

Australia: Travel Information

Endless sunbaked horizons, dense tropical rainforests,
chilly southern beaches.



Introduction

Australia's biggest attraction is its natural beauty. The landscape varies from endless sunbaked horizons to dense tropical rainforest to chilly southern beaches. Scattered along the coasts, its cities blend a European enthusiasm for art and food with a laid-back love of sport and the outdoors. Sydney is Australia's oldest city, the economic powerhouse of the nation and the country's capital in everything but name. It's blessed with sun-drenched natural attractions, dizzy skyscrapers, delicious and daring restaurants, superb shopping and friendly folk. Uluru is the most famous icon of the Australian outback and a site of deep cultural significance to the Anangu Aborigines. The 3.6km (2.2mi)-long rock rises a towering 348m (1141ft) from the pancake-flat surrounding scrub. It is especially impressive at dawn and sunset when the red rock spectacularly changes hue. Although it's come a long way from its convict beginnings, it still has a rough and ready energy, and offers an invigorating blend of the old and the new, the raw and the refined. While high culture attracts some to the Opera House, gaudy nightlife attracts others to Kings Cross.



Weather Overview

Summer (December to February) can get uncomfortably hot just about anywhere, even in Tasmania. If you're in the southern states during these months it's great beach weather and great melanoma weather. Up north, this is the wet season, and it's very, very humid (you'll need to check for jellyfish before jumping into the water). On the upside, the Top End is beautifully green and free of tourists at this time.

From June until August things in the north have cooled down a little and dried up a lot. This is a good time to visit Queensland or the outback. If you're here for the skiing, now's the time to head for the snowfields of NSW and Victoria. Overall, spring and autumn are probably the safest bets - the weather is reasonably mild wherever you are, and spring brings out the wildflowers in the outback, while autumn is particularly beautiful around Canberra and in the Victorian Alps.

Visa Overview

Every nationality except New Zealanders need visas. Tourist visas and Electronic Travel Authority (ETA) visas are valid for three months, but longer-term visas can be applied for. The processing of ETAs often costs around A\$15.00; standard visas cost around A\$45.00.

History:

Pre 20C

Australia's original inhabitants, known as Australian Aborigines, have the longest continuous cultural history in the world, with origins dating back to the last Ice Age. Although mystery and debate shroud many aspects of Australian prehistory, it is generally accepted that the first humans travelled across the sea from Indonesia about 70,000 years ago. The first visitors, called 'Robust' by archaeologists because of their heavy-boned physique, were followed 20,000 years later by the more slender 'Gracile' people, the ancestors of Australian Aborigines.

Europeans began to encroach on Australia in the 16th century: Portuguese navigators were followed by Dutch explorers and the enterprising English pirate William Dampier. Captain James Cook sailed the entire length of the eastern coast in 1770, stopping at Botany Bay on the way. After rounding Cape York, he claimed the continent for the British and named it New South Wales.

In 1779, Joseph Banks (a naturalist on Cook's voyage) suggested that Britain could solve overcrowding problems in its prisons by transporting convicts to New South Wales. In 1787, the First Fleet set sail for Botany Bay under the command of Captain Arthur Philip, who was to become the colony's first governor. The fleet comprised 11 ships, 750 male and female convicts, four companies of marines and supplies for two years. Philip arrived in Botany Bay on 26 January 1788, but soon moved north to Sydney Cove, where there was better land and water. For the new arrivals, New South Wales was a harsh and horrible place, and the threat of starvation hung over the colony for at least 16 years.

Australia never experienced the systematic push westward that characterised the European settlement of America. Early exploration and expansion took place for one of three reasons: to find suitable places of secondary punishment, like the barbaric penal settlements at Port Arthur in Van Diemen's Land and on Norfolk Island; to occupy land before anyone else arrived; or in later years, because of the quest for gold.

