

TOURIST TIME

AT COOBER PEDY

By "PUGGY" (Far North)

The little dug-out town of Coober Pedy—source of South Australia's opal stones—will shortly be expecting its annual influx of touring motorists. This month the "season" will begin, and numbers of holiday-makers from this and other States, will head their cars northwards in search of the sunshine and exhilarating air of Central Australia.

Coober Pedy exercises a great fascination over those who appreciate the unusual, and the more enthusiastic travellers even cut short their tour in order to "try their luck" at opal digging. The hundred and eighty miles journey from the East-West line takes the traveller through sheep station country until he passes the last netting fence, forty-five miles from the opal field. The remainder of the journey is across tablelands of straggly saltbush. With surprising suddenness the track dips down among the low, flat-topped hills which are part of the Stuart Range, and our traveller has reached the land where the rainbow is in the ground instead of the sky. The first emotion he registers is one of blank surprise. "Where are the people? Where their houses?"

Cave Homes

A closer examination reveals to him a galvanized iron building which appears to be poking its head out of a hill—a notice board on top informs him that it is the "Coober Pedy Store." His next discovery is the narrow doorways dotted here and there in the hills, which are the entrances to the dug-outs, taking the place of houses for the residents. But where are the residents?

Our traveller continues his explorations on foot. As he makes his way along the track he has no idea that he is traversing the main thoroughfare of Coober Pedy—Bolshevik Gully—the shopping centre. But he need have no fear—the opal diggers are a peaceful, law abiding crowd, even if they are cavemen, and give their roads outrageous names.

Having reached the end of the gully he comes upon some of the opal workings—"a cemetery gone mad," as one visitor aptly described it. Whole hillsides rooted up, shaft after shaft, and dump upon dump. Here he sees his first signs of life—men patiently winding on windlasses—pulling up the broken sandstone, picked out by the man down the shaft.

Opal Digging

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It is not long before our traveller is learning all about the opal digging business, and at the same time, giving a summary of news from "outside" to the interested diggers who depend on a weekly mail for their papers. Somebody suggests a visit to "Dave's show—he is getting a bit of good opal." As they near his claim Dave's head appears as he climbs out of his shaft. Hot and dusty he looks, but very cheerful, for in his hand he holds a bulging calico bag—the result of his morning's work. Our traveller is introduced, and Dave obligingly produces his "king stones" for inspection. The gorgeous, flashing pieces are passed from hand to hand—criticised and compared by those "who know." Some of the pieces are large, some small, and the best may bring seven to twelve pounds an ounce. Sometimes twenty pounds an ounce has been paid for Coober Pedy opal, but it must be very brilliant to command that price.

Dinner time arrives and the visitor is invited to one of his new-found

friend's dugouts for a drink of tea and something to eat.

Bush Hospitality

The digger heads the way, and as the traveller enters the doorway, the subdued light seems to him intense gloom after the bright sunshine outside. His eyes soon become accustomed to the change and he examines the cave-man's home with interest. A large oblong shaped room cut out of pink or white sandstone. Shelves carved in the walls, and containing the owner's provisions. A home-made table surrounded by petrol-case seats, and last, but not least, a bed, probably surmounted by the owner's cat.

The opal digger is an expert cook, and his home-baked bread is delicious while his meat is cooked to a turn. His billy tea is great—for those who like it strong.

After the meal the visitor may perhaps be shown an array of cut and polished opal stones—a sparkling

naps be shown an array of the most polished opal stones—a sparkling mass of color, and he begins to wonder if he has walked into Aladdin's Cave unaware.

He hears wonderful stories of the "early days." Fortunes found in a few hours, rushes to outlying workings, celebration "beanos," and all the doings of the field.

He probably stays the night and explores the field thoroughly, and then away he goes to Oodnadatta, Alice Springs, or Darwin, but sometimes he stops to dig. He has learnt the field slogan, "Where it is, there it is!" And he stands as much chance as the oldest digger on the field.



BUYING THE WEEK'S SUPPLIES—OPAL MINES AT COOBER PEDY.