

Coober Pedy

Life's tough in the opal capital of the world

Here's an Australian town in the middle of nowhere really. It's 846 km north of Adelaide and in 2021 had a resident population of 1,437. According to a later report this has grown to 2,500, about 60% being of European origin. When the location is considered it seems rather unusual. Why would anyone in their right mind want to be there at all? Well, the answer is simple – opals.

I have no information on who first discovered opals in the area, but there are plenty there now reaping the rewards and providing 85% of the world's opals. The gems, it would appear, are mined from shafts extending down underground; hard work I would imagine; however, a return to the surface did prove uncomfortable for some. Summer temperatures can be 20°C at night going up to 36°C in the day. Occasionally this may reach 52°C in the hottest months, and that's in the shade. On top of this, come winter the resident miners and their families are looking at much, much cooler temperatures – often single figures. So, where to live that's more comfortable?

They might have figured it out from being down in their mine shafts because it's considerably more pleasant underground. It is said, however, that First World War soldiers came up with an idea after living and fighting in the trenches, and dugouts was their answer. Apparently it took on and now 50% of the population live underground; or if not all below the surface, rather many homes have been excavated in convenient hillsides. These aren't just plain old caves but extend to the point of being amazing



mansions thanks to the soil formations of the hillsides which are stable enough to allow for huge ceiling spans that don't collapse. The odd residents who are not content with modest domiciles buy an adjacent property or three and cut tunnels to join them to their existing one. Some of these are spread over 450 square metres – not bad for a desert dwelling. It is interesting to note that the name Coober Pedy is derived from an Aboriginal term “kupa piti” meaning “white man in a hole”.

Surprisingly, life here isn't all that primitive; far from it actually. Aside from shops, many of which are partially or completely underground, there are other facilities that one might expect to find in any large country town. The hospital has a 24/7 emergency department as well as 19 beds, 4 of which provide high level aged care, and there is also 1 palliative care bed. Coober Pedy Area School covers preschool to year 12 students and incorporates a child parent centre plus other community facilities. Further education is available too, particularly tertiary study and apprenticeships; so no-one misses out despite being in an isolated region.

Because of the low annual rainfall and having no permanent natural water source, in 1922 the Government constructed a 500,000 gallon water tank. Unfortunately, this proved to be unreliable, so in 1967 a solar desalination plant was constructed to treat and purify salt water drawn from 100 metres below the surface; but the supply of fresh water was insufficient for the population, and the facility was often damaged by high winds. In 1985 a more modern desalination plant was set up piping water from artesian bores 23 km away. Apparently, bore water pumps are operated automatically by radio signals from the town Treatment Plant. All of this provides ample water of excellent quality.

Apart from water for drinking and washing it also provides reticulation for primary production and the relevant support services. Occasionally it does rain and lakes that form during these times attract pelicans and black swans; and there is plenty of other wildlife around such as kangaroos, emus, goannas and, of course, snakes. Birds, it would seem are in abundance – budgies, galahs, parrots, eagles and finches. Opal mining is, of course, still the major industry, but the region also caters for an all-important tourist trade.

So, Coober Pedy doesn't just produce sought-after opals but is a precious gem in its own right, a veritable oasis in the dry and dusty outback. If you're ever in the area you might like to pay it a visit. But seeing as many facilities like shops are buried in or under the dirt, do yourself a favour and get a map or guide to save getting lost.

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