Free settlers began to be attracted to Australia over the next decades, but it was the discovery of gold in the 1850s that changed the face of the colony. The huge influx of migrants and several large finds boosted the economy and irrevocably changed the colonial social structures. Aborigines were ruthlessly pushed off their tribal lands as new settlers took up land for farming or mining. The Industrial Revolution in England required plenty of raw materials, and Australia's agricultural and mineral resources expanded to meet the demand.

Modern

Australia became a nation when federation of the separate colonies took place on 1 January 1901 (although many of the legal and cultural ties with England remained). Australian troops fought alongside the British in the Boer War and WWI. Interestingly, while Australians rallied to the aid of Britain during WWI, the majority of voters were prepared to support voluntary military service only. Efforts to introduce conscription during the war led to bitter debate, both in parliament and in the streets, and in referenda compulsory national service was rejected.

Australia was hard hit by the Depression; prices for wool and wheat - two mainstays of the economy - plunged. In 1931 almost a third of breadwinners were unemployed and poverty was widespread. Swagmen became a familiar sight, as they had been in the 1890s depression, as thousands of men took to the 'wallaby track' in search of work in the countryside. By 1933, however, Australia's economy was starting to recover, a result of rises in wool prices and a rapid revival of manufacturing.

When WWII broke out, Australian troops fought alongside the British in Europe but after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Australia's own national security finally began to take priority. Singapore fell, the northern Australian towns of Darwin and Broome and the New Guinean town of Port Moresby were bombed, the Japanese advanced southward. In appalling conditions, Australian soldiers confronted and defeated the Japanese at Milne Bay, east of Port Moresby, and began the long struggle to push them from the Pacific. Ultimately it was the USA that helped protect Australia from the Japanese, defeating them in the Battle of the Coral Sea. This event was to mark the beginning of a profound shift in Australia's allegiance away from Britain and towards the USA.

Post-WWII immigration brought a flood of European immigrants, many of them non-British. The immigrants have since made an enormous contribution to the country, enlivening its culture and broadening its vision. The post-war era was a boom time in Australia as its raw materials were once again in great demand.

In the 1950s Australia came to accept the American view that it was not so much Asia but communism in Asia that threatened the increasingly Americanised Australian way of life. Accordingly, Australia followed the USA into the Korean War, and in 1965, Australia committed troops to assist the USA in the Vietnam War, though support for involvement was far from absolute. Still more troubling for many young Australian men was the fact that conscription was introduced in 1964, and those undertaking national service could now be sent overseas. By 1967 as many as 40% of Australians serving in Vietnam were conscripts.

The civil unrest aroused by conscription was one factor that contributed to the 1972 rise to power of the Australian Labor Party, under the leadership of Gough Whitlam. The Whitlam government withdrew Australian troops from Vietnam, abolished national service and higher-education fees, instituted a system of free and universally available health care, and supported land rights for Aboriginal people.

The government, however, was hampered by a hostile Senate and by much talk of mismanagement. On 11 November 1975, the governor general (the British monarch's representative in Australia) took the unprecedented step of dismissing the parliament and installing a caretaker government led by the leader of the opposition Liberal Party, Malcolm Fraser. Labor supporters were appalled - many as an anachronistic vestige of Australia's now remote British past had long regarded the powers that the governor general had been able to invoke. Nevertheless, it was a conservative Liberal and National Country Party coalition that won the ensuing election. A Labor government was not returned until 1983, when a former trade union leader, Bob Hawke, led the party to victory.

Recent

After a period of recession and high unemployment in the early 1990s, the electorate eventually lost faith in the Labor government, and in early 1996, Labor leader Paul Keating was defeated in a landslide victory to the conservative coalition, led by John Howard. Howard has since become the country's second longest serving prime minister, most recently re-elected in 2004. Under Howard, the prominent, divisive issue of refugees (and refugee camps) has seen the majority of Australians hardening their hearts to asylum seekers. At the same time, Howard's stance on Aboriginal issues has been marked more by confrontation than by sympathy.

