L-R Umoona Opal Mine, Coober Pedy; The Opal Beetle, Coober Pedy
PHOTOS South Australian Tourism Commission

An underground town in

South Australia's OUTBACK DESERT

Known as the opal capital of the world, Coober Pedy is one of the country's most unusual and unique places to visit

By **Amanda Lee**

Panorama of The Breakaways near Coober Pedy

"It's all about dreaming," says Ned Berovic. Our tour guide is talking about the lure of opal mining. "For some, dreams come true. But many people don't find big opal." Ned arrived in Coober Pedy, South Australia, more than 30 years ago. He moved from the former Yugoslavia to work the opal fields with his uncle.

We're driving past vast orange-red opal fields where piles of earth sit beside thousands of holes dug deep into the earth, on our way to the Kanku-Breakaways, 32 kilometres north of Coober Pedy. At the Kanku-Breakaways Conservation Park, I step out of the van and the wind whips my hair around my face. As I absorb the breathtaking scenery over 70 million years in the making, Ned takes out a tray of local cheeses and chilled white wine from our van, like pulling a rabbit out of his hat.

Named among one of the "100 Things to do Before you Die" by *Conde-Nast Traveller*, Coober Pedy is the type of town where you can arrive wearing only the shirt on your back, and leave a millionaire. The dry, arid red landscape is rich in opals. In fact, the town has the reputation as the opal mining capital of the world. "The town got its name in the 1920s," Ned tells us. "*Kupa* and *Piti*, meaning 'white man in a hole.'"

In summer, the temperature pushes past 40 degrees Celsius and opal isn't the only thing you'll find below ground. Almost half of the town live underground to escape the fierce summer heat in dugouts, where the temperature remains a constant 23 degrees. You can also worship underground. On the tour, we stop to the Serbian Underground Church. Built into the sandstone, the stunning underground church features traditional Serbian Orthodox architecture and intricate carvings.

The '70s and '80s were the heyday for opal miners. Opal mining is dusty, hard and sometimes dangerous work. The opal fields are littered with holes and closed off to tourists.

"You see a hole, you stay away," Ned warns us. But on our tour, which is called the the Down N' Dirty, we have the opportunity to enter a former working mine. Ned supplies us with a hard hat, a flashlight and a handpick before we walk underground into a large, cavernous opal mine. It's pitch black under the earth. Ned points a black light at the sandstone wall to illuminate a seam of opal. Here's my opportunity to try opal mining. The pick feels clumsy in my hand as I try to pry a piece of opal from the opal seam. It's delicate, painstaking work.

When it's too hot to opal mine, you can tee off at one of the most unique golf courses in the world. The "greens" are actually black; Ned says they're made from sump oil mixed with gravel.

Opals aren't the only precious objects in Coober Pedy. At Josephine's Gallery and Kangaroo Orphanage, I have the opportunity to get up close and personal with orphaned kangaroos by feeding them dried banana chips and Wasabi peas.

"A nice little snack for this time of day," says Terry Brennan-Kuss, who runs Josephine's Gallery with his wife, Jo. The couple take in orphaned kangaroos from an area the footprint of Germany. A docile red kangaroo gobbles up the food from my outstretched hand. Nothing left, the roo is content to lick my palm. Feeding times take place at noon and

Serbian Church
PHOTO South Australian Tourism Commission/ Milton Wordley

Golf **PHOTO** South Australian Tourism Commission

5:30 p.m. daily, payment is by donation. Josephine's Gallery also sell original Aboriginal artwork.

WHERE TO EAT

Outback Bar & Grill

You wouldn't expect some of Coober Pedy's best food to be served up in a gas station, but don't miss eating at the Outback Bar & Grill. The bright and modern café serves huge portions of lamb souvlaki, South Australian garlic prawns or chicken schnitzel, along with a glass of their Shaft Draft beer, brewed in-house.

John's Pizza

This relaxed, family-owned restaurant specialize in pasta, delicious pizzas and gelato to help cool you off. Those with a more adventurous palate should try their "Coat of Arms" pizza, fusing emu Mettwurst and smoked kangaroo with cranberry, spinach and Camembert.

Greek Club

If you're in Coober Pedy on a Friday night, make like the residents do and feast on barbecued ribs, chicken and freshly prepared salads. Grab a spot at the family-style table and strike up a conversation with the locals. The club also serves beer, wine and Ouzo at lower prices.

Josephine's Gallery, Coober Pedy
PHOTO Jonathan Cami

John's Pizza Bar and Restaurant, Coober Pedy
PHOTO South Australian Tourism Commission

Desert Cave Hotel
PHOTO South Australian Tourism Commission

WHERE TO STAY

Experience underground living at the Desert Cave Hotel in their stylish, cool rooms built into the soft sandstone. The hotel also has the town's only underground pub and turquoise blue swimming pool.

If you're looking for boutique "digs" of your own, rent an entire stunning underground home with desert views and deck on Airbnb. The two-bedroom dugout once belonged to an Irish opal miner.

WHEN TO GO

The best time of the year to visit is from April to October, when the weather is mild. January and February are the hottest months, when even locals leave town to escape the fierce heat.

HOW TO GET THERE

Regional Express Airlines (REX) operates one flight daily from Adelaide to Coober Pedy. You can also drive along the Stuart Highway from Adelaide. The journey takes between eight and 10 hours. It's advised you check the road conditions before you travel by car. ■

Amanda Lee has written about everything from trekking in Laos, her love of Sydney (a bold statement for a Melbournian), to getting hitched at Vegas's Graceland Wedding Chapel. Originally from Australia, she now lives in Toronto.