STRUCK BY LIGHTNING

Opals are just one of the beautiful sights that can be found in the remote and quirky Lightning Ridge

WORDS & PHOTOS MARIAN MCGUINESS

STAY COVID SAFE
health.nsw.gov.au

MY ROAD TRIP itch has returned with the intensity of a bedbug bite. "It's only a nine-hour drive to Lightning Ridge," I proposition my husband after watching another episode of *Outback Opal Hunters*. He snorts and reminds me of past road trips, adding in a litany of extra hours for coffee stops, notetaking and photography.

Nevertheless, we find ourselves under an inkblot sky in pre-dawn Sydney, passing dimly-lit coffee vans serving their first waves of tradies. Before us, a slit of sunrise presses low against the silhouette of the Blue Mountains. Our ears clog and pop on the ascent. Mist rises in wisps across the sandstone plateau and we begin our descent to the Central Tablelands.

Fuelled up with a big brekky at the Lithgow Tin Shed, we're back on the road passing coal miners' cottages, fields of copper grass, verges of purple statice and golden daisies, as well as Mudgee's vineyards and cellar doors. We make another pitstop at Gulgong, the home of my goldmining forebears. There's a photo stop at Dunedoo for its silo art depicting local champion racehorse, Winx, while another features a child reading in a sunset field of wheat and cotton.

The car tyres beat out the rhythm of Gilgandra, Gulargambone and Coonamble. We watch an emu dad chasing his chicks. They're high-stepping like cabaret dancers at Moulin Rouge, all feathers and long legs. We part seas of flocking galahs while kangaroos make a break in front of our car, playing a deadly game of 'hit and miss' that's harder for us to negotiate with a windscreen of baked-on bugs. Tumbleweeds blow across our path and we pass a sign to the township of Come by Chance, should we wish to detour. It's so flat and empty out here that it seems like we're the last people on earth.

At last we hit Lightning Ridge – black opal country. Prized and rare, Australia's national gemstone is the only one that has the colour of every other gemstone in it. Stanley the Emu greets us. He's 18 metres tall and crafted from old VW Beetle bonnets and doors. Resident artist, John Murray, created the sculpture to acknowledge the significance that emus hold in the lives of Aboriginal people. As I photograph it, I nearly swallow a family of flies.

Heading into town, we find a landscape of pebbly earth blobbed with grey saltbush. Among the mullock heaps are rusting retro cars and miners' claims covered with tin and clamped with crudely made windlasses. It's a post-apocalyptic scene where Mad Max meets Russell Drysdale's earthy canvases of abandonment. To my husband's disbelief, we pull

From left to right: silo art at Dunedoo depicting champion racehorse Winx; mullock heaps around a mine shaft and hoist; sorting gemstones at Down to Earth Opals; coloured car doors lead you to Lightning Ridge's curious sights.

into our accommodation at 6pm with 700km on the odometer, just in time for dinner across the road at the bowling club. We're staying for the week in a self-contained cabin at Chasin Opal Holiday Park.

One of the many quirks of this town is its streets being named after aspects of opal. There's Gem, Agate, Potch and Silica, while others are named after famous opals: Fireball, Halley's Comet, Fantasia and Sunflash. Morilla Street, where we're staying, is named after the Indigenous word for ridge. As for the name Lightning Ridge, the story goes that in the 1870s, when a drover was sheltering from a fierce storm, lightning struck the ridge and killed him along with his dog and sheep.

Dreamtime stories seek to explain the origin of opals. My favourite is about a giant fire-wheel falling to earth while spraying the land with brilliantly coloured stones. But the geological origin story of opals is even more fascinating. This area was once part of the inland sea in the time of dinosaurs and megafauna. In its simplest explanation, silica-rich water percolates through sandstone into cracks or decomposing fossils in an underlying clay layer. Once the water evaporates, the silica gel hardens into opal over millions of years.

I meet Danuta on a nearby mullock heap. She peers at me from under a large, white floppy hat and says she comes here for two weeks at a time for the peace, birdsong and ambience. Last time she found a nobby worth $800 and now she's 'noodling' (searching an opal dump) to find something for her grandkids.

