



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Australia is the sixth largest country in the world (2,967,892 square miles, or 7,686,850 square kilometers) and is roughly the size of the continental United States. Australia is the only country that occupies a complete continent. It is also the driest inhabited continent in the world. About one-third of its land is desert and another third is composed of poor-quality land. A long chain of mountains, the Great Dividing Range, runs along the Pacific coast. Fertile farmland lies east of the Great Dividing Range, in the southwestern corner of Western Australia, and in the island state of Tasmania. Cattle stations reach the edge of the barren interior desert. The famed Australian Outback is an undefined region that encompasses all remote, undeveloped areas. The Outback is seen as a mystical heartland or frontier—a symbol of Australia's strength and independence—where the climate is hot, life is hard, and people are tough, independent, and few.

Among Australia's natural wonders is the Great Barrier Reef, a system of coral reefs that extends more than 1,250 miles (2,000 kilometers) near Australia's northeast coast. Regarded as a national treasure, it is the largest coral formation in the world. Australia is also famous its wildlife: marsupials such as the koala, kangaroo, wallaby, possum, and wombat, as well as other distinctive species such as the platypus, echidna, and dingo. Birds include the emu, cockatoo, and kookaburra. Australia's snakes are among the most venomous in the world.

Summer is December through February, and winter is June

through August. The climate varies considerably by region. A tropical climate prevails in the north. The interior is arid and hot, with temperatures routinely above 100°F (38°C). The south is more temperate. Snow falls in the southeastern mountains in winter.

### History

Indigenous Australians, or Australian Aborigines, inhabited the continent for tens of thousands of years prior to the arrival of Europeans. They lived in hunter-gatherer communities across Australia, most of them nomadic or semi-nomadic. Once colonization began, many Aborigines died due to European diseases, land loss, and conflicts with settlers.

The Dutch explored parts of Australia in the early 17th century, but most of it was left undisturbed by Europeans until 1770, when Captain James Cook took formal possession of the eastern coast for Britain. On 26 January 1788, the British established a penal colony at Port Jackson, which became the city of Sydney. Other penal colonies were founded in what became Hobart and Brisbane. Therefore, many of Australia's early settlers were convicts or soldiers. Free settlements were established in Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth. With the discovery of gold in 1851, the number of free persons immigrating to Australia increased rapidly. In 1868, the practice of transporting convicts to Australia ceased.

In 1901, the continent's six British colonies agreed to federate as the Commonwealth of Australia. Australia's traditional role as a loyal member of the empire, established by supplying troops for British conflicts such as the Boer Wars and World Wars I and II, eventually evolved into a

more independent Australian identity. For example, Australian troops' harsh experiences during a World War I campaign in Gallipoli, Turkey, helped create an Australian national consciousness. This transformation of identity has come to be known as the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) tradition.

The second half of the 20th century brought a transformation in the ethnic makeup of Australia. At the end of World War II in 1945, Australians were almost entirely of Anglo-Celtic descent, with 90 percent born in Australia. During the 1950s and 60s, a large influx of immigrants from Greece, Italy, and other European countries began to shape a more multicultural society. Significant Asian migration began in the 1970s. Today, nearly 25 percent of Australians were born overseas, and 40 percent are immigrants or children of immigrants.

Beginning in the 1960s, a series of reforms addressed issues facing Australian Aborigines. In 1962, Aborigines received national voting rights, and in 1970, the government ended a longstanding assimilation policy, which had forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their parents. These children came to be known as the "stolen generations." Australia's High Court ruled in 1992 that Aborigines possessed Australia prior to the arrival of Europeans, rejecting a policy that the continent had been empty. The decision opened the way for legislation that allowed Aborigines to press land claims. Controversy still surrounds the history of relations between Australian Aborigines and Europeans, but Aboriginal culture is increasingly recognized as an integral part of Australia's national heritage. In a historic speech in February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a formal apology for the past mistreatment of Aboriginal people, particularly the stolen generations, on behalf of the Australian government. In June 2010, Australia elected its first female prime minister, Julia Eileen Gillard.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Australia's population of 21.5 million is growing by 1.2 percent annually. Some 89 percent of the people live in urban areas. Sydney is the largest city, with 4.3 million residents. Melbourne has 3.8 million. Brisbane, Adelaide, and Perth each have between one and two million.

