

Live underground like a bandicoot? You have to be joking!

You mean underground? Like a Rabbit? Or a Snake? Or a Bandicoot?

Until I visited Coober Pedy and White Cliffs in South Australia, I really thought that these poor people who live underground were just the human leftovers of disappointed miners who ran out of money and enthusiasm to dig for opal in these hot dusty outback towns. The only alternative was to live in the holes they dug.

How wrong can you be? That opinion was dramatically altered after my experience staying in a 5 star quality dugout motel at White Cliffs, a few hundred miles off the beaten track not far from the famous 'silver city,' Broken Hill.

There's something eerie about lowering yourself into the depths of mother earth where the only sound you hear is the echo of your own voice and the semi silent thud of your footsteps. But hesitation gives way to delight as soon as you experience the pleasant solitude, the privacy, and the deep dark night of peaceful sleep that represents insomniacs' heaven.

This motel was located in the side of one of the 'white cliffs', the solid remaining part of what happened when giant floods scoured the outback millenniums ago. The miners discovered opal in these solid lumps of earth, and when the opals ran out, they turned their holes into homes.

A few trees were planted at the entrance, and today you can peep through the foliage where flocks of 'happy family' or 'twelve apostle', or 'lousy jack' birds play. [they're called by all three names, depending on how you view the cheeky little creatures] You can look out over the endless planes where the giant floods have washed away the topsoil and the heat from the sun has scorched the earth.

But you are not concerned about heat, dust, and flies. You are settled in comfortably, without the need of an air conditioner, because the temperature underground is even and comfortable the year round, and the friendliness and hospitality of the locals is refreshing and reassuring when contrasted with the hard nosed business world back in the city.

White Cliffs boasts one of the most important experiments in the use of solar energy in Australia. The huge reflective solar discs are a photographers dream as the frivolous fluffy clouds assemble in an azure sky, portraying to you imaginary shapes and pictures that remind you of the patterns in the precious crystal opals dug by the miners, and mirror themselves in the concave panels.

So much energy is generated by these solar discs that the townspeople actually earn credits by sending the power back to the main grid in Broken Hill.

Then, there are the people. The amazing people of the outback. One guy I met around 20 years ago decided to turn his opal hole into a spiral staircase on the top of the hill. I remember he said he was not opal mining at the time. Just lived in the place for the lifestyle. I think he said he was a sheep shearer, and he would fly his little plane to work each day and land it in a small runway at the top of his house.

I looked through the house at the time. Carpets. Piped music. He was building an indoor outdoor swimming pool at the time, half sticking out the side of the hill. I might have a few details of that wrong, but most of it is right. It was a long time ago when I visited.

But then I saw him again a couple of years ago. He's back into opal mining and osculates between the northern opal fields in Queensland and the southern ones at the Cliffs. But you should see his new house. Wow!!

Not long remarried to a New Zealand girl who is an amazing artist, the place is full of unusual artistic creations, including one piece made in the style of an ancient Egyptian relief. The difference is, that is made out of off cuts from fencing wire. I which I could show you a photo of it, but there's no provision on this site for that, I don't think. I don't know. I'll check.

He had this amazing opal picture stone from the Queensland fields, set into a pendant that he wanted \$800 for. I should have bought it, but you can't just keep buying amazing opals. [see.<http://www.opalmine.com/opals-encyclopedia-5.php>] When you buy these things, you just don't want to sell, and that's not good for putting food on the table and paying for fuel.

Then there was the nice little lady with the big dog and the even bigger smile, displaying the opal tooth that she had stuck into her dentures with epoxy. This tooth was a sample of a huge find of opal discovered many years after it was thought that the town had run out of the precious gem. Big miners had come from Adelaide with inspection machines and had drilled a hole in an unlikely spot where no one thought there was an opal. Imagine the excitement when it was discovered that the drill had carved right through a basin of high quality crystal opal. Apparently many of the local battlers benefited by a few chips of this find. Hence, the opal tooth.

Life underground at White Cliffs. A joke? I wish it was. I would be able to get rid of this niggling temptation I get every few weeks to go back there. Nay.. to live there.. and I'm serious!

Addendum: If you are wondering what a bandicoot is, you might have to come to Australia to find out, or just go to
<http://www.dpiwe.tas.gov.au/inter.nsf/WebPages/BHAN-5379SX?open> to save

you the trouble. Or visit <http://www.opalmine.com/opals-encyclopedia-1.php> For a summary of everything opal.

Peter Brusaschi is the author of the CD '**The ordinary Bloke's guide to opal**' and has sponsored the site <http://www.opalmine.com> with its opal chat forum, for the past 10 years. Peter has been visiting the Australian outback for the past 37 years and is an expert on the subject of opals, Australian outback travel, and ancient middle eastern history.