Our next stop is the visitors' centre to pick up brochures on the self-drive Car Door Tours. The numbered car doors direct you along four colour-coded routes. It's a feast of oddities where you can take a self-guided Opal Mine Adventure or visit the Astronomer's Monument, Amigo's Castle and Bevan's Cactus Farm. It'll also take you to Ridge Castle where you can stay in its

It's a post-apocalyptic scene where Mad Max meets Russell Drysdale's earthy canvases of abandonment

unique accomodations and check out the views from its turret. Punctuating the landscape are lean-tos and huts made of cans, bottles, tin and rock.

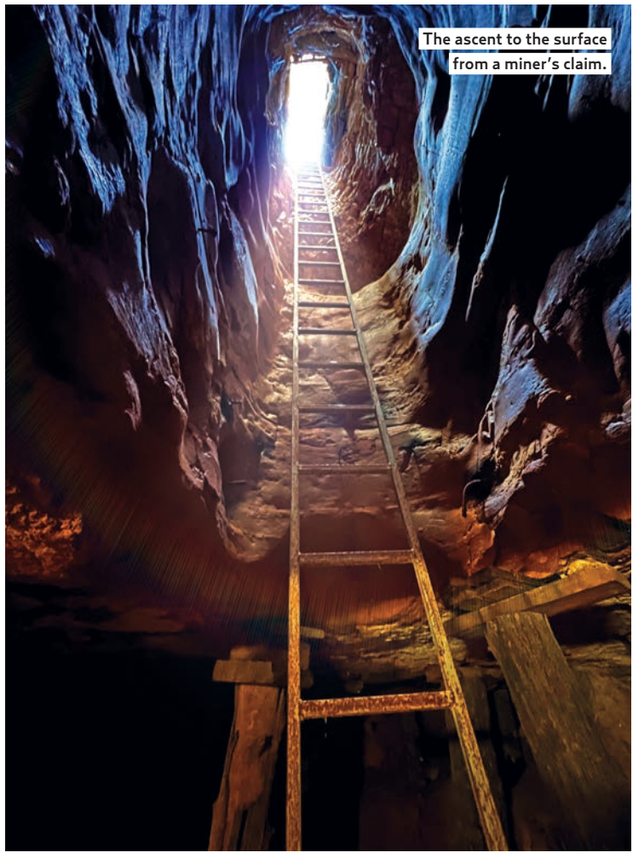
On Old Chum's Track there's a 45-minute nature walk to Fred Bodel's camp. Back in 1905, Fred cobbled his home from pressed metal, flattened kerosene tins and corrugated iron. Peering through a chink in the wall, I can see his eggbeater, egg slide and green chequered tablecloth, as if he were still off mining.

In the Chambers of the Black Hand we find a different kind of mining experience. Decked in hard hats, we wander into vast chambers where miner, Ron Canlin, has created a sculpture gallery. He even sculpted his own version of Mount Rushmore, caricaturing Aussie prime ministers. Back above ground, we visit John Murray's art gallery that's full of his wise and whimsical interpretations of bush life.

I'm also keen to return to Lunatic Hill to see Brian McCudden. Last time I was here he was in his 80s and still mining. "I've been 43 years in the game," Brian said at the time. With eyes as bright as the opals he mined, he spun the yarn of Lunatic Hill in 1911. "Whoever goes up there to mine is a lunatic," he explained, mimicking the old locals. "After seven weeks they got opal; helmets full of orange and green stone. When you get opal, there's a hell of a lot of it."

We speak with Brian's grandson, Shaun, who's now helping to run the show. He's tipping a truck of opal dirt onto a mullock heap, which has come out of the mine that's been here since

Main Image: Getty Images



The ascent to the surface from a miner's claim.

his grandmother bought Port Macquarie's Radio Fun Bus and travelled to Lightning Ridge. She was a clairvoyant and foresaw there was money where they camped. "The opal bug is in my skin," says Shaun. "There's a lot of millionaires made off Lunatic Hill."

Whether the tales are tall or true, you can take your pick in this town. There's Harold Hodges and his opal false teeth. After years of being asked to smile, Harold cemented his colourful choppers into the wall of the local pub. They're now on display at the Australian Opal Centre along with a tantalising array of opalised fossils.

