

Exploring the Strange Underground Town of Coober Pedy

The dusty outback of Australia is a location that intrigues many visitors and provides inspiration for many films. Coober Pedy in particular stands out because of its striking landscape and conditions, and will be familiar to many that have watched "Mad Max" or "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert". However, it may surprise people to learn that this strange little town – set 846 km north of Adelaide – is a thriving tourist spot with plenty to offer. There are the usual tourist traps and standard Australian fare but under the surface there is a lot to discover – literally.



The Underground Mining Community

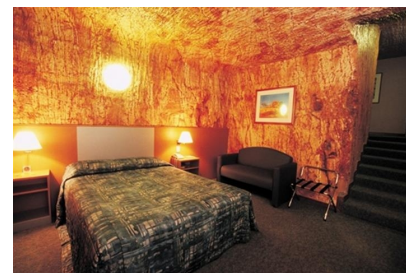
Coober Pedy is primarily famed for its mines of opals, which has been a great provider for the world's jewelry market and the town in general. Miners have been working with the opals in the area since the first one was discovered in 1915, to the point where there were over 250,000 shaft entrances. In more recent years, the area has been enjoying its status as an alternative tourist destination thanks to the history of the area, the unusual underground community and, of course, the chance to show off the gems.

There are the usual attractions that holidaymakers might expect – tours of the area's landscape and historical landmarks, plane rides, a kangaroo refuge, shopping, galleries etc. But the real joy in exploring this town comes in experiencing the simple, day-to-day activities and the way that such an inhospitable landscape can be inhabited.

Life Underground

To say that the landscape is extreme would be an understatement; the temperatures get so high that the residents choose to live underground in dug-outs and there is no greenery to be found at all – which is why the only tree is the one made from scrap iron. This dry, baking landscape should pose a problem but the locals always have a solution and do not let it affect their leisure time, as is seen in the drive-through cinema and the golf course, where people play in the cool night air with glowing balls and carry their own "turf" to tee off. Other must see landmarks in the town are the underground church – a building that was used by all faiths and is thought to be unique in its location – and the Dessert Cave bar and

gaming room.

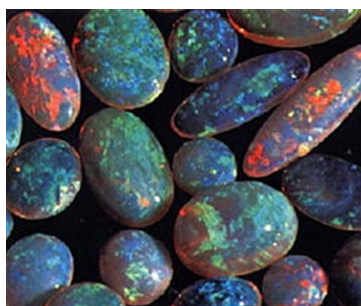


Where to Stay?

All this talk of underground buildings and arid conditions will have many interested visitors thinking about the accommodation on offer in such a strange town. Basically there are two options to consider, you can either choose an above-ground, standard hotel with all the usual conveniences or you can do as the locals do and enjoy a night in the much cooler (in both senses of the word) dug-outs.

In 1988 the doors were opened to the Desert Cave hotel leaving guests to explore to see what it is like living underground. Of the 50 rooms to choose from, 19 are located underground and even though the location is a little old fashioned, no luxuries are cut back on.

The original name for the town comes from the Aboriginal word for white man's hole so why not embrace the style of living? Just because these homes are underground does not make them stark caves, they are arguably more comfortable than above-ground abodes due to their constant temperature.



Being in such a remote place so far from the city, travelers could expect that it is difficult to get to Coober Pedy but this is another factor that has been changing over the years and you no longer have to rely on the twice weekly train. Regional Express now has direct flights from Adelaide and there are also daily coach services – if you do not mind a long trip on a dusty road. The final thing that any visitor should consider before booking a trip is when to go. January and February are too hot and the attractions are generally closed so it is best to head over between May and September.

As you can see, Coober Pedy is a quirky little spot in the outback that is ideal for a quick visit, but perhaps not for the reasons you may think. Forget the numerous opal stores and the luxury hotel suites; instead, embrace the dug outs, have a beer in the underground bar and watch the weirdest round of golf you may ever see.

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