



Welcome to Australia

"Working to conserve endangered ecosystems in such a beautiful, unspoiled environment, felt like I was helping to protect my perfect vision of paradise."

Derived from the Latin *Australis*, meaning "southern", Australia forms the mainland of the world's smallest continent. Despite being the world's 6th largest country, its population is only 21 million, and this is highly concentrated along the east and south-eastern coasts. Around 92% of the people living there today are of European origin, with Aboriginal people constituting just 2% of the population. The chief of state is the British monarch Queen Elizabeth II.

Australia is a land of contrasts and dramatic scenery, from the endless desert plains to tropical rainforests. As one of the world's 12 "mega-diverse" countries, with high levels of endemism, it is a must for anyone with an interest in conservation.

Know your History

Early history

Inhabited by indigenous peoples for over 42,000 years, these original settlers are thought to be the ancestors of Australia's remaining Aboriginal population. They were hunter-gatherers with a spiritual culture and strong oral tradition.

European colonisation

1606 is the first recorded European sighting of the Australian landmass, when Dutch navigator Willem Janszoon made landfall at the Pennefather River on the western shore of Cape York. During the 17th Century, the Dutch chartered most of the northern and western regions of the country, which they had dubbed New Holland, but no attempts at settlement were made until the late 1700s.

When James Cook made the first sighting of the east coast in 1770, he claimed it for the crown and named it New South Wales. The first official landfall was on 26th January 1778, when Captain Arthur Phillip led the First Fleet into Port Jackson. This day is now known as Australia Day, and has been celebrated by all states and territories since 1994.

The years that followed remain an issue of contention, particularly regarding the early treatment of indigenous Australians, who lost their land, were affected by disease and were the victims of direct violence and prejudice. This resulted in a 90% decrease in the Aboriginal population by 1900 – and the removal of Aboriginal children from their families (known as the "stolen generations") has been claimed by historians as attempts at genocide. Therefore, for some, including Aboriginal activists,

26th January, rather than being a day of celebration is in fact a day of mourning and protest.

Convict colonies

In 1829, Britain formally claimed the western part of the country, and six separate colonies were subsequently formed; including South Australia in 1836, Victoria in 1851, and Queensland in 1859. South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia were founded as "free" provinces. Though South Australia was never a penal colony, Victoria and Western Australia later accepted transported convicts due to a severe shortage of labour. The settlers of New South Wales campaigned against the transported convicts, and the last convict ship arrived in 1848.

The gold rush

In the 1850s a gold rush began, leading to a period of economic expansion and prosperity. The Eureka Stockade rebellion in 1854 was against mining licence fees was one of the first expressions of civil disobedience. Between 1855 and 1890, the six colonies individually gained responsible government and managed the majority of their own affairs, although still part of the British Empire. However, the flush of prosperity from gold wasn't to last, and the 1890s were a period of economic depression.

The Commonwealth of Australia

In 1901, after a decade of negotiation, the six Australian colonies became a federation and formed one Australian state, to be known as the Commonwealth of Australia. The Commonwealth of Australia became a dominion of the British Empire in 1907. In 1911, the Northern Territory became under the rule of the Commonwealth, but it wasn't until Canberra's completion in 1927 that the Commonwealth had a permanent seat of government (Melbourne was the temporary home between 1901 and 1927).

World War One

The First World War had a devastating impact on the male population, and between wars there was a period of social and economic instability. The Australian army joined Britain, supported by both the outgoing Liberal Party and incoming Labour Party. The Australians mainly fought the on Western Front, but it was the defeat at Gallipoli (the first major military action of the ANZACs – Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) that most regard as a nation-defining event. Of the roughly 416,000 Australians who fought in World War One, around 60,000 were killed and 152,000 wounded.

