



## CITIES & SETTLEMENTS

# Life in the Outback

**Places and Regions** West of Australia's major mountains and rivers, a vast arid region extends across the country to the Indian Ocean. Some Australians call this desolate expanse the "back of the beyond," but it is better known as the outback. Temperatures here can reach 120°F (48°C) in the shade. Rainfall averages under 10 inches (25 cm) per year. The outback's riverbeds hold only rock and sand, except after heavy downpours. Dust storms are more common than rain! When it fills with water, Lake Eyre, at the edge of the Great Victoria Desert, is the country's largest lake. However, the lake fills completely only about twice in a century. Instead, most of the time the "lake" is a huge salt flat.

### Adapting to the Environment

The outback covers about 75 percent of Australia. It is the ancestral home of Australia's first people, the Aborigines. Today only about 10 percent of Australians live on this desolate unforgiving land. Population density averages fewer than two people per square mile, and large areas are completely uninhabited. Many outback dwellers live 300 miles or more from the nearest

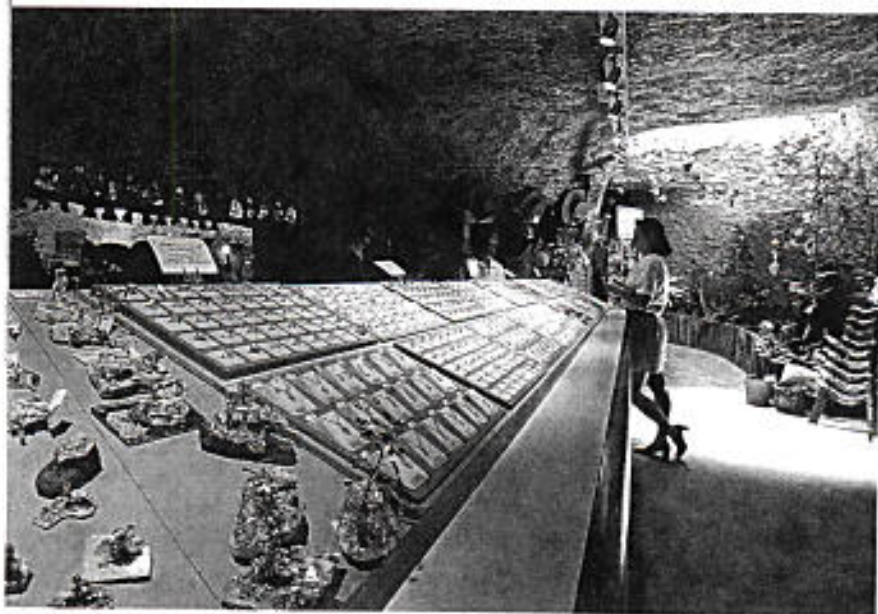
store. Doctors and schools are even farther away. Such conditions have created a rugged and independent people. Yet the region defeats those who believe they can truly conquer it. The people of the outback survive only by adapting to the arid environment.

Coober Pedy, a town west of Lake Eyre in South Australia, provides a clear example of this adaptation. This isolated community is one of the few stops on the only paved road that crosses the entire outback. Called the Stuart Highway, this route connects the northern and southern coasts to Alice Springs, in the Northern Territory. With just 27,000 people, "the Alice" is one of the outback's largest towns.

Fewer than one percent of South Australia's 1.5 million people live in the state's interior. A visit to Coober Pedy quickly reveals why. The people of Coober Pedy have had to take extraordinary measures to live in such a harsh environment. In the Aborigine language, *Coober Pedy* means "White Man's Burrow." The name fits. Coober Pedy exists only because of the opal mines nearby. The town is the world's largest producer of these precious stones. In addition, much of Coober Pedy is itself underground. To escape the blistering heat, businesses, churches, and many homes are below the surface. These establishments, and about half the residents, occupy old mine shafts or specially dug homes called dugouts. In these underground places the temperature is 72°F (22°C) all year.


### Adapting to Isolation

Along a rough dirt road between Coober Pedy and Lake Eyre lies the Anna Creek Station homestead. This small cluster of buildings is the station's headquarters. Covering some



People shop for opals in one of the many belowground stores in Coober Pedy.





18,600 square miles (30,000 sq km), Anna Creek is the largest cattle station in Australia. However, only 15 people live here. Besides the station manager and his family, the population includes a cook, pilot, and teacher. Several ranch hands—or “jackeroos” as cowboys are known in Australia—complete the group.

For those who are not used to it, station life can be uncomfortable. The ground is hot and dry. Snakes sun themselves on low sand dunes behind the buildings. Flies seem to be everywhere. The wind carries a fine red dust that covers everyone and everything. For some of the station’s residents, dealing with the loneliness is difficult. After all, Coober Pedy, 100 miles to the west, is the closest town. Yet other station residents could not imagine living in a city again.

Few of the station’s teachers have lasted more than a year before returning to the coast. Even when the station has an on-site teacher, basic education comes from the School of the Air. Using a high-frequency radio, the children take part in classes broadcast from the coastal city of Port Augusta. Every grade level has a half-hour class each day. Each student also receives an



*Anna Creek family members and jackeroos pose for an informal portrait. The children’s best friends may live hundreds of kilometers away. Still, some residents compare their far-flung community’s closeness to a small town’s.*

individual 10-minute radio session with his or her radio teacher once a week. Other lessons arrive on videotape. Students mail in their assignments. The teacher grades them and returns them by mail. Students work five or six hours a day on these assignments. A parent or a hired teacher, as at Anna Creek Station, supervises. Use of the Internet, e-mail, and video conferencing is increasingly important for instruction.

March through November is the busiest time at Anna Creek. The cattle must be gathered before the heat and the flies make life miserable for people and animals. Calves must be tagged, horns cut, and some livestock shipped to market. The roundups are challenging. Some 16,000 head of cattle may be spread across an area larger than the state of Maryland. The jackeroos go out for weeks at a time to various parts of the station. Like education in the outback, this job also depends on technology. Jackeroos use motorcycles instead of horses on these roundups, and workers in airplanes spot cattle from the sky.

### Applying What You Know

- 1. Analyzing Information** How have technological innovations allowed people to live and work in the outback?
- 2. Comparing** How is education in the outback similar to education in the United States? How are the two systems different?

*A worker watches a small part of the Anna Creek herd, which had been reduced by drought. Although horses are seldom used for roundups, many outback families keep them for other purposes.*

