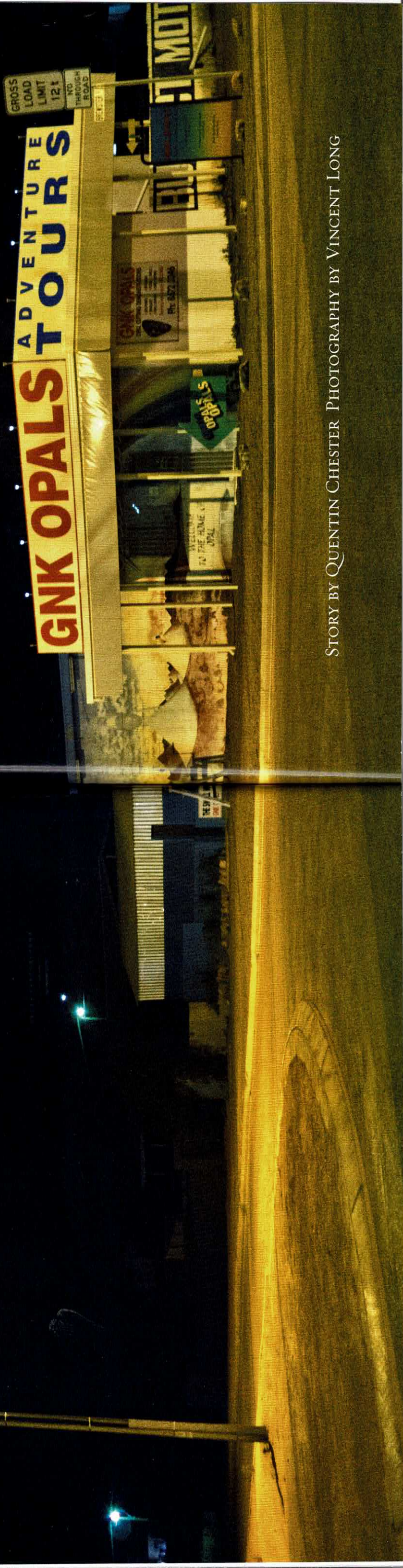


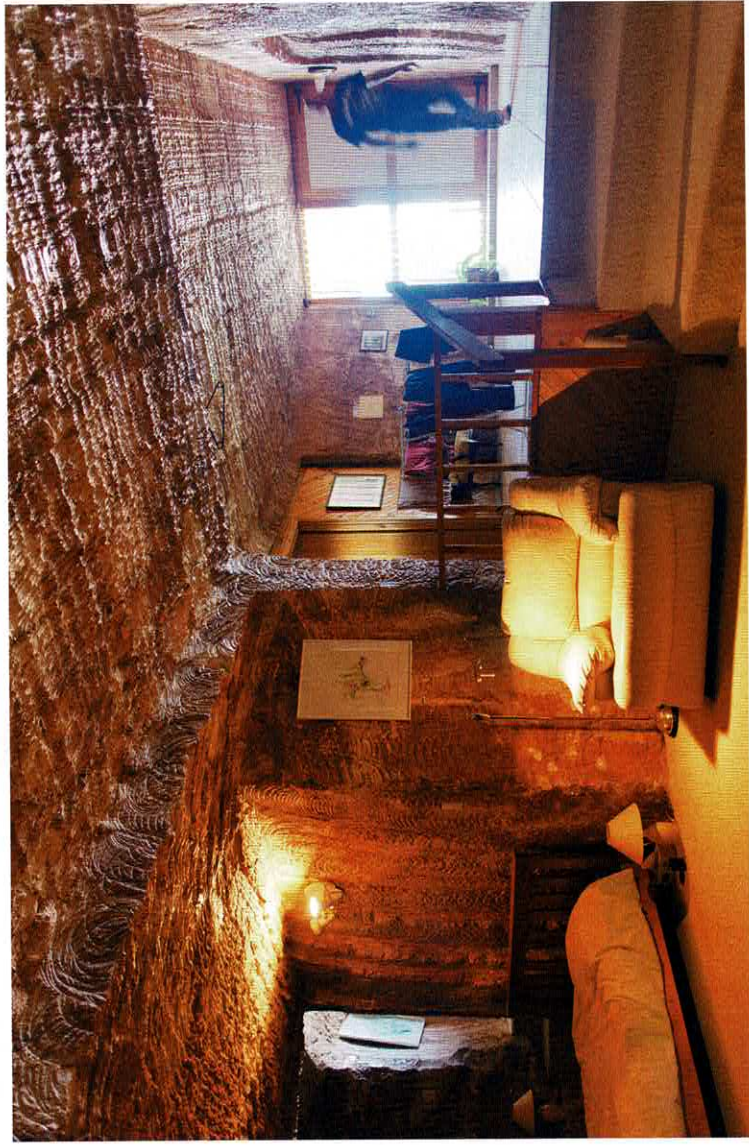
Onetime boomtown. From a heyday throng that boasted 3000 men, barely 20 active miners remain in the world's opal capital. Yet, for all the faded glory of gem mining, below the surface a resilient community still shines.

