THE QUICK ROUGH GUIDE to Australia
MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN AUSTRALIA

As Rough Guides publisher, I’d like to welcome you to this special edition of this Rough Guide produced for Australian Visa Bureau clients. You’ve made the right decision in choosing Australia, and I think this brief guide will show you exactly why - and hopefully really get the excitement flowing for your forthcoming trip.

Based on our best-selling 1000-page guide to the country, we’ve put together a selection of things you really shouldn’t miss on any visit to Oz - iconic journeys and attractions like the Great Ocean Road and Uluru, along with a host of lesser-known suggestions like the Undara Lava Tubes in Tropical North Queensland. There’s also a brief introduction and a map of each region; and finally what we think is a really cool thing to do in each place, from Canyoneering in Karijini, WA to indulging your tastebuds at Queen Victoria Markets in Melbourne.

We love Australia at Rough Guides and I hope you enjoy this little taster of our guide, and that it helps you to plan your journey. Wherever you decide to go, you’re sure to have a great time.

Happy travelling!
Martin Dunford
Rough Guides Publisher
INTRODUCTION TO AUSTRALIA

Australia is massive, and sparsely peopled: in size, it rivals the USA, yet its population is just twenty million. It is an ancient land, and often looks it: in places, it’s the most eroded, denuded and driest of continents, with much of central and western Australia – the bulk of the country – overwhelmingly arid and flat. In contrast, its cities, most of which were founded as recently as the mid-nineteenth century, express a youthful energy.

The most memorable scenery is in the Outback, the vast desert in the interior of the country west of the Great Dividing Range. Here, vivid blue skies, cinnamon-red earth, deserted gorges and other striking geological features – as well as bizarre wildlife – comprise a unique ecology, one that has played host to the oldest surviving human culture for up to 70,000 years (just 10,000 years after Homo sapiens is thought to have emerged from Africa).

This harsh interior has forced modern Australia to become a coastal country. Most of the population lives within 20km of the ocean, occupying a suburban, southeastern arc extending from southern Queensland to Adelaide. These urban Australians celebrate the typical New World values of material self-improvement through hard work and hard play, with an easy-going vitality that visitors, especially Europeans, often find refreshingly hedonistic. A sunny climate also contributes to this exuberance, with an outdoor life in which a thriving beach culture and the congenial backyard “barbie” are central.

While visitors might eventually find this Home and Away lifestyle rather prosaic, there are opportunities – particularly in the Northern Territory – to gain some experience of Australia’s indigenous peoples and their culture, through visiting ancient art sites, taking tours and, less easily, making personal contact. Many Aboriginal people – especially in central
Australia – have managed to maintain a traditional lifestyle (albeit with modern accoutrements), speaking their own languages and living according to their law. Conversely, most Aboriginal people you’ll come across in country towns and cities are victims of what is scathingly referred to as “welfare colonialism” – a disempowering consequence of dole cheques and other subsidies combined with little chance of meaningful employment, often resulting in a destructive cycle of poverty, ill health and substance abuse. There’s still a long way to go before black and white people in Australia can exist on genuinely equal terms.

WHERE TO GO

For visitors, deciding where to go can mean juggling with distance, money and time. You could spend months driving around the Outback, exploring the national parks, or hanging out at beaches; or you could take an all-in two-week “Reef, Rock and Harbour” package, encompassing Australia’s outstanding trinity of “must-sees”.

Both options provide thoroughly Australian experiences, but neither will leave you with a feeling of having more than scraped the surface of this vast country. The two big natural attractions are the two-thousand-kilometre-long Great Barrier Reef off the Queensland coast, with its complex of islands and underwater splendour, and the brooding monolith of Uluru (Ayers Rock), in the Northern Territory’s Red Centre. You should certainly try to see them, although exploration of other parts of the country will bring you into contact with more subtle but equally rewarding sights and opportunities.

