

# Jimmy among gems in mining folklore

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THE real intrigue of Coober Pedy is its characters, writes ANDY PHILLIPS. "I'VE been one of the unlucky ones," sighed Jimmy Nikoloudis in his staccato Greek accent as he slumped into a chair and reflected on the futile results of his life's work.

Jimmy was our tour guide for an afternoon in Coober Pedy. Two members of his group had become embroiled in a drawn-out process of selecting opals displayed under a wide glass canopy; the extended break gave me a chance to

ask him about his real work: opal mining.

"It's an addiction first you are making a hole, then you are looking for signs of a seam," he said. "It's exciting when you find something."

Then his eyes widened, with the same glint as the opals he had spent so much of his life searching for deep underground. He leaned in and his voice became low and coarse. We had reached the crux of the matter: "It's hard work; gamble work; dangerous work. But it's an addiction."

Coober Pedy has an estimated population of 3500, including transient miners who arrive each year at Easter for the Opal Festival and leave again in November when the heat gets too much.

A high of 55C has been recorded in the shade, the reason most Coober Pedians live in dug-out underground homes, evidenced by telltale white ventilation pipes poking out of the sand topside.

For Jimmy, tour guiding is more of a regular income than a career move: he is, and always will be, an opal miner. He is one of the unlucky ones, yet to discover a seam worth enough dollars to finish on a winning streak.

But his experience and legendary encyclopaedic knowledge shone through as he took us around Coober Pedy on the Desert Cave Tour, run by the luxury hotel of the same name.

His commentary is a mixture of the factual and the personal.

He points out where Hollywood movies have been filmed between spots where he has lost mates to cave-ins or badly-set explosives.

He explains the type of drilling machines it took to create the half-cylinder arches of the 9m-deep underground Serbian Orthodox Church.

Jimmy added a death-defying story based on a set of mistimed explosives at the Umoona Opal Mine Museum, a multi-layered complex which had mining tunnels beneath a dugout home; an opal seam worth thousands of dollars was left to show tourists.

Then it was time to head out to Breakaways Reserve, 33km north of town, where colourful sandstone outcrops that were once part of the Stuart Range looked out over desert that was once an inland sea.

We skirted the world's longest fence, the Dog Fence, and dropped down to Moon Plain, where fossilised rocks are scattered.

But the real intrigue of Coober Pedy is its tales of characters who arrived with just the shirts on their backs, uncovered a fortune, then lost it all again; the sort of gamblers whose spirit brought a flat, dry area of the world to life. This year's Opal Festival, on Saturday, April 7, is the finale to a triple-bill of events which will further light up the town. They include the National Opal Symposium (April 2-5) and the Gem Trade Show (April 5-6).

The festival's competitions include the best painted ute and Outback dunny toilet seat races.

There is, of course, plenty of room to peruse the gems, too. But it would be misleading to think the festival is just about opal; it is more a celebration of the miners who brought the town to life.

Such as Jimmy, a man who arrived more than 43 years ago on a truck with a couple of suitcases and some books and has since had a road named after him (Nikoloudis Drive) by the SA Government, in honour of his services to the town.