

Change inevitable, even in backblocks **Coober Pedy**

By STEVE CONNOLLY

IN THE dusty, underground opal mining town of **Coober Pedy** the locals have come to expect the unexpected.

Put 4500 people in the middle of nowhere in one of the harshest climates in the world and it is no wonder some strange things occur.

This week's explosion, which wrecked the town's most popular restaurant and late-night drinking haunt, the Acropolis, was just another episode in the life of one of Australia's most unusual places.

Sergeant Neville Talbot, of the **Coober Pedy** police, said that when awoken by the blast he had thought the police station had been blown up.

He had good reason for his fears: a year ago a stick of gelignite was hurled through a police-station window, and the year before Senior Sergeant John Reed's police car was attacked by a man wielding an axe.

Sergeant Talbot said people occasionally had unusual ways of venting their anger. "Earlier this year a car was blown up following a domestic dispute," he said.

But, despite all these incidents, locals insist **Coober Pedy** is a happy town and laugh off its perception as a remnant of the Wild West.

"When you live here for years you take these sort of things in your stride; you're always prepared for the unexpected," said the Mayor, John Thrower.

Coober Pedy has undergone great change in recent years, the sealing of the Stuart Highway between Port Augusta and the Northern Territory

encouraging a huge invasion of tourists and prospectors.

And while this week's potentially disastrous explosion brought some unfavourable publicity to the town, Mr Thrower said it could also add to **Coober Pedy's** appeal.

"It might deter some people from wanting to come here," he said. "But it also might encourage others."

"One of the things we try and keep is that rough image, although when I say rough I mean in the rural sense and not in the way of violence."

Coober Pedy's population is made up of an estimated 40 nationalities lured to the arid north of South Australia by the chance of striking it rich in the seemingly endless opal fields.

Pros and cons seen in restaurant explosion

Despite the volatile mixture, Mr Thrower said, **Coober Pedy** was a multi-cultural success story.

"The whole world can take an example from this town on how other nationalities can live together," he said. "You name them, we've got them. If there was any undercurrent ethnic-wise the whole town would feel it, but as far as I know everyone gets on, although there's the occasional family feud."

Though it is 850km from Adelaide and more than 500km from the nearest major town, Port Augusta, the 20th century is rapidly catching up with **Coober Pedy**.

Five years ago the town received its first piped water after residents

had endured salty bore water since **Coober Pedy** was established in 1915.

The town's council was set up in January 1987 and Mr Thrower, who moved to **Coober Pedy** from Melbourne in 1974, was the first Mayor. He lasted five months before being dumped at the first elections, but was re-elected for a two-year term in May last year.

The town's development is one of the burning issues for the council and in recent years the increase in tourism has seen a dramatic growth in motels, shops and restaurants, with long-time residents adjusting reluctantly to the change.

When a median strip was laid on **Coober Pedy's** main street in 1988 locals howled in protest, but Mr Thrower said changes have been inevitable.

"The next 10 years should see the town double from what it is now in population and development," he said.

A supplementary development plan is in its final stages and Mr Thrower said it would be put on public view before the end of the year. He hoped **Coober Pedy** would retain its rough exterior, with dug-outs, rather than have large buildings dominate the landscape.

Mr Thrower said tourism was becoming a greater source of business.

"With tourism there's been a growth in cottage industries and service industries," Mr Thrower said.

The bombing of the Acropolis may be symbolic of the changing face of one of the nation's last frontiers.

— AAP