



Living underground
has all the modern
conveniences – and
no need for
double glazing

Cave-Dwellers of Coober Pedy

BY ABIGAIL HAWORTH

HA VE WE LANDED ON the moon?" Sarah Orloff asked her husband of just five days. Chris had accepted a job as the only dentist in a remote outback town, 840 kilometres northwest of Adelaide, and the couple had left a comfortable terraced house in Britain for a new life in one of the world's most inhospitable places. Coober Pedy is a barren, heat-scorched, opal-mining town on the edge of the Stuart Range, so remote that to Sarah it looked and felt like another planet.

Even more alien was the couple's first marital home: an underground dwelling that had been dug by hand out of the parched red earth. It was little more than a cave, with rock walls, stone floors and an almost total lack of natural light. "That first



A residence featuring knock-through kitchen and cosy dining nook; top right, an underground town house with a sunny, easy-to-maintain patio

house in the side of one of the tallest hills in the area and, although the only natural light comes from the windows at the front, Val says she never feels claustrophobic. "If I feel hemmed in, all I have to do is go outside, and the view of the horizon is uninterrupted for 360 degrees." And as she says, "It's easy to be house-proud living underground, and life is much simpler."

Coober Pedy was never intended to be a place where the nest-building instinct would take root. Since opal was discovered there at the

beginning of this century, speculators from all over the world have flocked to make their fortunes, calling the area after the Aboriginal words *kupa piti*, meaning "white man's hole in the ground."

For decades it was little more than a desolate frontier post, with no electricity or water. It was a harsh life, but many wanted it to stay that way. The miners feared that the arrival of settlers would bring rules, regulations and interference from tax officials. But Coober Pedy grew into a modern town, where the local shop sells not only beer and explosives but also perfumed soap and copies of *Australian Women's Weekly*.

According to long-time resident



Rock-solid foundations and potential for modernisation: plenty of scope here for the DIY enthusiast

Jenny Gough, a cheerful woman in her early fifties who works as a nurse at the local hospital, it's the women who have been the driving force behind the town's development. Once they realised their miner husbands would never leave, because the mining had got into their blood, "they gritted their teeth and tried to make it a better place to live in."

In the early 1960s, Jenny and her husband Ron were one of the first couples to raise a family in Coober Pedy. "Even the simplest chores took a huge amount of labour," she recalls. "The dust was never ending and water was rationed, so keeping nappies and baby clothes clean was hard work. Because of the red earth,

the water turned all the washing bright pink."

Jenny and Ron had the ultimate stroke of good luck. "After the children were born, we needed another room. So we used explosives to blow through the wall – and discovered an abandoned mine containing opal."

Today the walls of Jenny's now sumptuous home still bear pockmarks made by the excavations, but she doesn't care. She believes it is the possibility of being poor one day and rich the next that makes life in Coober Pedy so addictive.

Fifteen months after they arrived in Coober Pedy, Chris and Sarah Orloff bought their own dugout in the centre of town, which they are now renovating. "We paid \$30,000 for it, which sounds a lot for a hole in the ground, but they're in great demand," explains Sarah.

"We had to rip everything out. Electric wires were hanging down over the walls, there was water dripping from the ceiling, and huge cockroaches kept crawling out from underneath the lavatory," Sarah says

with a shudder. When they investigated the cockroach problem, they discovered a 25-metre-deep shaft that the previous occupants had simply boarded over. Sarah is undaunted. "I know it will be a wonderful place eventually."

In addition to finding relief from the heat, Sarah and Chris relish the privacy and peace of living underground. "There are hardly any disturbances because the walls are soundproof, and you can play music as loud as you want. It also feels very safe." Although they originally intended to live in Coober Pedy for only two years, they now want to extend their stay. "Britain seems so dull in comparison," says Sarah.

Jenny Gough's daughter Robyn once tried to leave Coober Pedy, only to find she couldn't stay away. "I lived in the city for five years and then came back and married a miner," she says. "I missed living in a dugout. Houses above ground creak and groan in the night, and they are always either too hot or too cold. It just didn't feel like home."

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Son spots

OUR SEVEN-YEAR-OLD brought home a report card that didn't meet our expectations. After dinner, my husband sat the boy on his knee and said, "Son, we're going to have to do something about these grades."

"We can't, Dad," our son replied. "They're in ink."

— Mary Hughes

OUT SHOPPING with my nine-year-old son, I stopped at an automated-teller machine to use my new ATM card. Worried about security, I told my son that I was going to get money out of the machine and to make sure no-one was watching me. After the machine spat out ten crisp \$20 notes, my wide-eyed son said, "Do it again, Mum! Nobody's watching!"

— Sarah Gray