About 92 percent of Australians are Caucasian, although because of heavy immigration, Australia is also a mosaic of many nationalities, including Cambodian, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, Estonian, French, German, Greek, Indian, Italian, Latvian, Lebanese, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Polish, Polynesian, Serbian, South African, Sri Lankan, Sudanese, and Vietnamese. The Asian population has grown to 7 percent. Australian Aborigines comprise less than 1 percent of the population.

### Language

English is the national language and is taught in all schools. Immigrant groups often continue to use their native languages at home. Aborigines once had more than 250 languages, but

only about 50 have survived in teachable form. There is now an effort to reverse a trend toward stressing English over Aboriginal languages. Aborigines have their own radio system, more families are speaking traditional languages at home, and many Aboriginal schools delay English instruction for a few years. Australian universities are in the process of recording and documenting Aboriginal languages in an effort to preserve them.

Colloquialisms and idioms make Australian English unique. For example, *Spot on* means "Right on." A *prang* is a "fender bender." If someone is unwell, he or she is *crook*. A *bloke* is a "guy," and friends (particularly males) may refer to each other as *mate*. Australians, or *Aussies* (pronounced "AH-zeez") as they are often called, also shorten words for everyday conversation. Examples include *uni* (university), *kindy* (kindergarten), *telly* (television), and *footy* (football).

### Religion

Generally, religion does not play a strong role in daily life, but many people attend church on special occasions. Approximately 76 percent of Australians are Christians, divided among Anglican (26 percent), Roman Catholic (26 percent), and other denominations (24 percent), including the Uniting Church (combination of Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational). Evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant faiths are growing. Other religions and nonreligious parts of the population account for the remaining 24 percent. Due mostly to immigration, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism have increased followings. In Aboriginal society, ceremonies and social responsibilities help people maintain connections to each other and the land. Aboriginal beliefs are based on legends of the *dreamtime*, when ancient ancestors sang the land and living things into being.

### General Attitudes

Australians are proud of their heritage—that a nation of convicts and working people established a wealthy, educated, and egalitarian society in a harsh and inhospitable land. They value tolerance and fairness (called *a fair go*) and dislike aggressive, ostentatious, or proud behavior. At times, this dislike is manifest in the desire to bring down people of power and influence to the common level. Australians are outgoing and friendly and place a high value on enjoyment. They particularly appreciate material things that allow them to enjoy life (spacious homes, vacations, cars). Australians have a prevailing optimism that things will "be right." Their keen sense of humor is laced with irony, sarcasm, and satire and is often self-deprecating. While Australians are generally perceived as laid-back, they also value hard work and have a strong sense of politeness; being prompt is important. In recent years, extended drought and fears over climate change have made Australians increasingly conscious of environmental issues. For example, water resources management and energy conservation often rank high among people's concerns.

### Personal Appearance

Australians generally follow European and North American fashion trends. They tend to dress casually, but this does not

mean clothes are sloppy. For example, while shorts are common in the summer, tattered clothing is not considered acceptable. Australian businessmen commonly wear suits. In hot weather and in tropical regions, an open-neck, short-sleeved shirt may be worn. Women in the workplace wear fairly conservative pant suits or blouses and skirts. People usually dress up to go into the city or for social functions. During winter, sweaters (*jumpers*) and other cool-weather clothes are necessary in some (particularly southern) regions. Australians rank first in the world in rates of skin cancer and tend to be careful about sun protection; many people wear hats and sunglasses year-round.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Australians greet friends with a casual *Hi* or *G'day* (Good day) accompanied by a handshake. Close female friends and friends of the opposite sex might hug and kiss each other lightly on the right cheek. More formal greetings involve a simple *Hello, how are you?* From a distance, a wave is considered an acceptable greeting. Friends and peers generally are addressed by first name, while elders or superiors are addressed by title (*Mr., Mrs., Ms., Miss*) and surname. In the workplace, increased familiarity between a supervisor and employee may result in use of the first name. Supervisors do not address subordinates by last name only; this is considered arrogant and rude.