An outback gem

Once famed for its dugouts and abundance of opals, Coober Pedy is today rich in other gems: culturally diverse folk who keep the spirit of this outback frontier town alive.



STORY BY QUENTIN CHESTER PHOTOGRAPHY BY VINCENT LONG



their small claims, there are barely 20 still swinging a pick. Falling prices, rampant costs and a global dip in demand have leached the town of its most colourful lifeblood. "The joke these days," says George, "is that if someone's out there doing work they must have had a fight with their missus."

COOBER PEDY HAS always worn its knobby about heart on its sleeve. This topsy-turvy settlement grew up among a cluster of old mine sites. Its streets dip and sway past mullock heaps and eroded gullies. And apart from the very proper-looking Westpac bank and a few government offices, the place has an authentic, makeshift feel. Every side road sports its share of busted machinery, old tyre stacks and lean-to sheds. It's like one big, dust-filled backyard. Needless to say, the Tidy Town judges are not booked in anytime soon.

Then again, in this of all places, the view at street level rarely tells the whole story. Take, for example, the fact that more than half the 3500 locals live out of sight in neat-as-a-pin dugouts underground. Burrowed deep into the hillside slopes, some of these cool, multi-room residences are as spacious and luxurious as any in a big city. Suburbia doesn't get earthier than this.

An even more telling perspective is from 1000m above. At that elevation the town recedes into a red expanse riddled with drill holes and embossed with

Subterranean suburbia. Markus Hammermeister's smart dug-out abode on German Gully Road is as well appointed as any big-city home. Although cave-like on the inside, Markus's front-verandah views stretch into the desert vastness.

conical tailing mounds or mullock heaps, shaft entrances and huge ramps of excavated material. It's an oddly mesmerising vision. At close to 50,000ha, this entire surface appears like a work of abstract art or a vast natural wonder. But in truth, this colossal sculpture of desert dirt is essentially hand-wrought. For an entire generation of hard-bitten miners, here lies their field of dreams.

Today, from the air, signs of activity are scarce. However, one of the puffs of dust below is coming from Emu Field and a big Daewoo 300 LCV excavator with George at the helm. He's scraping the Daewoo's bucket down the side of an open hole no bigger than a one-car garage. Having exposed a new surface, he and Vince peck away with their hammers, hoping to find twinkling veins of opal nestled among the drab host rock. "So this is what we do all day," explains George. "Patience, you've got to be patient. And looking – always looking."

George's keen eye for opal was handed down from his dad Constantinos, who started mining here in 1967. While opal was discovered at Coober Pedy in 1915, it was another 45 years before things started humming with a surge of *Continued page 67* ▶



