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## NEW PROJECT PROFILE

# AUSTRALIAN OPAL CENTRE (STAGE 1), LIGHTNING RIDGE

Australia is the world's foremost opal producing nation. The new \$34 million Australian Opal Centre (AOC) will be a regionally, nationally and internationally significant facility. In this 21st century icon of Australian sustainable architecture, designed by world-renowned Australian architects Murcutt + Lewin, the AOC will house the world's premier public collection of Australia's national gemstone, a national treasure found in Australia's outback, around the margins of an ancient Gondwanan inland sea. The AOC is also the world's leading provider of opal-related knowledge, certification, education and training, scientific research and industry development. An Opal Vault in the new AOC will provide opal certification services and a high-end opal trading centre.

The new AOC will enable preservation, maintenance and access to the world's premier public collection of opals, opalised fossils and items relating to the science, art, industry, history and culture of Australian opals.

**THE WONDER OF GONDWANA**  
*A Journey into Ancient Australia*



**DESTINATION  
MARKETING  
STORE**

# AUSTRALIAN OPAL CENTRE (STAGE ONE), LIGHTNING RIDGE



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## EXISTING EXPERIENCES

At present, the Australian Opal Centre operates a small public museum in the main street of Lightning Ridge, featuring highlights of the world's leading public collection of opalised fossils, and a Black Opal Heritage Shed on the Three Mile opal field. Since 2004 the centre has run two Fossil Dig experiences each year in partnership with the Australian Geographic Society and the University of New England, with paying participants receiving rare 'hands on' access to opals, opalised fossils, sites and people on the opal fields, while contributing to scientific discovery and a world-class fossil collection. These experiences are led by experts in their field and give the visitor a close and personal connection to the story of Gondwana and Ancient Australia. Imagine the wonder of finding a 100-million-year-old dinosaur bone transformed into opal.

The Australian Opal Centre runs opal carving courses each May and September; lectures and hands-on activities around opal and opalised fossils for visiting school and bus groups; bespoke lectures and experiences for specialist visiting groups; and for six months per year, three nights per week, it hosts SPARK cinema under the stars, showcasing the natural and cultural heritage of the opal fields.

There are also five tour operators who offer a variety of tours giving the visitor the opportunity to experience Lightning Ridge and the surrounding area. There are many stories to be told in Lightning Ridge and they are defined by the characters of the place, their heritage and ingenuity, shaped by the landscape in which they live and work.

## LIGHTNING RIDGE

Lightning Ridge is located within Walgett Shire and the Orana Region of Outback NSW. It is 770 km north west of Sydney, 50 km south of the Queensland border and is approximately equidistant from Sydney and Brisbane. Lightning Ridge is the world's sole commercial source of black opal, the most valuable and highly prized form of the gemstone. Lightning Ridge is also famed as the world's most diverse source of prized 100 million-year-old opalised fossils; the only dinosaur fossil site in NSW; and home of the recently-discovered Australian dinosaurs Lightning Claw, Weewarrasaurus and Fostoria. Without the help of opal miners, many fossils would never have been found. The rare and often valuable fossils from Lightning Ridge have the potential to solve many mysteries about the history of life in Australia<sup>1</sup>. A significant part of the AOC story will be to share the Indigenous heritage of the region and to also showcase the connections from the present day, via tens of thousands of years of human habitation, to ancient Gondwanan times.



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## CREATING A SIGNATURE EXPERIENCE

Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre Incorporated (LROFC) has identified a number of opportunities to leverage AOC experiences to attract more visitors to Lightning Ridge and encourage them to stay longer and spend more money. To take advantage of this unique opportunity, a number of important strategies need to be considered:

- Reviewing and auditing the Lightning Ridge accommodation offer. At present the accommodation style and quality is restricted to traditional regional hotels, motels, caravan parks, bed and breakfast and a limited inventory on Airbnb. With the development of a potentially world class facility in the AOC, there is a need and opportunity to explore the development of a range of accommodation offerings to extend the appeal of Lightning Ridge.
- The accommodation gaps for Lightning Ridge are in the group accommodation sector (LROFC has identified this as an opportunity complementary to the AOC, and obtained development approval for a Lightning Ridge Field Study Centre providing accommodation for groups of up to 50 students); and up-market boutique accommodation to attract and serve high spending visitors keen to purchase a premium sustainable luxury product – precious opal (a market gap also identified by LROFC). A key to success is ensuring that new accommodation reflects the sense of place; that is, reflects Lightning Ridge, its landscapes, history, heritage and characters. This is an opportunity for the industry to work with the Council and DNCO to identify new opportunities and create interesting accommodation experiences that meet market demand.<sup>2</sup>
- Review and solve ground transport issues, including to support recently announced AirLink air service from Dubbo (twice weekly, Tuesdays and Thursdays). Currently, a major limitation for Lightning Ridge is the lack of ground transport services, including taxis and car hire. Investigating shared transport options should be a consideration for Council and look to other solutions such as a subsidised mini version of Uber. There is a major increase in the use of bike share facilities globally especially the use of e-bikes. Bike share and specifically e-bikes presents Lightning Ridge with an opportunity to provide access to transport around the town, to the baths and other sites. The AOC has already proposed to the Walgett Shire Council that AOC could be a transport hub. It will be important to look at a variety of transport initiatives as suggested in this recommendation for the hub.
- The AOC plans to leverage the fossil dig and opal education experiences that are already in the market to develop a series of further seminars, workshops and masterclasses to be offered through the AOC. These experiences will range from the current fossil dig experiences to family adventure experiences, short courses for gem and jewellery industry members and members of the public, jewellery making masterclasses, and guest expert speaker series, involving experts from, for example, the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, USA. These workshops and fossil dig experiences are presently offered on an ad hoc basis. However, there is an opportunity for these experiences to be offered on a regular basis through the peak travel season to Lightning Ridge and would also attract a higher yield visitor (especially if there was a range of accommodation offered to support the higher yield market).
- As part of the overall a marketing blue print and the position of NSW as the Wonders of Gondwana a journey into ancient Australia, undertake a content audit (video, images and copy) to identify the gap in the relevant content for Lightning Ridge and the AOC (especially through the building period of the AOC).

1. [Fossils in Lightning Ridge](#)

2. Examples of accommodation ideas for Lightning Ridge - [Interesting Hotels](#) and [Contained Off Grid Eco Resort](#)

3. [Bike Sharing Market - Growth, Trends and Forecast \(2020 - 2025\)](#)