### Gestures

Rules of basic etiquette are strongly adhered to in Australia. When yawning, one covers the mouth and then excuses oneself. Winking at women is typically considered inappropriate. Pointing at someone with the index finger may be perceived as rude. Instead, one may point with an open hand in the person's general direction. It is considered impolite to stand too close to people while conversing. Interrupting a conversation or passing between conversing individuals is also impolite. Australian men generally like to maintain a strong sense of personal space.

### Visiting

Casual visiting in the home is common in Australia. Close friends and relatives may arrive unannounced, but more casual acquaintances usually *ring* (call) ahead. Visits often take place during the early evening. Arriving unannounced at mealtimes is generally inappropriate. Hosts typically serve a tea, coffee, or beer, along with a light snack such as cake or *biscuits* (cookies).

Australians entertain in the home and enjoy inviting others to dinner. Guests often bring something for the meal (fruit, homemade goods, a bottle of wine, or beer). Hosts greet guests warmly at the door before inviting them to enter the home. After dinner, the company sometimes goes out to a dance club, movie, or sports club. One popular reason for getting together is the barbecue (*barbie*). It may be informal, where guests bring their own meat and maybe another item, but it is just as common for hosts to provide all the food.

Parties and card games are also popular. Many people also meet friends in local pubs after work and on weekends.

### Eating

Australians generally eat three meals a day. The evening meal may be the only meal busy families eat together during the week. The term *tea* may refer either to afternoon refreshments or the evening meal, which is also called *dinner*. Table etiquette can vary between ethnic groups. However, most Australians eat in the continental style; the fork remains in the left hand and the knife in the right. It is considered impolite to put elbows on the table or use a toothpick at the table. Individuals do not leave the table until everyone has finished. Dinner guests often do not serve themselves from various dishes at the table but receive a plate already served. However, in some homes the host will place all the food on the table for guests and family to serve themselves or be served from. Guests wait for the host to offer second helpings, rather than ask for them. At a restaurant, one places utensils on the plate together to indicate that one is finished and wishes to have the dish cleared away. Tipping is becoming more common, and if the service is good, a small tip is appreciated.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

The average family has two or three children, although larger families are not uncommon. The concept of the extended family is not strong in Australia, although it may be among immigrant groups. Older children living at home are expected to contribute toward family expenses. There are an increasing number of single-parent homes, stepfamilies, and families in which both father and mother work outside the home. Women comprise about 40 percent of the workforce. They generally are considered equal to men, with about the same amount of education, fairly equal wages, and important leadership positions in the private and public sectors.

### Housing

Although the Outback plays an important role in Australia's perception of itself and the country's image abroad, the nation has a predominantly urban and coastal population. About 89 percent of Australians live in urban areas, and 85 percent are within 30 miles (50 kilometers) of the coast. Two-thirds of urban residents live in a state or territorial capital (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra, Hobart, or Darwin), often in a sprawling suburb.

The typical home is a freestanding single-storey house with a yard. Timber and brick are the most common building materials. Roofs are tiled or made of metal sheeting such as galvanized iron or painted steel. A living area, dining area, kitchen, bathroom, and multiple bedrooms are found in an average home. New homes often feature an open-plan combination kitchen, dining, and living area. Also popular is an "outdoor living" area: a covered patio with a barbecue and dining table used for meals in warm weather. In city centers, apartments and townhouses are popular. Many elderly

Australians value their independence and live in their own homes or in communities for senior citizens. These homes may be funded by church, government, or community groups, although some are privately owned. Home ownership is highly valued; about 70 percent of Australians own their own homes.