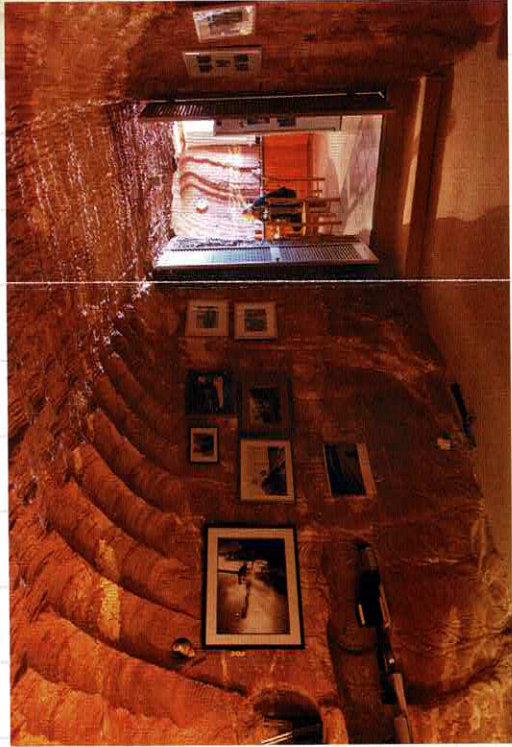


Encircled by mine diggings, Coober Pedy sprawls along the flat-topped edge of the Stuart Range. In this dust-coated township the hallowed turf of the footy ground shines opal-green.

What lies beneath

From homes and hotels to restaurants, churches, bookshops and museums, in Coober Pedy a whole lot of living unfolds underground.

ABOUT HALF THE town's population call a dugout home. Faced with remoteness, a scarcity of building materials and blistering summer heat, early miners sought refuge in basic underground shelters. Many were returned WWI soldiers who had experienced the insulating properties of dugouts in the trenches. Since the 1970s, tunnelling machines revolutionised both mining and home building. As a result, modern dugouts can be cavernous, multi-roomed homes. While construction costs are about 30 per cent lower than for conventional abodes, the real savings are in heating and cooling bills. Below ground, it remains a constant 23°C–26°C all year – even when it's 40°C outside. Need another room? Then just keep on digging – and, who knows, you might strike an opal seam as you go.

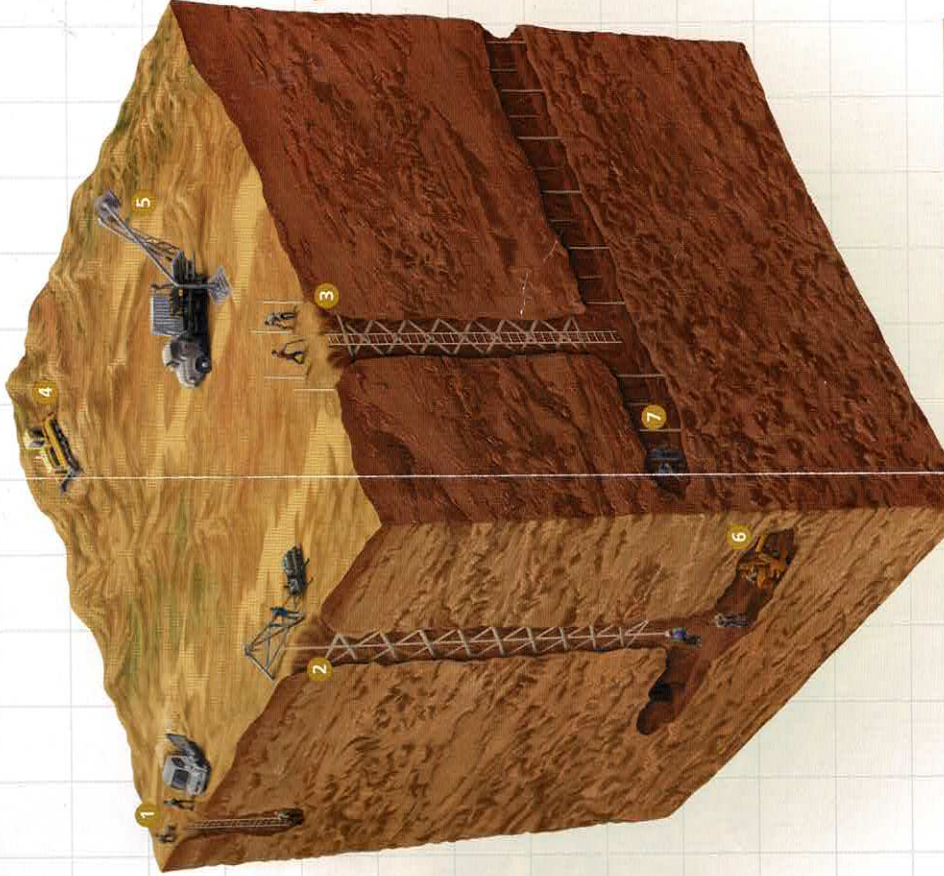


Cave men of Coober Pedy. The city's underground homes are also oases of calm and seclusion – hidden worlds without noise, traffic and neighbours.



