

# Australia



Australia is the only country that takes up a whole continent. It is known for its vast Outback, the Great Barrier Reef, and its unique wildlife. The capital of Australia is Canberra.

## Geography

Australia is one of the largest countries in the world, but it is also the smallest continent. Located south of Asia, Australia lies between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Off the southeastern coast is the island of Tasmania. It has more than 4,000 lakes. Along Australia's northeastern coast is the world's largest coral reef, the Great Barrier Reef.

The western half of the continent is a plateau with several deserts, including the Great Victoria Desert. East of the plateau is a lowland area that rises to the Great Dividing Range, a range of mountains on the east coast. In the southeast are the Australian Alps. There, Mount Kosciusko, Australia's tallest mountain, stands 7,310 feet (2,228 meters) high. The Darling and Murray rivers also run through the southeast.

Australia is very dry. Most areas have hot summers and mild winters. Because Australia is in the Southern Hemisphere, summer starts in December, and winter starts in June.





Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is located in Australia's Northern Territory. The area is sacred to Australian Aborigines.

### Plants and Animals

Australia's plants vary from region to region. The rain forests of the northeast include flowering plants, palms, and laurels. Woodlands and forests cover eastern Australia. Eucalyptus trees are common in the highlands of the south and at the edges of the deserts. Desert shrubs and grasses grow in dry areas.

The country is home to many unique animals, including emus (large flightless birds), dingoes (wild dogs), and platypuses (egg-laying mammals). Many of the world's marsupials live in Australia—for example, kangaroos, koalas, and wallabies. Crocodiles, lizards, snakes, turtles, and parrots also live there.

### People

More than 90 percent of Australians have European roots. Australia welcomed many immigrants, or people from other countries, over the years. However, entry tests were set up to make it very hard for nonwhites to settle there.

This changed in 1973. Since then, many Asians have immigrated to the continent. Aborigines, the native people of Australia, make up a small percentage of the population.

Almost 70 percent of Australians are Christians. There are also small groups of Buddhists and Muslims. Many people do not follow any religion.

Few people live in the central region, called the Outback or "bush." About 85 percent of all Australians live in cities, mostly along the coasts. The official language is English.

### Economy

Australia is a prosperous country. Most people work in trade, businesses that serve the public, and manufacturing. Manufacturers make food, print, and metal products; chemicals; and machinery.

Australia's rich natural resources include oil, coal, and natural gas. Mines provide



A bridge crosses the Yarra River in Melbourne. The city is Australia's second largest, after Sydney.



## TIMELINE

Dutch explorers name the continent New Holland.

Britain sets up the first colony in Australia.

Australia separates from Britain.

Sydney hosts the Summer Olympic Games.

**1644**

**1770**

**1788**

**1851**

**1901**

**1992**

**2000**

James Cook claims Australia for Great Britain.

A gold rush brings many settlers to Australia.

Aborigines win the right to claim their traditional lands.

iron, bauxite, copper, opals, and sapphires.

Agriculture and fishing are small parts of Australia's economy. Still, Australia is one of the world's largest producers of wool. The wool comes from more than 100 million Australian sheep. Farmers grow wheat, vegetables, fruits, nuts, cotton, and other crops.

### History

Aborigines lived in Australia for at least 40,000 years before Europeans arrived. They came from Asia by boat or by land that is now underwater.

### European Explorers

Portuguese and Spanish explorers may have landed in Australia in the 1500s. In the 1600s several Dutch explorers reached the continent. They included Dirck Hartog and Abel Tasman. Hartog discovered the west coast, and Tasman sailed along the southern tip of what is

now called Tasmania. Because of all these voyages the Dutch named the continent New Holland in 1644. But they did not settle there.

William Dampier, an English pirate turned explorer, landed on the west coast twice in the late 1600s. In 1770 Captain James Cook landed in south-eastern Australia and claimed it for Great Britain. He named the region New South Wales.

### First Fleet and Settlement

Captain Cook thought that New South Wales was a good place for settlement. At the time, England's prisons were overcrowded. So the English government decided to send prisoners to Australia to start a penal colony—a place where criminals are sent to live.

Captain Arthur Phillip was in charge of the First Fleet. He led 11 ships carrying about 200 marines, a few free settlers,

more than 700 convicts, food stores, and farm animals. The trip took eight months and conditions were very hard. They reached Australia in January 1788 and settled in a bay that they named Sydney Cove. Phillip became the first governor of the colony.

Convicts and settlers worked to clear land and to establish farms. They were not used to the climate, so the colonists struggled to survive. But soon more convicts and settlers arrived.

In the 1800s other parts of the country were settled. In 1851 the discovery of gold drew thousands of new immigrants to Australia. The settlements grew and became colonies separate from New South Wales. They became Tasmania, Western Australia, Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia.

The flood of settlers nearly wiped out the aboriginal population. Many Aborigines died while fighting for their land or from diseases brought by the Europeans.

### Independence and War

By the late 1800s the six separate colonies each had an elected parliament, or group of lawmakers. In 1901 they became states when they joined together to form a federation. The new Commonwealth of Australia had a national parliament and six state parliaments. It kept ties with Britain, however, as part of the British Commonwealth (a group of former British colonies).

In World War I, Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) troops fought alongside the British Army. Many Australians died during the battle of Gallipoli in 1915. Australia also supported Britain when World War II began in 1939. In the 1940s the Japanese attacked several Australian cities. After the war the population grew.

### Recent Events

In the 1970s Australia started to focus more on its Asian neighbors. Many Asian immigrants arrived, and trade increased between Australia and Asian countries. In the 1990s Aborigines won some rights to land. They also won more respect from white Australians.

Although the prime minister is the head of the government, the British monarch is still the official head of state in Australia. Some Australians want the country to become a republic with a president as head of state. In 1999, however, Australians voted against a complete separation from Britain. In 2010 the country gained its first woman prime minister, Julia Gillard. She served until 2013.

Australia suffered two major natural disasters in the early 2000s. A series of bushfires in 2009 killed 173 people in Victoria, and rains in Queensland caused massive flooding in 2010–11.

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#### Facts About AUSTRALIA



**Population**  
(2013 estimate)  
23,028,000

**Area**  
2,973,952 sq mi  
(7,702,501 sq km)

**Capital**  
Canberra

**Form of government**  
Federal parliamentary state

**Metropolitan areas**  
Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide