



COOBER PEDY

Advertising Supplement



The elusive gem defies all logic

A POPULAR story in Coober Pedy is about a man who searched for years for opal without success.

One day he decided to extend his dugout by creating another room through one of its whitewashed walls.

Tunnelling work revealed a wealth of opal.

The man had been living within centimetres of it for years, while his working claims had yielded little.

Worth \$3m, it was the largest reported find in Coober Pedy's history.

The story reveals an important aspect of the search for opal in the SA Outback: there is no logic to finding the elusive gem.

Every person in town has a different theory about how to locate it in the geological strata formed by an ancient inland sea.

According to Coober Pedy opal buyer and cutter, Claus Wirries, there are as many different theories as miners' hats.

"We have had big companies come in here with all the latest technology to find opal," he said.

"They had no hope.

"It is like trying to find a needle in a haystack."

Opals are so difficult to locate they rate ahead of emeralds on the scale of gemstones.

The most valuable is the black opal, but it is extremely rare and buyers compete keenly for it when it is available.

"Per ounce, a good opal is worth \$1000 to \$6000," Mr Wirries said.

"Then the absolute tops, the cream of the cream, is \$10,000 to \$15,000 per ounce — dearer than diamonds."



Opal buyer and cutter Mr Claus Wirries of the Big Winch at his workbench.

Many people who come to Coober Pedy dream of making their fortune overnight.

As one miner told a German film crew: "They reckon once you've kissed the opal, you never get away from it; like heroin or cocaine once it is in your blood."

Others find reasonable amounts of the stone, leave town, and then return to reinvest their money.

They are drawn by the chance of finding more.

According to Mr Wirries, perhaps only 3 p.c. will strike it rich.

A trained opal cutter, Mr Wirries came to Coober Pedy in about 1967 when it was still very much a frontier town.

There were no bitumen roads or shop-lined main street and only one tourist-oriented business, Alladin's Cave.

Underground houses

were primitive with none of today's subterranean style.

Initially, Mr Wirries was caught up in the fever of mining and worked in the traditional way, using a pick.

Today he is a full-time opal cutter and buyer, spending four months of the year selling stones in Europe.

The occupation has earned him the nickname, the Banana Inspector.

His trademark is a black bowler hat, worn whenever he is negotiating purchases with miners.

Mr Wirries also operates The Big Winch, an opal shop and gallery where he sells jewellery and gives opal-cutting demonstrations.

The business incorporates a giant replica of a miner's windlass which stands on the highest point in the town.

It is a popular lookout and location for photographers.

"I have people here from all over the world," Mr Wirries said.



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Coober Pedy is popular with film crews, television documentary makers and journalists.

America's NBC made a 30-part breakfast show in the town.

A German documentary has been sold to almost 60 countries.

Later this month a film crew will arrive to shoot scenes for a new film starring Australian actor Jack Thompson.

It will be about the atomic testings at Maralinga in 1953.

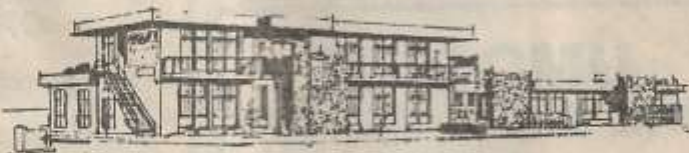
New motel being built

A NEW four-tier underground motel is being built in the centre of Coober Pedy.

Designer and builder Mr Robert Coro said the 45-room motel would incorporate a restaurant, two bars, shops and tourist information facilities.

Accommodation was expected to become available in February, 1987.

The rest of the motel would be completed within 18 months.



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