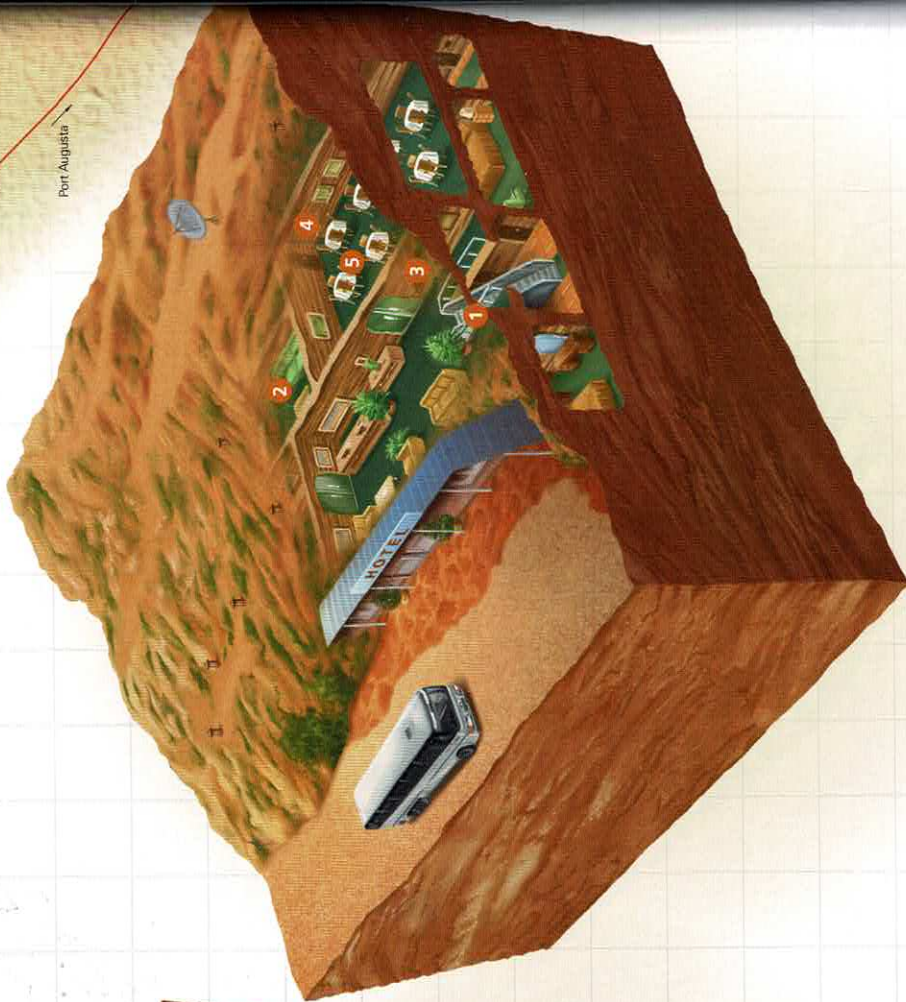
UNDERGROUND RESIDENCE

Coober Pedy's own special variety of dugout homes typically burrow into natural hillsides (1). A 'cut and fill' by bulldozer creates an entrance apron and a vertical face. Often shaded by a verandah, this space (2) can be used for car parking, leafy gardens and outdoor entertaining. Meanwhile, the exposed slope above the entrance bristles with an array of vents (3) to allow for natural air circulation, plus assorted light tubes, chimneys, aerials and satellite dishes (4). For ease of plumbing and wiring, the kitchen (5) and living areas (6) are usually located towards the front of the dugout, while the bedrooms are often arranged at the rear (7), and sometimes on lower levels (8). More elaborate and expensive kinds of floor plans can incorporate large games rooms, bars and even indoor swimming pools (9).



