

Film-makers are just wild about the opal capital and they're putting the town on the map

Welcome to Coober Pedy, Australia's hottest film location. Summer shade temperature: 45 degrees. Atmosphere: Out of this world. Bonus features: The locals willingly work as extras.

In the past 14 years, eight feature films, a mini-series and countless documentaries and TV ads have been shot in the lunar landscape around South Australia's opal capital. They include *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*; *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; TV mini-series *Stark*, *Pitch Black* (a yet-to-be-released American sci-fi film) and, most recently, local movie *Siam Sunset* - the directorial debut of Vietnam star Jon Polson - which opens this month.

All this has left the dusty streets of Coober Pedy looking like a movie back lot. There's a forest of concrete truffids and a monstrous spaceship nestled in a front yard. On the other side of town, there's a graveyard of apocalyptic plane wreckage, while a bus from *Siam Sunset* is still parked in a hilltop eyrie.

Now Coober Pedy is being transformed into Mars for a blockbuster American sci-fi film starring *Law & Order's* Benjamin Bratt. It's only a small stretch of the imagination: with its scorched red earth, endless plains and rocky outcrops, Coober Pedy looks extraterrestrial. It also has a sense of the frontier: a place where opal prospectors can strike it rich and patrons are asked to leave their explosives outside the cinema, and where the rare rains turn the streets to clay.

But it's also home to 3000 people, many of whom live in underground dugouts to escape the heat. These days they're getting used to seeing actors such as Rutger Hauer, William Hurt or Billy Connolly walk down the main street. Even the false fingernails of *Priscilla* star Terence Stamp barely raised

LES OUBOURKE



LEFT: The cast of *Siam Sunset*, and their bus, on location in Coober Pedy.



ABOVE: Tina Turner used lashings of fresh cream to protect her skin from Coober Pedy's heat and dust.



BELOW: Outlandish landscapes feature in the sci-fi film *Pitch Black*.



RIGHT: *The Adventures of Priscilla* made the most of the stunning backdrop.

Coober Pedy goes Hollywood

an eyebrow at the local supermarket. And when the call for "movie extras" and "movie crew" spreads through town, the locals are quick to line up. Everyone joins in, from policeman Sergeant Jim Tappin, who helps with traffic control, to pub manager Anna Rodda, who provides rooms at The Opal Inn.

Sisters Nadine and Melissa Goddard spent five hours on a bus full of locals, singing *She'll Be Coming Round The Mountain* for *Siam Sunset*. Their parents had the laundry contract for the *Siam Sunset* cast.

Andrew Brockhoff, an opal miner who lives in a spacious dugout, is a veteran of two roles – he's one of the singing passengers in *Siam Sunset* and has a speaking part in comedian Ben Elton's mini-series, *Stark*. He'll get together with friends to see *Siam Sunset*. "It's kind of like, 'There I am, there I am!'" Andrew shouts excitedly.

"We never watch the main actors because you don't see yourself. Don't ask me what the film is about, but I can tell you what went on in the background."

Andrew Andrea at the local BP petrol station was an extra in 1985's *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. "It was about 45 degrees and none of the big guys from Sydney could handle it. They were passing out," he says with a chuckle. "But I think it's good for Coober Pedy. Our name goes up in lights and the world finds out about us."

Siam Sunset is the second film Sydney-based Al Clark has produced in Coober Pedy. His first was *Priscilla*. It's the scenery that brings him back. Rocky outcrops are painted from a palette of muted purple, butter yellow and alabaster, and film-makers love them.

"The first time I saw *The Breakaways*, I felt like I was present at the dawn of the world," Al says of the spectacular scenery.

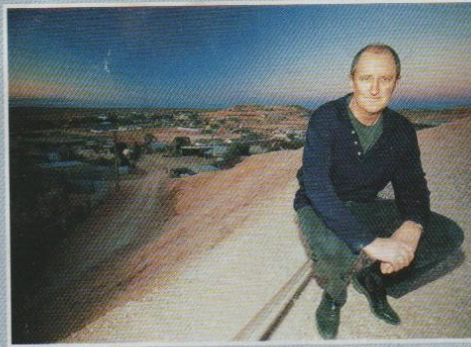
Dieter Sternberg also waxes lyrical about *The Breakaways*. He's a bit of a local entrepreneur. Apart from being the proud owner of a spaceship from *Pitch Black* and the remains of Eric's Road House from *Siam Sunset* (Dieter's wife, Lorraine, plans to create a movie museum), Dieter is an occasional opal miner. He runs a tourist museum, The Opal Cave, installs satellite dishes in remote communities, and he owns Coober Pedy & Outback Film Services. This business assists film crews to find locations, and cleans up after they have gone.

Movies have brought big money to Coober Pedy. Hotels are full, restaurants are busy and the health food shop does a roaring trade.

Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome star Tina Turner used to order a bottle of fresh cream every morning for her face, and Mel Gibson loved his VB beer and garlic prawns at Tom & Mary's Greek Taverna.

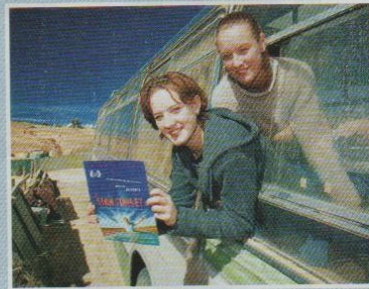
"This town is small, so word gets around quickly," says Dieter. "And the locals aren't backward in coming forward when it comes to working on films. Coober Pedy might look like the end of the world for some people, but for us, it's home, and these films mean jobs." **W**

— CELIA BARNES

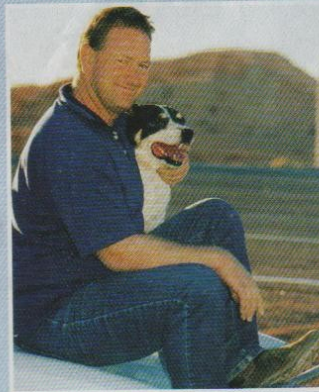


Siam Sunset producer Al Clark says he'd nominate the area as a world wonder.

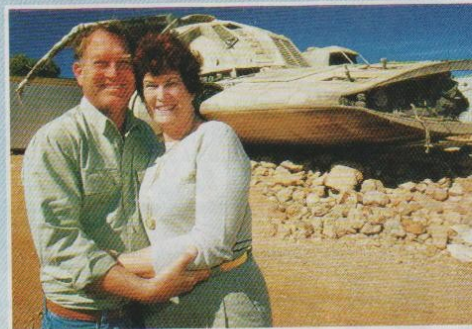
'It's good for Coober Pedy. Our name goes up in lights and the world finds out about us.'



BELOW: Town locals Melissa and Nadine sang aboard the *Sunset* bus.



ABOVE: Experienced extra Andrew Brockhoff and furry friend.



RIGHT: Dieter and Lorraine Sternberg are proud owners of a spaceship from the film *Pitch Black*.



and rocky outcrops, Coober Pedy looks extraterrestrial. It also has a sense of the frontier: a place where opal prospectors can strike it rich and patrons are asked to leave their explosives outside the cinema, and where the rare rains turn the streets to clay.

But it's also home to 3000 people, many of whom live in underground dugouts to escape the heat. These days they're getting used to seeing actors such as Rutger Hauer, William Hurt or Billy Connolly walk down the main street. Even the false fingernails of *Priscilla* star Terence Stamp barely raised

from Coober Pedy's heat and dust.

RIGHT: *The Adventures of Priscilla* made the most of the stunning backdrop.



Coober Pedy goes Hollywood