World War Two

During World War Two, the ANZACs predominantly fought in the Kokoda Track campaign in Papua during 1942. The campaign has become legendary, from the events during the campaign and its notorious terrain, as well as being known as the campaign that "saved Australia" from Japanese invasion. It was the threat of the Japanese that caused Australia to turn to its American allies, and the ANZUS treaty in 1951 secured its place as a formal military ally to the US. Following the Second World War, immigration from Europe was encouraged, and the manufacturing industry took off. The rate of people being home-owners also increased dramatically. The White Australia policy was abolished in the 1970s, causing an influx of migrants from Asia and elsewhere, changing the demography, culture and self-image of Australia.

1967 – Present

In 1967 the people of Australia voted overwhelmingly to enable the federal government to pass legislation on behalf of the Aboriginal Australians, and that they are included in future censuses. This was seen as much needed affirmation that the population of Australia wanted to see the government take the necessary steps to improve the living conditions of indigenous people.

Ties with Britain were severed in 1986 with the passing of the Australia Act 1986, ending all UK involvement in the Australian states. Since the election of the Whitlam government in 1972, Australia has been strengthening ties with other Pacific Rim countries, and renewing bonds with old allies and trading partners.

Money Talks

As of 2009, Australia can boast the 13th largest national economy by nominal GDP (Gross Domestic Product), and represents around 1.7% of the world's economy. Australia's economy is dominated by the service sector, and the main exports are agricultural – wheat, wool, and minerals.

Exports

Australia's emphasis is on the export of commodities as opposed to manufactures, and this has helped towards a significant increase in the country's terms of trade since 2000 and the rise in commodity prices. The service sector – including tourism, education and financial services – has constituted 69% of GDP, and Australia boasts an unemployment rate of just 5.5%. The other sector to enjoy such growth and success is the mining sector, in particular petroleum, seeing it go from 4.5% in the 90s to 8% in 2006-2007.

Money

Australia's currency is the Australian Dollar (AUD or AU\$). This is shared by its territories – Christmas Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Norfolk Island – and the independent Pacific Island nations of Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu.

With the decimalisation of pounds, shillings and pence in the 1960s, Australia had the chance to choose their own currency. Prime minister, Robert Menzies, in 1965 proposed the "royal", but other offers were: the austral, the oz, the boomer, the roo, the kanga, the emu, the digger, the kwid, the dinkum, the bloody paper and the ming (Menzies' nickname). The royal won out, but proved a failure and was replaced by the dollar. In 1966, the Australian pound (already distinct from the British pound) was replaced by the Australian dollar at the rate of two dollars to a pound, or 10 shillings to a dollar.

Both the Australian Dollar and the New Zealand Dollar are used in most places, and there is often a bureau de change at the airport. Traveller's cheques and credit and debit cards (Mastercard and Visa) are widely accepted, and there are ATM machines in the towns. A credit card will come in useful in the event of an emergency.

Get Culture Savvy

Australia is a melting pot of different cultures – from the aborigines to the Anglo-Irish to the more recent immigrants from Asia and Europe. After World War Two, there was a great influx of people

from Italy, Greece and the Netherlands, and later the Middle East, East and South-East Asia.

Australian attitudes are well-documented and stereotyped. Many Australians have the attitude of "a fair go". This is the idea of giving everyone the opportunity and an equal chance to achieve their goals. There is also a known habit of helping the "underdog", supporting those who seem least likely to succeed – unless it's against a fellow Australian, of course!

Movies, Music & Dance

Much of Australia's cinema, music and dance, although receiving international acclaim, are initially indiscernible from other global contributions. It is Australia's painting and architecture that are most unique. From the indigenous artwork to the Sydney Opera house, these iconic images are synonymous with Australia.

Much of Australian folklore, poetry and songs, come from the outback. There is the legendary Ned Kelly – an outlaw much like a latter day Robin Hood – and many of the songs have originated from the "drovers", cattlemen who herded the cows through the outback.

Sports

Australia is best known for its passion for sport. From national games such as Australian rules football and rugby union, to their champion cricket team and unbeatable tennis players. They also host the Australian Grand Prix. Australians are fanatical about their sport, both in terms of spectating and participation. The biggest sporting rivalry, despite a friendly dig at neighbours New Zealand every now and then, is between Australia and England. The sporting arena is somewhere that Australians can shine, and to great effect.

