

OPAL TOWN:



One of the first women to mine opal at Coober Pedy, Fay Naylor then lived in the old double-decker bus, now a tourist attraction. Left: Local opal.

Opal mining has left Coober Pedy looking like a cratered moonscape — and townsfolk beat the heat by living underground.

THERE'S nothing quite like Coober Pedy in the whole of Australia.

It's not just because it produces about two-thirds of the world's opals. It's the place itself. The way it looks. The way it lives.

The tiny South Australian town nestling

THE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S WEEKLY—SEPTEMBER 3, 1975

It's science fiction living under a moonscape



Coober Pedy's lunar landscape. Each crater marks a mine shaft. They extend for 40km around the town.

on the edge of the great Australian desert is almost science-fiction.

The supermarket sells gelignite, churchgoers worship underground, and the landscape as far as the eye can see is like the crater-scarred surface of the moon.

The men there set out for the opal fields with guns in their packs, but if you are visualising a wild and woolly shanty town, you will be pleasantly disillusioned.

Although it is in a barren desert setting — where the only tree in the town is a

metal phony — Coober Pedy has come a long way from its rough beginnings.

You could even call it modern now, with its airstrip, modern school, motels and hospital. With sometimes two to three hundred visitors in town overnight, Coober Pedy stays awake late. Tourists enjoy well equipped air-conditioned accommodation and they can dine out in style.

Coober Pedy — the words are Aboriginal and mean "a place where white men live underground". They have to. The

summer temperatures soar to 36 deg. C. At night the mercury plummets to around 5 deg. C.

These underground homes and the desalination plant that is the town's water supply are Coober Pedy's most unusual attractions. Apart from the opals, of course.

Fay Naylor's house is a typical dugout home. She built it herself on the spot

Continued overleaf

OPAL TOWN

Continued from page 41

where her original mine stood. Fay is another of the town's "unusual attractions". She was the first woman to mine opals at Coober Pedy.

Today she runs the Opal Cave, a successful shop and art gallery where tourists can buy opals, watch them being polished and set into jewellery.

Fay herself is an expert in every glint of the opal business — from mining, to cutting, selling and merchandising the gem.

When she first came to live in this desert township, Fay brought with her an old double-decker Sydney bus. This was her home for two years. Although it was painted silver to reflect the intense heat, it was still like an oven inside. Eventually she turned her mine into her present home.

Like all the dugouts at Coober Pedy, the rock floor, walls and roof provide perfect insulation against the extremes of temperature. Because of their color and texture and specks of glinting stone, they are also very beautiful.

Fay Naylor has another first to her credit. She has had a swimming pool installed — there are only two in the whole town. It is not below ground but in a covered annex near the entrance. The water, coming from deep underground, is always icy cold.

Since 1964 the bus has been open to the public and during the tourist season, about three bus loads call in for a visit.

Her second house, a mile away from her shop, has a commanding view of Coober Pedy's lunar landscape.

Coober Pedy is Fay's home and her life — and she wouldn't swap it for any other place on earth. A sentiment echoed by most of the town's 3000 residents.

Their dugout homes are an incredible and heartwarming combination of man's strength and woman's home-making instinct and ingenuity. It is unbelievable to stand in a home that is about 12 squares, beautifully furnished and just like any normal home inside.

It is also inspiring to visit the wonderful little Roman Catholic underground church, opened in June, 1967, and excavated on the site of a miner's dugout.

Men of all denominations helped



Fay Naylor's dugout kitchen has all the modern gadgets — fridge, stove, stainless steel sink. Below: The underground church that miners helped to dig in 1967.



Coober Pedy's first parish priest in the building of the church, where the walls glow with natural rock colors and gleam with specks of what tourists hopefully think could be opal but are only gypsum.

The desalination plant is just outside the town. Here salt bore water is made fit to drink by a process of pumping it through a series of glass tubes, applying heat to the outside of the tubes and

gathering the condensed water vapor.

This is the vital water supply on which life at Coober Pedy depends. The town also has its own electricity supply.

Coober Pedy, nearly 1000km from Adelaide, is a good stopping-off place between Alice Springs and Port Augusta, and quite a lot of trade in the town comes from the tourist industry.

A variety of nationalities work in the

THE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S WEEKLY—SEPTEMBER 3, 1975



Coober Pedy are Aboriginal words meaning the place where white men live underground. Stylish entrance to Fay Naylor's dugout home is built of local stone. The ventilation shaft is in the centre. Right: Fay's covered pool, favorite spot for her 8 pet dogs. Photographs by Douglass Baglin.

town and the mines. (At one Christmas party in Coober Pedy last year there were 65 nationalities represented!) Some of the miners have a town job in the daytime, and dig in the evenings, when it is cooler.

White and Aboriginal children learn together at the town's kindergarten and school.

Footnote for would-be miners: For \$10 you can get an opal miner's licence from the Mines Department which enables you to mine 50 square metres for one year. You can't run two claims at once.

If you find a "run" of opals you should get a member of your family to claim the next piece of land so that the find doesn't slip out of your hands.