### Dating and Marriage

Dating usually begins by age 15, often in small groups. The most popular activities are dancing and going to movies. The average age of marriage is 27. Church weddings are still common. A growing number of couples choose to live together before or instead of marrying. This arrangement is referred to as a *de facto* marriage.

### Life Cycle

When a woman is expecting a baby, family members and friends usually host a baby shower for her. Presents include clothing and other items for the infant and mother. The average person is not a regular churchgoer, but most parents have their babies baptized. Rites of passage for young people include graduating from high school (at age 17 or 18) and obtaining a driver's license (a restricted license at age 18, then a full license at 21). Another common milestone is a *debutante ball*, a dance to which high school girls invite a partner and wear a white gown. When a person turns 21, friends and family are invited to a large birthday party, usually with much drinking. Funerals typically consist of a wake, a memorial service, and burial in a cemetery.

### Diet

Australian cuisine is an evolving blend of European and Asian foods. Popular dishes include steak, roast lamb and lamb chops, sausages (*snags*), french fries (*chips*), seafood, pasta, and meat pies. Stir-fries and other Westernized Asian dishes are common. Dinner may consist of meat, potatoes, vegetables, and salad, followed by dessert (ice cream, fruit salad, pudding) and coffee. As in many countries, however, there is a trend toward eating lighter foods. Salads, seafood, and fresh vegetables are increasing in popularity. Fruits and vegetables are grown year-round. *Take-away* (take-out) and fast-food businesses are popular. Australians often drink domestic wine or beer with their meals.

### Recreation

Physical fitness, exercise, and sportsmanship are important to most Australians. Cricket is the most popular national sport. Many people also enjoy Australian-rules football (most popular in Victoria), rugby union and rugby league (most popular in New South Wales and Queensland), soccer, basketball, cycling, tennis, lawn bowling, golf, and water sports such as surfing, swimming, and kayaking. Many girls learn netball, a game similar to basketball, as early as age five and play it throughout school. Popular outdoor recreational activities include fishing, boating, *bush walking* (hiking), going to the beach, picnicking, and camping.

Auto racing and horse racing are favorite spectator sports. The Melbourne Cup horse race is a state holiday in Victoria and one of the nation's most popular sporting events. The

Australian Open, held in Melbourne in January, is one of the world's four major tennis tournaments. Australians also enjoy travel, both domestic and international; nearly all salaried workers receive four weeks of paid vacation each year. Going to movies is popular, and the Australian film industry is one of the largest and most successful in the world.

### The Arts

For thousands of years, Aboriginal art has portrayed *dreamtime* ancestors, who created life and the landscape. Rock art, paintings, dances, and musical stories called *songlines* focus on these creation legends. The Aboriginal *didgeridoo* is a five-foot-long wooden musical instrument into which the player blows to produce a distinctive resonating sound.

Australian writers and poets have celebrated the nation's frontier spirit. One poem of the Outback, "Waltzing Matilda" by A. B. "Banjo" Paterson, has become an unofficial national anthem. Painters have also used the Outback as their inspiration, portraying the beauty of the unique Australian landscape. The Sydney Opera House, a national symbol, represents modern Australia's devotion to the fine arts. Dance, theater, and the symphony can be found in all of Australia's major cities. A number of Australian performers, from operatic singers to rock bands, have made their mark internationally.

### Holidays

Australia Day (26 Jan.) commemorates the arrival of the first European settlers to Australia. Other holidays are New Year's Day, Easter (Friday–Monday), Anzac Day (25 April, honoring the armed forces and war dead), Queen Elizabeth II's Birthday (second Monday in June), Christmas, and Boxing Day (26 Dec.). Boxing Day comes from a British tradition of giving small boxed gifts to service employees or the poor. It is now simply a day to visit friends and relatives. Labour Day, bank holidays, and holidays for local horse races or cultural festivals vary from state to state. Ethnic festivals and local holidays provide an opportunity to celebrate cultural diversity and are popular throughout Australia. For example, Chinese New Year features fireworks and dragon dances.