OPAL MINE

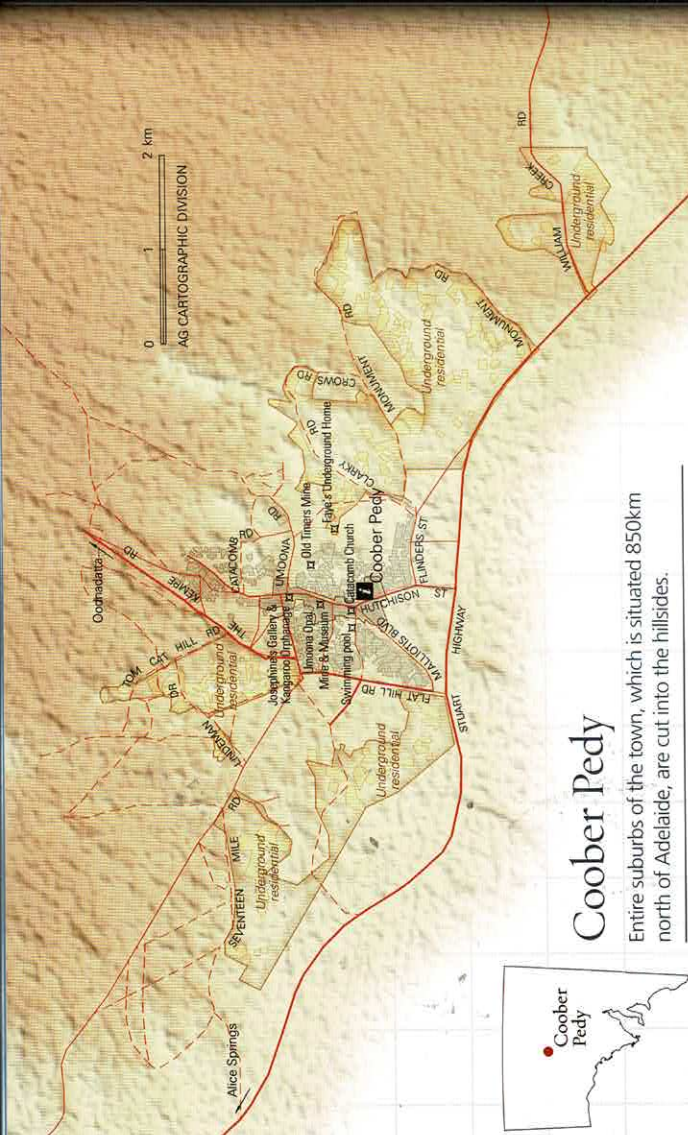
Gone are the days when miners dug shafts and drives with pick and shovel (1). Modern prospecting mostly uses a piling/drilling rig (2) to dig a metre-wide hole with an auger bucket. Many thousands of these holes (3) – some up to 30m deep – dot the opal fields. In traditional mines, waste material (4) – mullock – was hauled to the surface by buckets and winches. Large truck-mounted blowers (5), working like giant vacuum cleaners, have also long been used to clear mullock from shafts and drives. Many miners now operate on a larger scale with underground tunnelling machines and front-end loaders (6). There are also a growing number of open-cut pits where excavators scrape down the face of the pit and bulldozers remove mullock. The art is to spot opal traces and then work over the seam with a hand pick (7).



UNDERGROUND HOTEL

The novelty of spending a night or two experiencing the subterranean life attracts thousands of travellers a year to stay in Coober Pedy's underground hotels. While the construction technique is akin to that used for family dugouts, the hotel's multilevel network (1) of hallways, suites and function rooms (2) is more extensive. The inherent strength of the local stone also allows for large spaces (3) with vaulted ceilings. Tunnelling machines leave a fluted surface (4) to the interior walls, which are then sealed. This texture, and the rock's natural toffee-like

colour with maroon streaks, gives the rooms a distinctive character. As well as underground cafes and restaurants (5), several hotels also showcase the town's claim to fame – and take the opportunity to sell jewellery and merchandise – with opal galleries, shops and mining displays.



Coober Pedy

Entire suburbs of the town, which is situated 850km north of Adelaide, are cut into the hillsides.



