

Podcast 109 – Australia's National Gemstone – The Opal

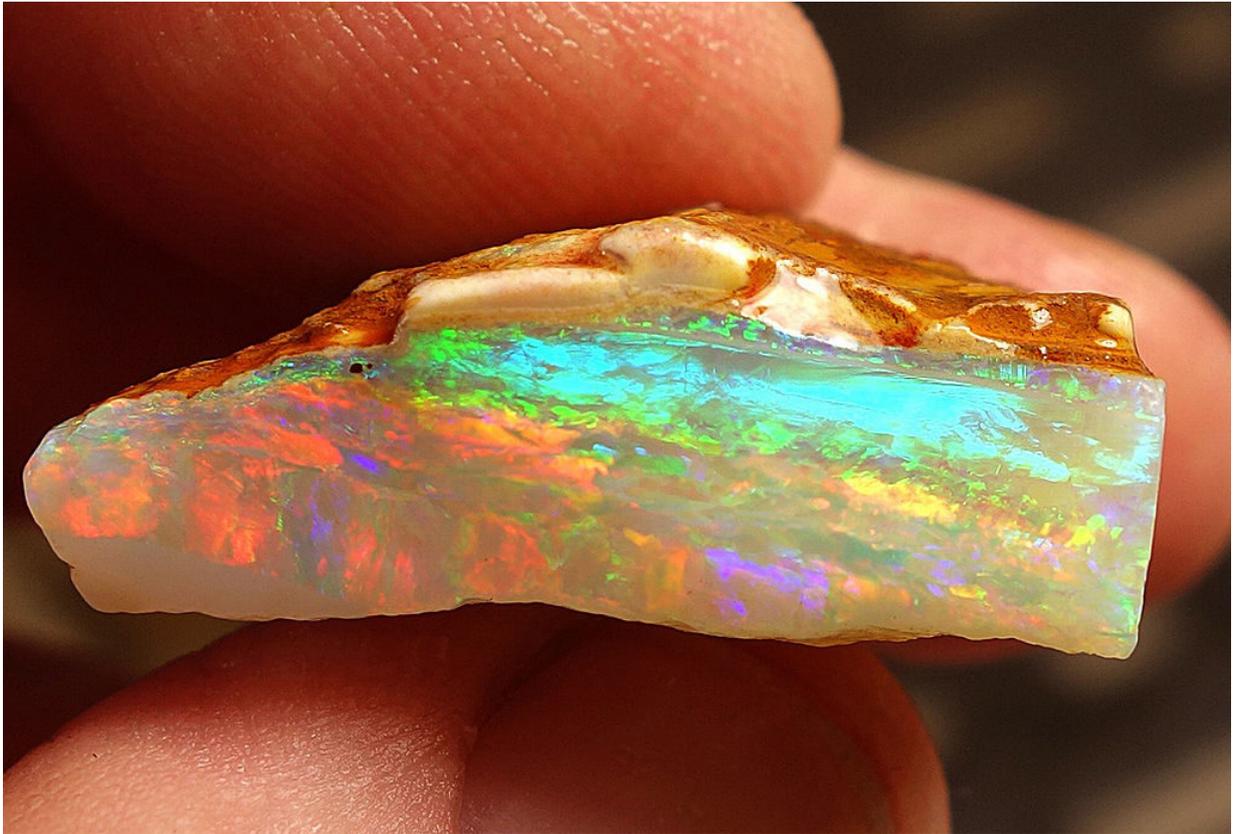
Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia,
with Rob McCormack

Podcast Number 109 – Australia's National Gemstone – the Opal

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Hi,

The opal is a precious gemstone with wonderful bright rainbow colours which flash with the light. Like other gemstones such as diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and pearls, opals are admired for their great beauty and are used in jewellery such as rings, necklaces, earrings and bracelets. Australia produces over 90% of the world's opal and in 1993 the opal was officially declared as Australia's National Gemstone. In this podcast I would like to tell you a little about this famous and beautiful gemstone.



White Opal from Coober Pedy in South Australia

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There are different types of opal. Black Opal has a largely black background from which the rainbow colours flash. By contrast, White Opal has a largely white background from which the beautiful rainbow colours flash in the light. Boulder Opal is slightly different, as it has some ironstone at the back of the opal, but still with the bright sparkling colours coming from the stone.

Opals are mined in the outback of South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland. Each location produces certain types of opal. Coober Pedy in outback South Australia is one of the most famous opal mining towns. It is located 846 km north of Adelaide, in outback desert country that is hot, dry and harsh. Because the town is so hot, some houses are built under the ground and are called 'dugouts', as they are actually dug out from the rock. Coober Pedy is most famous for White Opal. By contrast, Black Opal is the most valuable opal and is mined in Lightning Ridge in outback New South Wales. Lightning Ridge is 740km northwest of Sydney. Boulder

opal is also very beautiful and is found in western Queensland. The most famous opal towns in Queensland are Jundah and Quilpie.