## SOCIETY

### Government

Australia is a federal parliamentary state consisting of six federated states, the Australian Capital Territory around Canberra, and the Northern Territory. States have power over all matters, except those reserved to the Commonwealth of Australia in the constitution. The nation remains a member of Britain's Commonwealth and officially recognizes Queen Elizabeth II as its monarch. The queen is head of state and is represented by a governor-general (currently Quentin Bryce), who is Australian. The prime minister (currently Julia Eileen Gillard) is head of government. The federal Parliament consists of a 76-seat Senate and a 150-seat House of Representatives. Major political parties include the Labor Party, the Liberal Party, and the National Party. All citizens

age 18 and older are required to vote in federal and state elections. Those who do not vote may be fined.

**Economy**

Australia has been nicknamed the “lucky country” because of its vast mineral deposits and other resources. Australia exports many minerals, including iron ore, bauxite, diamonds, coal, silver, gold, and copper. Livestock and sheep production are important in Australia, one of the world’s leading exporters of wool and beef. Australia’s mineral and agricultural exports are sensitive to fluctuations in world-market prices. These fluctuations have sometimes led to periods of recession and restricted economic growth. The country is self-sufficient in food production. Australia also has a large and diversified service sector. Manufacturing and services together now contribute twice as much to exports as farming. Sixty percent of exports go to Asian and Pacific nations. The currency is the Australian dollar (AUD).

**Transportation and Communications**

Australia is among the highest-ranked nations in the world in number of automobiles per capita; many families own two cars. The transportation system also includes taxis, interstate bus lines, railways, and an extensive airline system. The bus system is very good in metropolitan areas. Melbourne has an extensive *tram* (streetcar) system. Sydney has a ferry system. An overnight ferry service travels between Victoria and Tasmania.

Most Australian adults own a mobile phone. Nearly all homes have a land line telephone, and most have an internet connection, usually high-speed broadband. Free television broadcasters include two national public networks and three national commercial networks. Access to paid television cable and satellite networks is also common. Many public and commercial radio stations operate. Two national newspapers and numerous local newspapers are published daily.

**Education**

Public education is administered by state governments and financed by federal funds. Seven years of primary education are followed by five years of secondary education (six in New South Wales and Victoria). Schooling is compulsory from ages 6 to 15 (16 in Tasmania). Three-quarters of all students complete their secondary education at age 17. Approximately one-fourth of all children attend private schools. The School of the Air (correspondence instruction originally supplemented by shortwave radio and now by the internet) reaches children in remote areas. All states have universities, colleges, and technical and other institutes.

**Health**

All Australians are entitled to subsidized basic health services under the national (Medicare) system, which is funded by an income tax. Many Australians also have private insurance. Low- to middle-income individuals receive a tax rebate if they have private insurance, while high-income individuals pay a small penalty tax if they do not have private insurance. About two-thirds of all hospitals are public. The Flying Doctor service provides emergency and primary health care in

the Outback. Infant mortality is twice as high and life expectancy is 20 years lower for the Aboriginal population.

**AT A GLANCE**

**Contact Information**

Embassy of Australia, 1601 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20036; phone (202) 797-3000; web site [www.usa.embassy.gov.au](http://www.usa.embassy.gov.au). Australian Tourist Commission, 6100 Center Drive, Suite 1150, Los Angeles, CA 90045; phone (310) 695-3200; web site [www.australia.com](http://www.australia.com).

**POPULATION & AREA**

Population	21,515,754 (rank=54)
Area, sq. mi.	2,967,892 (rank=7)
Area, sq. km.	7,686,850

**DEVELOPMENT DATA**

Human Dev. Index* rank	2 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	18 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$39,900
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	5 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	79 (male); 84 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).