

One of our guest rooms

The BEST AUSSIE real-life



I hope Dad is proud

Our underground

Debby's parents turned an abandoned mine into a hotel!

Debby Clee, 54, Coober Pedy, SA

It's the best view of the ocean you'll ever get,' I chuckled down the phone line.

And I wasn't lying!

The striking red rocks, dusty ground and sandstone walls are the remnants of the extinct inland sea.

Nowadays, of course, there's no water – the desert outlook is home to the famous town of Coober Pedy, in South Australia.

The iconic destination has attracted tourists from

all over the globe.

And I was running a true Coober Pedy experience – an underground motel!

My parents, Deane and Valerie, were the masterminds behind the opal mine turned roadside accommodation.

Residing in Adelaide, Dad was an accountant and had business in Coober Pedy.

Flying back and forth, he'd tell stories of this unique outback town.

In fact, he ended up falling head over heels for it, and in 1983 Mum and Dad packed up and decided to

'We found seashells and cockles in the ceiling!'

move there!

At the time, I was 16, and with my baby girl, Kezia, in my arms, I waved them off on their adventure, while we stayed in Adelaide.

Mum would call and tell me all about her visits to opal mines.

'I am so amazed at the colours of the soil. And the opal itself is absolutely exquisite,' she'd gush.

They soon settled into their new home at the edge of town in a small dugout.

It was a tiny three-bed-and-one-bath underground place, built into the side of one of Coober Pedy's dirt mounds,

made by drilling machines.

Windowless, the lights were kept on by day but other than that, the dugout was like any other home.

Electricity ran through the walls and the toilets flushed as normal.

Active members of the church, Mum and Dad started holding meetings in the living room. What began as a few people once a week, quickly grew to 40!

Squished inside the tiny dugout, they started searching for another house. But then they struck gold... well, opals!

Finding an unused and condemned opal mine which had run from 1918 to the '60s, Mum and Dad bought the property.

Telling me all about it, Dad's voice shook with excitement. With a torch in hand, they'd explored the old shafts in the pitch black and discovered metres of mine tunnels.

'We found seashells and cockles in the ceiling!' he said.

They were traces of the sea that had run through Coober Pedy millions of years earlier!

What made this mine unique was the machine that had been used to dig the tunnels was rectangular, creating perfectly shaped rooms and hallways.

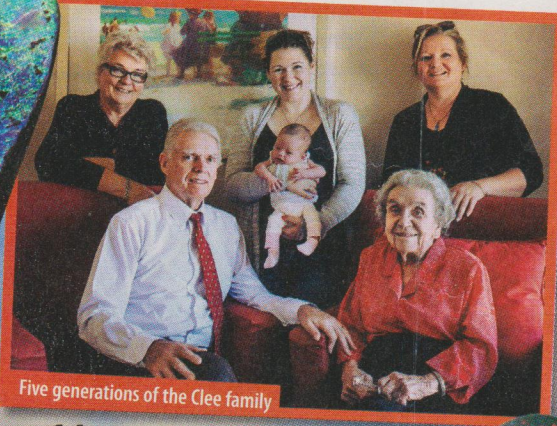
'This looks like a hotel!' Mum had said.

And with that one comment, they got started.

Mum and Dad got on the tools, creating 10 bedrooms and designing the lobby.

In 1996, they opened the doors to The Comfort Inn Coober Pedy Experience, all with sandstone sea views!

Kezia and I loved



Five generations of the Clee family

AS TOLD TO JACQUELINE MEY PHOTOS: SUPPLIED, GETTY IMAGES

Underground castle

The hotel is a magical place

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visiting when we could.

There's something really tranquil about being underground, I thought.

It was never too hot or cold, with the ground keeping you the perfect temperature all year round.

Mum cleverly installed a waste system that pumped grey water around outside the hotel, and subsequently grew grass there.

'You and the school are the only people in town that have grass!' I laughed.

It certainly stood out against the red dirt that enveloped the town.

The hotel was a huge success, and by 1999 they had to expand again! But this time, when they were digging room 15, something incredible happened.

'We found opal!' Dad cried on the phone.

The discovery of solid opalised seashells meant that they could easily fund the expansion.

'I can't believe it,' I laughed back.

With 141 pieces of solid crystal found, Dad was now an accountant, turned hotel owner, turned opal miner!

As tourists flocked to the new rooms, it seemed everyone wanted to be a mole person for the night!

'It's our underground castle,' Dad would say proudly.

In 2007, as Mum and Dad

were looking to retire, I moved to Coober Pedy to help manage the hotel.

And, in 2011, I convinced Kezia, then 28, and her husband, Ben, to move too.

When they welcomed their daughter, Amariah Joy,

in 2014, I relished hearing her giggles bouncing around the opal-encrusted walls.

Sadly, a few years later, Dad was diagnosed with cancer. Continuing to help run his underground castle, I'd keep his spirits high.

By now, we had a cafe and 16 rooms, and it was almost always fully booked

in peak season.

In April 2017, Dad lost his battle, aged 72. I was heartbroken, but I carried on running it and I hoped Dad would be proud.

Guests who'd visited as children now brought their kids, and we won awards.

Now, Mum is 76 and living in Adelaide. Soon after Mum moved, Kezia, Ben and Amariah Joy went back too. And after being apart from my family for years, I made the hard decision to put the hotel up for sale.

Comfort Inn is ready to bring joy and peace to its next owner.

Like the precious gemstones, it is a jewel in the orange town. ●

Something incredible happened

Visitors come from all over the world

The reception area