The issue of republicanism - replacing Britain's queen with an Australian president as head of state - dominated Australian politics in the late 1990s. An increasing number of people, particularly young Australians, felt that constitutional ties with Britain were no longer relevant and the only way forward was to declare Australia a republic. However, a national referendum in 1999 resulted in a comprehensive victory for the status quo.

The country is closer than ever to the USA, as it demonstrated by its commitment to the war in Iraq (2003-). Some say that this alliance protects Australia's independence; others insist that it reduces Australia to a fawning 'client state'.

Places of Interest

Great Barrier Reef

Larger than the Great Wall of China and the only living thing visible from space, the Great Barrier Reef is one of the seven wonders of



the natural world. The 2000km (1240mi) conglomeration of colourful coral stretches along the Queensland seaboard and makes for some of the most spectacular diving landscape imaginable.

Web: www.gbrmpa.gov.au

Margaret River

Bronzed surfers and wine-quaffing city slickers rub shoulders in this buzzing tourist hub that offers some of the best surfing in Australia and some of its most delicious wines. Wild coastal scenery, sophisticated restaurants, internationally acclaimed vineyards and strings of fascinating limestone caves are real crowd-pleasers.

Web: www.margaret-river-online.com.au



Kakadu National Park

Kakadu National Park is a natural marvel encompassing a variety of habitats, a mass of wildlife and some of Australia's best Aboriginal rock art. It stretches more than 200km (124mi) south from the coast and 100km (62mi) from east to west. It is World Heritage-listed for both its natural and cultural importance (a rare distinction).

Web: www.ea.gov.au/parks/kakadu/



Attractions

Sydney

Sydney is Australia's oldest city, the economic powerhouse of the nation and the country's capital in everything but name. It's blessed with sun-drenched natural attractions, dizzy skyscrapers, delicious and daring restaurants, superb shopping and friendly folk.

Although it's come a long way from its convict beginnings, it still has a rough and ready energy, and offers an invigorating blend of the old and the new, the raw and the refined. While high culture attracts some to the Opera House, gaudy nightlife attracts others to Kings` Cross. It's a city blessed with long stretches of heavenly beaches, a pleasant climate that sees over 300 sunny days a year, an economy that's stronger than it should be, a stable local government, and a population of open-minded, outgoing entrepreneurial types who are itching to show the whole place off.



Uluru

Uluru is the most famous icon of the Australian outback and a site of deep cultural significance to the Anangu Aboriginals. The 3.6km (2.2mi)-long rock rises a towering 348m (1141ft) from the pancake-flat surrounding scrub. It is especially impressive at dawn and sunset when the red rock spectacularly changes hue. A pilgrimage to Uluru and the coronary-inducing scramble to the top was an entrenched Australian ritual, but the Aboriginal owners would prefer visitors not to climb the rock and many visitors are now respecting their wishes. There are walks around the base of the rock which pass caves, rock art and sacred Aboriginal sites. Nearby Kata Tjuta (the Olgas), 32km (20mi) west of Uluru, are equally impressive monoliths and Mt Olga is actually much higher than Uluru. The Valley of the Winds is a worthy 6km (4mi) walking circuit.



Danger and Annoyance

Australia's native creatures can pose some threat and while it is unlikely you will be attacked by one, it is wise to be aware of what you may be tangling with. Box jellyfish, generally found on the northern coast, have venomous tentacles that can grow up to 3m (10ft) long and can deliver a fatal sting. Saltwater crocodiles are also a real threat - observe safety signs or ask locals if rivers and waterholes are croc-free, as they can be found a long way inland as well as along the coast. Venomous snakes and spiders also call Australia home. Should you encounter a snake, do not interfere with it - leave it well alone. The funnel-web spider is deadly while the white-tail and the redback can deliver a painful bite.