Encircled by mine diggings, Coober Pedy sprawls along the flat-topped edge of the Stuart Range. In this dust-coated township the hallowed turf of the footy ground shines opal-green.



families arriving from southern and eastern Europe – especially Greeks, Italians, Yugoslavians and Germans. “A lot of Europeans came up here to escape the factories,” notes George. “It was hard-going early on. Everyone lived out on the field and the dugouts were pretty rough. They had to cart water in those days. But they had hope. Back then the whole town shared this dream – it lived with everyone.”

Isolation, shared struggle, the dream of a big find – such were the forces binding family and community. By the 1980s more than 45 nationalities were living – and digging – shoulder to shoulder here. It was a freewheeling experiment: a mostly self-righting social frontier. Long before the concept got a name, Coober Pedy flourished as one of the nation’s most surprising multicultural triumphs.

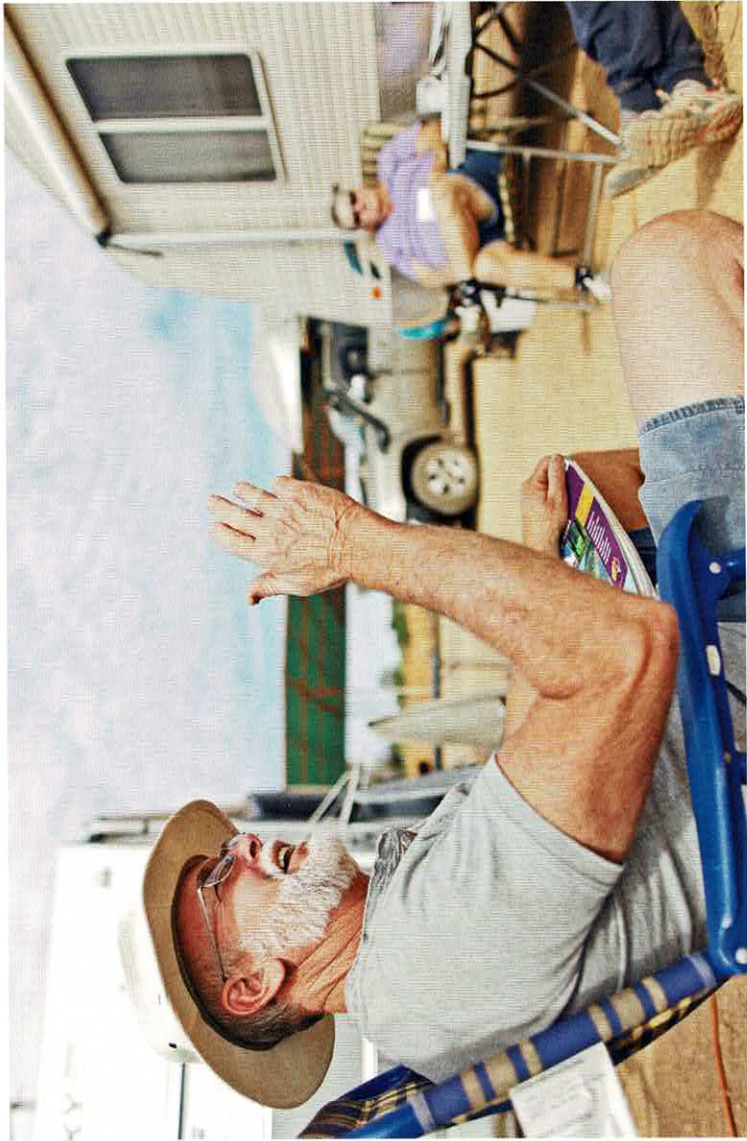
The Italian Miners Club is a popular hilltop haunt for a Thursday night feed, a beer and a spot of sunset-viewing. In a typically ‘Coober’ twist the club committee is mostly Australian and for 20 years perky, Czech-born Mila Kovacek has been manager. Like many long-time locals, she misses the openness

Eyes on the prize. Second-generation miner George Kountouris hopefully pecks for opal veins along the freshly exposed face of his open-cut pit at Emu Field.

and buzzing of the early years. “Opal mining is just like gambling. You have a go. You never know what you might find,” says Mila. “And when they found opal they kept gambling. Here I was earning \$17 an hour and they would drop 60K on a card game.”

