

OUT&ABOUT



Coober Pedy Mail Run Tour

See the Outback in its full glory while delivering the mail, writes Veathika Jain

Phone 8672 5226; mailruntour.com.au

LOCATION Coober Pedy, which is about 850km north of Adelaide.

DETAILS Guided 600km round trip on unsealed roads in the Australian Outback delivering post and other supplies from Coober Pedy to William Creek, Oodnadatta and five cattle stations.

AVAILABILITY Mondays and Thursdays. You are picked up by mailman Peter Rowe from your accommodation in Coober Pedy.

WHAT TO TAKE Hat, sunscreen, insect repellent, camera, snacks. Water provided and meals available to buy at Oodnadatta and William Creek.

PRICE \$330 a person.

RATING 4.5/5



It is not your usual guided tour. For a start it's 600km long. And it lasts between 10-12 hours. On the other hand, it is an authentic Outback experience, getting a real taste of life in some of the nation's most far-flung places.

Mailman Peter Rowe, pictured below, takes you on his round trip on unsealed roads delivering post and other supplies to William Creek, Oodnadatta and five cattle stations.

For 12 hours, he is on a strict timetable.

We, unfortunately, do not have that kind of time, so we take the short version of the Mail Run and cover a measly 300km. We see parts of the 5400km-long dingo fence, the moon plains where a number of Hollywood films like *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, *Pitch Black* and others have been filmed, and drive through salt bush and gibber country on to Mt Barry cattle station.

Rowe, the 75-year-old former opal miner and third mailman of Coober Pedy, picks us up in his four-wheel drive from our hotel at 8am. Then it is off to the post office, where he picks up the mail.

"I will not only deliver the mail but also talk to you about the cattle industry as we go through a very large cattle industry producing area," he says. "This could be a history lesson of sorts as a lot of great explorers have been through here like Ernest William Giles, John McDouall Stuart, then there's the 3200km-long Overland Telegraph Line and the Afghan cameleers, who worked in the Australian outback from the 1860s up until the 1930s."

We set out in the 4WD, which is comfortable and the ride not as bumpy as we expected on the unsealed roads.

About 20km outside of Coober Pedy, we see the world's longest fence. The dingo (dog) fence is approximately 5600km long and goes through South Australia and Queensland. "The fence was erected in 1885 to protect the sheep and other cattle from dingoes and other wild dogs," Rowe explains. "The South Australian end of the fence is well maintained and is very import-

ant for our farmers." Once passed the fence via a grid to stop wild dogs, we enter the moon plains. It's quite breathtaking with its vastness and nothing visible on the land. However, Rowe says that it has its own ecosystem with quite a bit of wildlife.

We stop at a few places to take some photos, though I am a bit cautious: I don't want any encounters with snakes and other creepy crawlies. Fortunately, we are in the car when we spot the world's most venomous snake, the inland taipan, and Rowe quickly manoeuvres to save its life.

The scenery then changes to salt bush and gibber stone country. Rowe talks about how the leaves from the salt bushes are dried and used in salads and other dishes for garnishing and enhancing taste.

Rowe tells us how he has lived underground for 50 years and has never owned a heater or an airconditioner.

He has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the places we pass through and tells us the history of the terrain and how millions of years ago the whole place used to be a sea – and where we are driving was once the sea bed.

We head to Mt Barry station, where mail has to be delivered, and meet Tony Williams, co-owner of Williams Cattle Company. "Rowe is not just a mail man for us but our lifeline. We just have to tell him what we need and he gets us everything – beer, fruit and veg to medical scripts," says Williams.

We have some tea with Williams and his family and chat about the area, the cattle industry and their lives in the Outback.

We then head back to Coober Pedy, stopping for photographs. Rowe is flexible, giving us a fascinating Australian Outback history lesson.

It's a must-do activity while in Coober Pedy to get a thorough understanding of life in the Outback. Rowe is the perfect guide with the right combination of interesting history and great anecdotes.

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DEBORAH BOGLE



Garden path

It was late and dark when we arrived at our hotel in Varanasi. As we crossed the first floor terrace on the way up to our room, I was aware of banks of potted, flowering plants. Dahlias, I wondered? I'm not sure why, but they seemed incongruous in India.

The next morning revealed them in all their multi-coloured glory. There were dozens of dahlias lined up, flanking four sides of the sunbathed terrace, clustering around a pretty gazebo on one side, and doing a fine job of competing for the attention of travellers drawn to the view of the sacred River Ganges below.

The dahlias were the stars of this horticultural show, lined up at the back of banks of pots three-deep. There were all sorts but given that my experience of dahlias is limited to buying them as cut flowers, the only ones I could identify were the obvious pompoms. But there were frilly ones, others with pointed petals, single and multiple heads, in plain colours, flecked, striped, large and small. One was bigger than my hand.

They were dazzling, and the pleasure wasn't restricted to the terrace. There were dahlias in vases and floated in bowls throughout the hotel. There were a couple of stems on my bedside table.

In front of the rows of dahlias were other flowering plants – roses, marigolds, numerous varieties of salvias, and various other plants I didn't recognise, as well as non-flowering ones including little ornamental brassicas. In all, we estimated there were several hundred potted plants on this first floor alone. Most were in terracotta pots no more than 15cm in diameter. This was clearly the work of a serious and dedicated gardener.

Later that first day, an elderly man appeared on the terrace, bundled up against the (not very) cold breeze. He was clearly in charge, directing two much younger men who were variously employed tending to the pots: snipping here, shifting there, moving among the rows at a measured pace, murmuring quietly to each other.

Occasionally, the younger men, who always seemed to be barefoot, would disappear up a steep set of metal steps – more a ladder than a staircase – that led to the rooftop terrace. Later, they inch their way down the perilous steps carrying between them fresh pots to replace those that were spent.

The rooftop terrace was the nursery space. There were scores more potted plants up there, some in a greenhouse, others ranged on the terrace behind and around it, all of them in various stages of growth. As the dahlias downstairs passed their peak, they were replaced with newer, younger specimens just coming in bloom.

We were there for four days, and every day they were at it, working quietly in twos and threes. In the afternoon, when the terrace was mostly in shade, one of them would hand-water. Watching them work was mesmerising. I could easily get used to that.