as easy throw you down a mine shaft and take the lot for themselves once they new the spot.

As it worked out I found a great guy to team up with and we made a deal to share half the cost and half of whatever was found. So off we went both pretty excited. Don't forget that even for a local permanent miner its hard to find good color. So any chance is a good chance. We dug away shifting heaps of bulk loose rock in the way and loosing heaps of sweat in the process.

We then started a little hand picking again and we cleaned away much of the loose rock in the way so we had a good clean area to investigate which direction the seam was going. The seam was at least around 20 foot square roughly in size all up but most of it was just plain opal potch which had no value because it had no color. Some of it was a couple of inches thick in places thinning down to nothing in others.

Once we worked out the best way to tackle things we started drilling with a long drill

a good metre long into the limestone rock in several locations and angles. Once that was done we set the charges into each hole and lit the fuses. We headed out of the way and I had to shift my old van in a hurry because the rocks would fly when it all blew.

Away it all went, the blasts were deafening and the fumes of the blast even though outside were still hanging around so we started up a generator and placed an electric fan there to just assist the fumes out of the way. These fumes are really toxic and my partner had already spent some time in hospital in the past from such an episode so he wasn't taking any chances this time. My partner mixed up his own explosives as this was the cheapest option for most opal miners.

After blasting our excitement was all short lived in that the color found was only a very small amount after all. And my adventure was cut short after all the hard work. I still had the best experience though. After this we shared the cost of the explosives and my partner let me keep the opal as a sign of good faith. It was all a risk and an adventure at the same time and even though we had lost a lot of sweat it was one of the best times I've ever had.

I went back a year later and unfortunately my partner had died so I missed out on ever seeing him again. The previous work he had done over the years breathing in all that poisonous gas from blasting underground had finally taken its toll on him. It's a hard and desperate life for many on the Australian Opal fields.