MANY ARRIVALS WERE drawn to the town’s remoteness and refuge. Before the advent of street signs and officialdom, these blow-ins grabbed the chance to ‘get away from stuff’. It was a footloose, no-questions-asked sort of place. Often rough and seriously tumble, too. Miners pushed their luck above and below ground. Shaft collapses, injuries – and worse – were part of life on the fields. And back then explosives weren’t just a tool of trade but occasionally a way to settle a dispute or send a message. Even the local courthouse copped a blast while under construction.

Isolation, shared struggle, the dream of a big find – such were the forces binding family and community.



Those wild west days are gone. But so too has much of the community's flair for out-there socialising. The arrival of satellite television is often cited as diminishing the town culture. Ditto drink-driving laws. To many locals, life now seems secretive and less friendly as people retreat more into their dugouts. Yet perhaps the real driver for this new mood is simply the fraying of a common thread that kept people close. As Mila observes: "It's all changed. There aren't the risk takers; no-one is mining opal."

Steve Baines, Coober Pedy's Mayor for 14 years, agrees: "The younger generation are just not coming through. Then again, why would you risk going to look for opal when you can travel 40km down the road and earn \$40 or \$50 an hour?" Some townsfolk like Mila view the big, open-cut mines, and especially those with a fly-in fly-out workforce, as a threat to the town's traditions. Others take a more pragmatic line. "The Cairn Hill operation has given us the greatest benefit by accommodating their miners in town," notes Steve. "Then again, most of these mines have created some opportunities that wouldn't have existed otherwise. Not just employment but sponsorship and work for local contractors, sign writers, concreters, waste services, and so on."

There's another reality too. Year by year Coober Pedy grows a little less isolated. Technology is tugging the community closer to the outside world. The region's raw edge of remoteness has also certainly

A long way from home. After nine weeks caravanning, Gippsland-based Lionel and Carol Jones enjoy a two-night stopover in Coober Pedy with Val and Colin Palmer from WA.

faded since the sealing of the Stuart Highway in 1987. With that the town has branched out as a government service hub and stopover for wandering tribes of backpackers and grey nomads.

Local tour operator Wayne Borrett sees the change: "These days it's not just the uniqueness of town or the opal. People are also switched on to the whole landscape: the Breakaways, the Painted Desert, Lake Eyre, the Simpson, William Creek – the lot." Coober Pedy is poised at the crossroads. As well as the main north-south run, there are the desert travellers lobbying in from the Anne Beadell Highway, the Oodnadatta Track and all points beyond.

Keeping a watchful eye over this vast swathe is local top cop Pete Murray and his 18-strong team. Since arriving in 2004 he's tracked the town's shifting identity with more visitors, less wealth and an ageing population. But the old-style tolerance lives on. "Coober Pedy is still the most egalitarian place I've ever been... You can be a local here in 10 minutes." Another highlight for Pete is the role of indigenous blokes in local policing. "A number of Aboriginal guys are moving from their jobs as community constables into full academy training and mainstream police work."

Continued page 71



Beloved by filmmakers. The Breakaways' lure lies in the vibrant ochre hues exposed in bands of weathered Cretaceous-era claystone. An old road-worker's caravan is the only concession to civilisation at '14 Mile', where Markus Hammermeister (above, at left), and Keith and Shirley Wireford have reworked old mullock heaps for almost six years.





Thursday evening is not just a training night for the Coober Pedy Saints but also a measure of footy's binding force across the community. The allure of opal (above) comes from the fire dance of colour created by silica-rich solutions that have been lodged in fissures underground for 20 million years or more.



Gambling gossip. In an anonymous upstairs room off Coober Pedy's main street, old miners and long-time locals catch up on all the latest news over their nightly stint at the card table.

A TIGHT-KNIT ABORIGINAL community has always been part of Coober Pedy life. For many families it's a meeting place and a centre for work and sport. Originally from SA's west coast, Chris Warrior is both an affable senior community constable of 10 years standing and, no less importantly, coach of the local footy team. Formed in 2004, the Coober Pedy Saints is a classic many-cultured expression of the town. With true outback commitment – aside from four home games – the team makes a 900km round-weekend-trip to Roxby Downs to play in the Woomera and Districts competition.

