

“Coober Pedy – Where Folks Live in Burrows”

In the Australian Outback, after the Devil’s Marbles, the monolith of Uhluru and the adjoining Olga’s, the bus rolls for a solid 3hrs before we come across these strange pilings covering the landscape. Looking like giant piles of salt seasoning the surrounding scrub, these mounds signal the approach to Coober Pedy, an aboriginal phrase for “white man’s burrows”.

The barren landscape surrounding Coober has been used to simulate futuristic landscapes in a number of movies, most notably the “Mad Max” trilogy. The reason for Coober’s existence in this environment is simple; opals. Coober is situated on the edge of an ancient seabed and thru an odd combination of events, the slowly receding waters of this seabed, thousands of years ago, helped to form a thin layer of fossilized water that we came to know as opals. These stones were discovered here back in the 1800’s and began a mining craze that continues today.

Since opals are basically fossilized glass and water, and occur randomly, there is no way to predict where the next ones will be found, so there has been no large-scale commercial effort to clear the area. Instead, the mining is left to privateers who spent untold hours digging, boring, shoveling, stooping and looking for the elusive gem stones.

The environment doesn’t really help in this exploration at all. Temperatures routinely top 100-degrees, so the inhabitants here chose to live underground and in several hillocks that dot the area. The aboriginal’s seeing this, came to call the locals “Coober Pedy”; White-man’s burrow’s.

For our part, we got to tour the underground homes, the mines and then got a chance to “stoop” for ourselves on several of those “salt piles”. Called “fossicking” this casual attempt at mining, occasionally turns up a worthy specimen and is a fantastic way to waste a few hours.

Outside of movie backgrounds and opals, Coober Pedy shouldn’t exist. In talking to some “townies” they claim the heyday for Coober Pedy was about 70-80yrs ago and what’s left are dreamers who hope to strike it rich with every bucket-load. Those that support these dreamers scratch out an equally hard existence renting out drills and rock siphons which create the piles seen on the side of the road. The main industry today seems to be tourism with buses of every size and description dropping off tourists in white gym shoes and floppy hats willing to take the tour which ends, conveniently, at the opal gift shop.

The fact that most residents live underground is definitely a unique factor here, but without this, Coober Pedy might just be another truck stop oasis on endless ribbon of road between Darwin and Melbourne. If you find yourself driving down from Darwin, you’ll stop at Coober Pedy; heck you’ll stop for just about any reason to get out of the car. For once, I was really glad to not be driving myself.