Food

Australian food is not as famous as their sporting achievements – Veggie Mite has never really been popular, though barbecues and beer have become iconic symbols of everything Australian.

Learn the Lingo

Australia has no official language, though the de facto language is English. Australian English is distinct from European and American English, with its own slang and accent. Other major languages include Chinese, Italian, Vietnamese and Greek. When Australia was first settled by Europeans, it was believed there were somewhere between 200 and 300 aboriginal languages, and today it is believed that there are only around 70 that have survived, and all but 20 are in danger of being forgotten.

Lay of the Land

Australia is the oldest, flattest, and lowest of Earth's landmasses. It is surrounded by the Indian and Pacific oceans, and boasts 34,218 km of coastline. The Great Barrier Reef, which extends for 2,000 km, lies off the northeast coast.

Being the world's 6th largest country, Australia encompasses a wide array of habitats, ranging from arid desert, to temperate forest, to savannah grassland, to tropical rainforest. 40% of the country is

classified as semiarid desert and covered with sand dunes, with the country's only fertile soils being found in the more temperate southeast and south-west corners.

What's the Weather like?

Australia experiences a wide variety of climates, which are influenced by ocean currents. The majority of the land is semi-arid desert which receives very little rainfall (200 mm annually). The south-east and south-west corners have a temperate climate, whereas the north is tropical.

Rainfall is highly variable, but only Antarctica receives less rainfall than Australia, with 80% of the country receiving less than 600mm per year. Due to a lack of mountainous areas (its tallest peak is 2228 m); temperatures rarely become extremely cold, but can reach up to 50°C in the desert. These climatic factors contribute to the country's relatively high incidence of bushfires. However, the majority of the country enjoys a pleasant year-round climate with temperatures in the mid-20s.

Biodiversity

Australia covers a wide range of habitats, from arid desert to tropical rainforest. The country is home to over 7% of the world's estimated total species count, which is more than twice the number of species in Europe and North America put together. It is one of twelve so-called "mega-diverse" countries (others include Brazil, Madagascar, and Indonesia), which combined, hold around 75% of the Earth's total biodiversity.

Due to its lengthy period of separation from other continents, Australia has a high number of endemic species, and it is this separation from other land masses that explain the country's unique biodiversity.

Although indigenous peoples who have inhabited the country for over 42,000 years and have undoubtedly interacted with and influenced their environment, it is since the arrival of Europeans little over 200 years ago that Australia has seen a sudden and massive increase in rates of environmental change and biodiversity loss.

Ways in which human population growth reduces biodiversity include; habitat disturbance (industrial development, pollution), over-harvesting of resources, and the introduction of exotic species. An example of the latter includes the deliberate introduction of Bitou bush from South Africa in the early '70s, which has subsequently eradicated several native vegetation species. At present, 20 species of animal are listed as "critically endangered" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and some entire ecosystems that have been lost over the past two centuries include nearly 50% of all forests and 99% of south-eastern Australia's temperate lowland grassland.

As a developed country, Australia has a special responsibility to protect and conserve its unique habitats and endemic species.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- Australia (Lonely Planet Country Guide). Lonely Planet Publications, 14th Revised Edition, 2007. ISBN 9781741043105.
- A Rough Guide to Australia. Penguin Publications Ltd., 8th Revised Edition, 2007, ISBN

9781843538578.

- Australia: 25 Ultimate Experiences (Rough Guide 25s). Rough Guides Ltd., 2007, ISBN 9781843538158.

Wildlife

- Australia (Lonely Planet Watching Wildlife). Lonely Planet Publications, 2000, ISBN 9781864500325.
- The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds. New Holland Publishers Pty Ltd. (AUS), 2003, ISBN 9781877069000.
- Australian Wildlife (Pocket Naturalist Series). Waterford Press, 1999, ISBN 9781583550359.

Fiction/Travel Journals

- Down Under. Bill Bryson. Black Swan, 2001, ISBN 9780552997034.
- Rabbit-proof Fence. Doris Pilkington. Miramax Books, 2002, ISBN 9780786887842

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