The strength of diversity is reflected within many Aboriginal families. Local artist Katrina Williams is one of five sisters, all of whom live in Coober Pedy and carry on a family tradition. "My grandmother was from here but grandfather's people came from Utopia in the Territory. All his family paint and so do we,"

says Katrina, as she gazes across a bright bushrucker painting that's big enough to cover her dining table. "It's what we do when we get together. I was crap at first but it didn't take long. It was like I had it in me."

The art success of the Williams sisters is another marker of the opportunities this far-flung town continues to offer. Opal mining may have lost some of its lustre but Coober Pedy's unique amalgam of ethnic groups still shines. Among the influx of recent years are more than 90 Sri Lankans. Shanaka Hewage has been working for three months at the local IGA supermarket. For him it's all about the future. On the eve of his return to Sri Lanka's capital city, Colombo, he's clearly looking forward to bringing his wife and two children to their new outback home. "It's the best place for my family. There are other Sri Lankans – that's wonderful. But the whole community, we are all together, so many nationalities."

Susie Crisa first caught sight of Coober Pedy as a six-year-old, when her family moved here in 1971. "I remember arriving here on the bus... I woke up, looked out the window into all that empty desert ▶

Opal mining may have lost some of its lustre but Coober Pedy's unique amalgam of ethnic groups still shines.



Local lawmen. Community Constables Chris Warrior, left, and Dean Walker have a friendly chat with Greg Carrol. The local force in Coober Pedy has a strong indigenous component.

and just cried," she recalls with a wry laugh. The plan was to come for a year, make some money and go back to Greece. "That year became 31 years."

Now the local manager of Aboriginal Family Support Services, Susie's personal story resonates with many others who grew up here, travelled, lived away and yet keep coming back. "Coober Pedy is still quite rough and raw in certain ways," she says. Through her job she's witness to the trans-generational trauma that affects some Aboriginal families. "The drugs, alcohol and family breakdown are just symptoms of a deeper problem. It really affects me — it's devastating. We have to be much more proactive."

At the same time, for somebody with Susie's feeling for social justice, a town with a history like Coober Pedy's still holds the promise of making a difference. "You have a microcosm of the global world here. And we do it pretty well. This is a town that gives. People give of themselves and sacrifice to make things happen. It's not the mining or the dugouts or the tourism. The real opal here is the people."

That said, even today and with all the changes, there's no escaping the insidious part that opal still plays in shaping the locals — that roguish glint in the eye that says Coober Pedy. George Kountouris left

the high-flying life of a London advertising creative director to come back. "It was meant to be a brief visit," he admits. "But then I said to my dad, 'I think I'll bring a machine up and do some mining.' I've been here ever since. It's the dust — it's addictive."

Another wanderer-cum-second-generation miner is Markus Hammermeister, of Swiss descent. For five years he and his business partners Keith and Shirley Wreford have been moving mountains 20km north of town. With a front-end loader Markus tips huge bucket-loads of mullock into a massive sifting machine. It's called noodling — the dream that stray, overlooked gems will appear out of the second-hand rubble and billowing dust. "I just like the opal," confesses Markus. "When you see something nature can make so good... It's not the money, not with all the costs and hours. It's what you know; what you like doing. Then there's the desert and the space. Where else do you go if you want to live this free?" ²⁶

FIND more images and a video of Coober Pedy online at: www.australiangeographic.com.au/journal/issue111.htm

Quentin Chester has written for AG since 1986, and lives on Kangaroo Island, SA. His last feature, *From the summits to the sea* (AG 104), was about Victoria's East Gippsland region.

Vincent Long is a freelance photojournalist in Melbourne's suburb of Collingwood who specialises in portraiture. This is his first feature assignment for AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC.



Perched on one of the town's highest vantage points, the Italian Club is a popular haunt on Thursdays for roast night. The Clee family (below) have been preaching the gospel underground in Coober Pedy for 29 years. Pastor Deane Clee's daughter Debbie says: "This town is like a good book — it's just got a bad cover."