Bushfires occur all too regularly in Australia, so be extremely careful with any naked flame, especially on hot, dry, windy days and always respect the total fire ban days. Conversely, bushwalkers should be aware of the risk of hypothermia as even in summer temperatures can drop below freezing at night in the mountains and weather can change very quickly.

While Australia is a relatively safe place, exercise common sense in the cities by locking cars and hotel rooms, not displaying valuables and not accepting potentially spiked drinks in bars.

Take care on unfamiliar roads - potential dangers on the open road include animals, such as kangaroos, leaping out in front of your vehicle, fatigue caused by travelling long distances without a break and tricky dirt roads.

Health Conditions

Sunburn

Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world. Monitor your exposure to direct sunlight closely. UV exposure is greatest between 10:00 and 16:00 so avoid skin exposure during these times. Always use 30+ sunscreen, apply 30 minutes before going into the sun and repeat regularly to minimise damage.

Heat exhaustion

Heat exhaustion occurs when fluid intake does not keep up with fluid loss. Symptoms include dizziness, fainting, fatigue, nausea or vomiting and pale, clammy skin. Rest in a cool, shady area and fluid replacement with water or diluted sports drinks will usually correct the problem.

Heatstroke is a severe form of heat illness that occurs after fluid depletion or extreme exertion in high heat. This is a true medical emergency, with heating of the brain leading to disorientation, hallucinations and seizures. Prevention is by maintaining an adequate fluid intake to ensure the continued passage of clear and copious urine, especially during physical exertion.

Getting there

Overview

Air travel is Australia's best friend, with most visitors taking a long haul flight to get here.

Plane

Virtually all visitors to Australia arrive by air. The main international airports are Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, followed by Perth, Adelaide, Hobart, Darwin and Cairns. There are plenty of connections to Asia, Europe and the USA, but Australia's remoteness makes flights relatively expensive and long. Many flights are heavily booked, so make plans well

in advance. Departure tax on international flights is U27.00. This tax is usually included in the price of your airline ticket.

Getting around

Overview

With distances between cities so great, flying is the most favoured and speedy option, although buses and trains provide a more scenic, if lengthy alternative. Within the major cities, you will find thorough and convenient rail and bus systems.

Plane

Australia is so vast (and so empty in places) that something like 80% of long-distance trips are made by air. Qantas is Australia's main domestic airline and has a budget subsidiary called Jetstar. A competing carrier that flies all over the country is Virgin Blue. Few people pay full fare for domestic air travel because the airlines offer a wide range of discounts, including random discounting and Internet fares.

Bus

There are several long-distance bus companies but only one truly national service, Greyhound Australia. Buses are comfortable, but if you're travelling between major cities, be prepared for a long trip. Australia has a skeletal rail network linking all major cities.

Train

Few people travel long distances by train because it's usually the slowest mode of overland transport and remains relatively expensive (though it is generally more comfortable for overnight trips).

Car

Many visitors group together and hire or purchase a car. The latter can be an economical way of travelling around Australia, as long as you don't have too many mechanical failures. Highway 1 circumnavigates the continent, sticking close to the coast much of the way. Watch out for monstrous road trains (trucks with multiple trailers) on outback roads; naturally it's wise to give way to anything bigger than yourself.

Fast Facts:

Time Zone

GMT/UTC +10

Weight measures

Metric

Area Sqkm

7,682,300 sq km

Area Code

Country Code: 61

Population

19,500,000

Spoken Language

English (official)

Australia is a multi-cultural country, so it's not unusual to walk down a city street and hear people speaking Italian, Greek, Lebanese, Vietnamese or Arabic as their first language. Aboriginal languages are also spoken. English-speaking Australians have a passion for abbreviations and are liable to use a hotchpotch of local slang that can take the first-time visitor a while to untangle.

Religion

75% Christian, 1% Muslim, 1% Buddhist, 0.5% Jewish

Currency

Australian Dollar (A\$)

Electricity

220-240V 50

Electrical Plug

Australian-style plug with two flat angled blades and one vertical grounding blade