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## SPECIAL REPORT: Despite a slowing in the region's fortunes, the Coober Pedy community says its underground Serbian church is far from buried, with tourists coming to its financial aid.



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The Serbian Orthodox Church in the South Australian outback opal mining town of Coober Pedy has the very unorthodox distinction of being underground.

But despite a slowing in the region's fortunes, the community says the church is far from buried.

"We're keeping the maintenance, it costs us lot of money, lot of effort, but thanks to the community of the Serbian people and thanks to all other people because other Australians come help us," said Milomir Belosevic, President of Coober Pedy Serbian church.

"German, even Croatian, Muslim, everybody we ask to help us they come to help us."

The window that appears ground level on the outside actually soars 20 feet over the church within. With its stained glass windows, dirt walls, and ornately carved statues, the church may well be from biblical times.

But perhaps more telling of the church's age is the portrait of Ratko Mladic which hangs unassumingly in the church hall. The Bosnian Serb and former military leader is **being tried** for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"He's in the prison now but he still is not find guilty, therefore we cannot judge. Let the court judge it," Mr Belosevic said.

There were hopes that the massive excavation for the church and hall may pay for itself with an opal find, but that hope has been dashed.

"We don't find nothing and we still stayed working voluntary and for nothing," said Stojan Garlic Treasurer of Coober Pedy Serbian Community.

It turns out tourists are the windfall.

The church charges tourists \$5 per person to support renovations and the ongoing running of the church, and these days, there are more visitors to the church than parishioners.

Since its priest passed away a few years ago, locals unable to find a replacement have conducted their own services.

"It's hard to get a priest to come out in the desert and live in the desert, you know what I mean?" said Luka Belosevic, Vice President Serbian church. "Most of them like a nice house, a nice car, things like that."

Priests are flown in for special occasions such as the anniversary, to be graced by the Serbian Patriarch from Belgrade. It's expected to attract thousands from across Australia.

The community's now striving to create St Elijah Park with more than 600 fruit trees to mark the event.

### Photo Gallery

See a virtual tour of the church