Teresa Cree shows us around here. "We have opalised dinosaur teeth, limb bones, back bones, toe bones and claws," Teresa enthuses. "Most are in grey, black or amber potch, but some shimmer with colour." I'm fascinated by the opalised thumbnail-sized pinecones, lungfish tooth plates, pond snails and yabby buttons. With only three per cent of their collection on display, a state-of-the-art underground building is in the works to house all these national treasures.

Next door is Down to Earth Opals. It's not only a jewellery store but it's where I meet gemmologist, Vicki Bokros. She's also a TV star, having featured in *Outback Opal Hunters* in which a rough, black opal nobby was sculpted by her partner Andrew Kemeny into the 35-carat gemstone named Fire and Ice. In their workshop, Andrew and his son, Brett, demonstrate the intricacies of polishing opals from the rough to the sublime. On choosing which opal to buy, Andrew offers his wisdom: "You'll find the one that talks to you – the opal chooses you."

For a change of scenery, we take a day trip to three iconic opal field pubs: Grawin Club in the Scrub, Sheepyard Inn and the Glengarry Hilton. They're where people stand out more than the opals. Noela runs the bar at Grawin Club in the Scrub and

Having a chat with Robert at the Glengarry Hilton.

A derelict car serves as a colourful signpost.

Built in 1916, Cooper's Cottage is one of the oldest buildings in Lightning Ridge.

After a dusty day out, the Bore Baths are a place of serenity for nomads, road warriors and miners

tells us tales of the recent mouse plague. It was so stressful that they now celebrate the rodents' demise by racing wind-up mice.

At the Glengarry Hilton we meet Robert. He was on his way to Cooktown, stopped off for a few days and never left. He met his Canadian wife here who arrived on a bus tour and they're now celebrating 28 years of marriage.

After a dusty day out, the Bore Baths are a place of serenity for nomads, road warriors and miners. We slide into the 40°C water that has spent the last two million years underground as part of the Great Artesian Basin and chat to a couple of miners. They divulge only their first names and I ask about the town sign that says 'Population ?'. My new friends tell me, "There are people out here who don't want to be found."

Another day trip worth taking is the 32km trek along the unsealed Ridge Road to Collarenebri on the Barwon River, which was a favourite haunt for the bushranger Captain Thunderbolt. We pass wild goats and a 10-year-old girl on horseback droving cattle. She first appears to be on her own, but her father is bringing up the rear a kilometre away.

With the imposing Tattersalls Hotel closed for COVID cleaning, we notice a Tucker Truck beside the water tower across the road. Its owner, Jodie, makes our lunches and tells us about the devastating 'dry flood' that came down from Queensland last December and how the town's busily preparing for the Collie Mud Trials, a popular motoring event held here since the 1950s.

Beneath the Barwon River's weir is one of the three things we've come to Collarenebri to see. We're in Kamilaroi Country and before us are ancient fish traps, a semi-circle of stones that today enable the whole community to catch fish.

Across the river is the heritage-listed Aboriginal cemetery where graves are covered with shattered, coloured glass. Each grave has a specially chosen colour, which sparkles like water in the sunlight. Glass shattering is a ritual families go through for their celebration of love and death. A child's grave, covered in bright blue glass, has been freshly adorned with wattle.

About 20 minutes out of town at Collymongle is a caged shelter. Inside are seven severed tree trunks, remains of the 82 carved trees that lined the path of the ceremonial Banaway Bora Ground before they were felled in the 1940s. Each carved pattern of chevrons, circles and curves tells a story. Looking at them through the wire, I have an overwhelming sense of captured spirits as the trunks stand in lonely, silent epitaph.

It's our last night in Lightning Ridge and I yearn to buy an opal. At Lost Sea Opals, I chat with designer Jo Lindsay. "Every second person mentions *Outback Opal Hunters*," she says. "It's brought a new generation to the Ridge." I'm pleased to report that, in the end, my opal did choose me. I fell in love with one of Jo's pendants encapsulating Lightning Ridge: iron-earth red and cobalt-sky blue.

For our final sunset, we head to the ridge of Nettleton's First Shaft. The Coocoran Opal Field before us softens from blood orange to watermelon pink. There's a whirr of the miners' wind turbines catching the dusk breeze as we gather in a kind of reverence with other pilgrims here. I fossick in the clay and tailings beneath my feet, hoping to turn over some colour, but the most treasured ones are in the sun melting into the horizon. OR