Opals are truly amazing gemstones to look at. The colours are so bright and sharp. The greens, red and blues are vibrant and dazzling. It is like a set of Christmas lights are trapped in the rock. When you move the gemstone in the light, you can see the beautiful colours flash and sparkle.

When an object allows light to pass through it, but the light is changed, we say the object is translucent. Opals are translucent. This is different to transparent, which is when light can pass through an object without being changed. Glass is transparent, but opals are translucent. This is what gives them their beauty.

The life of an opal miner in outback Australia is tough and can be dangerous. Mines can go deep into the ground and sometimes a mine can collapse, trapping, injuring and even killing the miners. But even with the danger associated with opal mining, these hardy people are happy to live the life of an opal miner. They become fascinated with opal gemstones and the idea of striking it rich. That is why they are prepared to go out into harsh and inhospitable desert areas in order to dig for the precious gemstones. While I can understand the attraction of striking it rich on the opal mining fields at Coober Pedy or Lightning Ridge, I think the tough life out there is not for me. I'll leave that to the more adventurous Australians among us.

My wife has always loved the look of opal gemstones. She decided that she wanted an opal in her engagement ring when we decided to get married in the mid 1970s. The normal gemstone used for engagement rings is diamond. Diamonds are certainly more precious and cost more than opals, but there is something quite different about an opal engagement ring. The beauty is unique and unmistakable and they are typically Australian. I was very happy with her choice of gemstone and the engagement

ring still has natural beauty after more than 40 years.



White Opal engagement ring

One point to note about opals, especially compared to diamonds, is their softness. While diamonds are the world's hardest material, opals are much softer. In fact, when worn as jewellery on the hand, there is a chance they can get bumped or knocked on something and they can break or chip. It is therefore recommended that an opal ring should be removed if the wearer is doing something active, such as gardening or cleaning, when there is a high chance that the gemstone might get knocked and be damaged.

After all this time, I still get a kick out of looking at my wife's opal engagement ring. Not only does it bring back great memories, it is still beautiful to look at.

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

Podcast 109 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

[Start quiz](#)

Vocabulary

active = when you do lots of things, the opposite of sitting around doing nothing

admired = liked

adventurous = when someone likes to do exciting things

amazing = something that is really, really good

associated = when things are joined in a relationship

attraction = when you believe that something is very good, valuable

background = something which is at the back or behind

bracelets = jewellery worn around the wrist (at the end of your arm)

bright = when something shines with the light

bumped = when one thing hits another, usually by mistake or by accident

certain = particular

chip = when a small piece of an object falls off, caused by something else hitting it

choice = when you can choose between two or more things

Christmas lights = the coloured lights that you put on a Christmas tree

collapse = when something falls down from above

damaged = when something is broken

dangerous = when you can get hurt or die

dazzling = when something is bright, colourful and surprises you

desert = a place a long way from the city where there are usually no plants and no water

diamonds = a very precious gemstone which is clear

dug out = taken out from the ground

earrings = jewellery worn in the ears

emeralds = a precious green gemstone

engagement = when two people agree to be married

fascinated = when you really like something and you can't leave it alone

flash = when you see bright light for a short period of time

gardening = to work in the garden

gemstone = a coloured or clear stone that you dig from the ground which people think is beautiful

get a kick out of = an expression meaning that something is exciting

hardest = when something is the most difficult to break or change

hardy = strong, can live in a harsh place

harsh = a place which is very hot, or very dry, or very cold, where people find it hard to live

inhospitable = harsh, when it is hard for people to live there

injuring = when someone gets hurt

ironstone = a stone with a red or brown colour from which iron can be made

killing = when people lose their life

knocked = when one thing hits another

located = found at

location = place

mined = when something valuable is dug from the ground, for example, gold, opals, etc

miners = people who dig precious gemstones from the ground

necklaces = jewellery worn around the neck

officially declared = announced by someone who is usually in the government

outback = those parts of Australia which are a long, long way from the cities

pearls = a precious white coloured ball found in clam shells or made by man.

precious = when something is worth a lot, when it has high value

prepared = to be ready for something

rainbow = a special half circle of colours that sometimes show in the sky when it rains

recommended = to tell another person that something is good and that they should do as you say

rings = circles of gold or silver jewellery worn on the finger

rubies = a precious red gemstone

sapphires = a precious blue gemstone

sharp = (here) very easy to see

slightly = a small amount, a little bit

softness = when something is easy to break or change

sparkling = when something flashes when light goes through it

striking it rich = (here) when you find a valuable gemstone or mineral in the ground which is worth a lot of money

tough = (here) difficult

trapped = when something or someone is not able to get out of a place

typically = when something is seen many times, is average, is normal

unique = when there are no others like it

unmistakable = you can easily see something, when you know exactly what it is

vibrant = very easy to see and with bright colours

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