

The gold rush

The Western Australian desert is home to the Super Pit, one of the largest gold mines in the world. A strange city has grown up around it, with bikini-clad waitresses, brothels to cheer up the lives of the miners and people who come from all corners of the globe searching for top whack salaries.

by Stefano Vergine

Carmen, the madam of the oldest brothel in Kalgoorlie, says this was once a real town, whereas now it's just a stopover: "When I first got here, in 1993, I knew every man who walked into the brothel. Now they're all new to me, mostly foreigners. They stay here a few months, some even manage to resist for a year or two, then they leave and are replaced by other fortune seekers".

Even though she's only been here just 20 years, this 60-something woman with a blonde bob and a British accent is nevertheless one of the main repositories for Kalgoorlie's history. With its 30,000 inhabitants in the middle of the Western Australian bush, almost 600 km from Perth, the town is once again a magnet for young people the world over in search of a quick buck.

Known for over a century as Australia's gold capital since it was discovered in 1893 by Irishman Paddy Hannan, the fortunes of Kal (as its inhabitants call it) have mirrored the seesawing prices of raw materials on world markets. Times of great fortune, with pioneers becoming billionaires overnight, were followed by years of low prices and a mass exodus. You can see proof of this boom and bust in the dozens of ghost towns along the Golden Quest Discovery Trail, a 1,000-kilometre stretch of road that winds its way northwards from Kal and essentially passes through the last 100 years of history in this gold-rich land, home to incredible events.

Like the adventure of Modesto Varischetti, a Bergamo native who survived for nine days in the bowels of a flooded gold mine. Or the

story Emilio Gabrielli recounts in the novel *Polenta and Goanna*, in which main character Gino Minozzi, like many Italians, came out seeking his fortune and ultimately lived out the rest of his days here, after settling down and raising a family with an Aborigine woman.

Many of these sun-drenched villages are no more than a handful of dust and a pile of rusty



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☒ Kalgoorlie is the largest gold mine in Australia. It attracts people from all over the world prepared to go to any length to earn top dollars. In spite of the considerable migrations in recent years, Kalgoorlie still has a Far West appeal to it.

corrugated iron, with nothing but cemeteries left as reminders of their past glory. Whereas Kalgoorlie, the capital of Goldfields, is now back in the limelight. Uncertainty over the world economy and the euro crisis have encouraged investors to buy gold, the ultimate safe asset. So prices have soared to record levels, as can be seen on the luminous sign in the

lobby of the Palace Hotel, renowned for the fact that famous mining engineer Herbert Hoover once stayed there, before later going on to become the 31st president of the United States.

While an ounce of gold was worth \$300 dollars ten years ago, it now fetches \$1,600. “That’s why people come here from all over the world”, explains Jeena, an employment agency manager.

Europeans, Asians, Arabs, New Zealanders: Kal is the stepping stone for thousands of FIFOs, namely “Fly In/Fly Out” people who stay long enough to accrue sufficient money to get a project off the ground, before returning home.

Most of them work atop the large red hill overlooking Kalgoorlie. This is the Super Pit: a canyon 500 metres deep and 3.6 km long. It is the largest gold mine in Australia, and is co-owned by US company Newmont Mining Corporation and the Barrick Gold Corporation of Canada, both accused of releasing seven tonnes of mercury into the environment between 2004 and 2005. The locals don't really seem to care. “I don't know much about that business”, says Jarrod Lucas, the editor-in-chief of the local paper, *The Kalgoorlie Miner*, somewhat evasively. “But the mine does employ 1,200 people and

the 56 millionth ounce of gold is about to be extracted”. Money, money, money. Although, when all is said and done, there's not much else to do here but make as much of it as possible.

Once encamped in tents dotted around the mines, now the workers live in the hostels on Hay Street, the city's ‘red light district’. James, a 28 year-old Scot, works as an assistant perforator operator in the Super Pit. He earns \$2,500 a week. A skilled worker? No, in Glasgow he was a bartender. “Life's tough around here”, says James. “You work 12-13 hours a day, with day and night shifts, in temperatures as high as 50°C, flies everywhere, knowing that accidents can happen with these long hours. I keep focused on the money I'm making and how long I have to go before I can open my own pub in Scotland”.



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Things haven't really changed much since a century ago. Kalgoorlie still attracts the kind of people who are prepared to break their back to achieve their dreams. And in spite of the McDonald's that has just opened, the town still preserves its Far West appeal, with topless waitresses serving at the tables, weekends blurred by alcohol, fist fights outside the pub and brothels to soften the hardships of tough mining life.

"There's not much to do beyond smoking, drinking and having fun in the brothels, because there aren't many girls around here", says Hayden, a 25-year-old New Zealander who's come here to work in the Super Pit. And in actual fact one sees very few female faces in Kal. Which is why the police have always turned a blind eye to the prostitution. Up until 10 years ago, the dens of vice were concen-

trated on Hay Street. "Then", Madam Carmen recalls, "the local government abolished prostitution 'containment' laws and soon after, dozens of private houses full of Asian girls sprung up". Subsequently, today there are only two bordellos left on Hay Street. "Now us miners prefer to go to the suburbs", Hayden admits. "There, half-an-hour's sex costs 120 bucks, half the price of the older brothels". As for the mines, the "Fly In/Fly Out" principle holds true for prostitution as well. Young women come in from all over the world, stay as long as it takes to earn what they need to fulfil their dream, and then leave. Unless they get hooked on the easy money. Proving that gold still represents what it did for the panhandlers of old: an unquenchable fever that can lead people to take excessive, even mortal, risks. **E**

Bill, a Kalgoorlie panhandler who has been selling his gold nuggets to tourists for years. The gold mine employs 1,200 people.

Red light district in Kalgoorlie. The girls come here from all over the world to make the money they need for their life project then go back where they came.



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