The cities are surprisingly cosmopolitan: waves of postwar immigrants from southern Europe and, more recently, Southeast Asia have done much to erode Australia’s Anglocentrism. Each Australian state has a capital stamped with its own personality, and nowhere is this more apparent than in New South Wales, where glamorous Sydney has the iconic landmarks of the Opera House and Harbour Bridge. Elsewhere, the sophisticated café society of Melbourne (Victoria) contrasts with the vitality of Brisbane (Queensland). Adelaide, in South Australia, has a human scale and old-fashioned charm, while Perth, in Western Australia, camouflages its isolation with a leisure-oriented urbanity. In Hobart, the capital of Tasmania, you’ll encounter fine heritage streetscapes and get a distinct maritime feel. The purpose-built administrative centre of Canberra, in the Australian Capital Territory, often

FACT FILE

• With an area of eight million square kilometres, Australia is the sixth largest country in the world.
• The population stands at just twenty million, of whom some 85 percent live in urban areas, mainly along the coast. About 92 percent of the population are of European origin, 2 percent Aboriginal, and around 6 percent Asian and Middle Eastern.
• Much of Australia is arid and flat. One third is desert and another third steppe or semidesert. Only six percent of the country rises above 600m in elevation, and its tallest peak, Mount Kosciuszko, is just 2228m high.
• Australia’s main exports are fossil fuels, minerals, metals, cotton, wool, wine and beef, and its most important trading partners are Japan, China and the US.
• Australia is a federal parliamentary state (formally a constitutional monarchy) with two legislative houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The chief of state is the British Monarch, represented by the Governor-General, while the head of government is the Prime Minister.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Though there’s fun to be had in the cities, it’s really the great outdoors that makes Australia such a special place. Its multitude of national parks – around a thousand in total – embrace everything from isolated beaches and tropical rainforest to the vast wildernesses of the bush and the Outback. Visitors are spoilt for choice when it comes to getting out and about, with a huge range of outdoor pursuits on offer – everything from diving off the Great Barrier Reef or white-water rafting Tasmania’s Franklin River to hot-air ballooning over Alice Springs or even skiing in the Australian Alps. Perhaps the best way to see something of the great outdoors, and certainly the cheapest and the most popular, is bushwalking – you’ll find trails marked in every national park.
exist in the southern half of the country outside of the tropics. Here, you’ll find reliably warm summers at the coast with regular, but thankfully brief, heatwaves in excess of 40°C. Head inland, and the temperatures rise further. Winters, on the other hand, can be miserable, particularly in Victoria, where the short days add to the gloom. Tasmania’s highlands make for unpredictable weather all year round, although summer is the best time to explore the island’s outdoor attractions.

In the coastal tropics, weather basically falls into two seasons. The best time to visit is during the hot and cloudless Dry (from April to November), with moderate coastal humidity maintaining a pleasant temperature day and night and cooler nights inland. In contrast, the Wet – particularly the “Build Up” in November or December before the rains commence – can be very uncomfortable, with stifling, near-total humidity. As storm clouds gather, rising temperatures, humidity and tension can provoke irrational behaviour in the psychologically unacclimatized – something known as “going troppo”. Nevertheless, the mid-Wet’s daily downpours and enervating mugginess can be quite intoxicating, compelling a hyper-relaxed inactivity for which these regions are known; furthermore, the countryside – if you can reach it – looks its best at this time.

Australia’s interior is an arid semi-desert with very little rain, high summer temperatures and occasionally freezing winter nights. Unless you’re properly equipped to cope with these extremes, you’d be better off coming here during the transitional seasons between April and June, or October and November.

In general, the best time to visit the south is during the Australian summer, from December to March, though long summer holidays from Christmas through January mean that prices fail to grip visitors, but Darwin’s continuing revival enlivens an exploration of the distinctive “Territory”.

Away from the suburbs, with their vast shopping malls and quarter-acre residential blocks, is the transitional “bush”, and beyond that the wilderness of the Outback – the quintessential Australian environment. Protected from the arid interior, the east coast has the pick of the country’s greenery and scenery, from the north’s tropical rainforests and the Great Barrier Reef to the surf-lined beaches further south. The east coast is backed by the Great Dividing Range, which steadily decreases in elevation as it extends from Mount Kosciuszko (2228m) in New South Wales north into tropical Queensland. If you have time to spare, a trip to often-overlooked Tasmania, across the Bass Strait, is worthwhile: you’ll be rewarded with vast tracts of wilderness as well as landscapes almost English in their bucolic qualities.

**WHEN TO GO**

Australia’s climate has become less predictable in recent times, although like the rest of the planet the country has rarely had stable weather patterns over the last few thousand years. Recently observed phenomena, such as an extended drought in the eastern Outback, the cyclic El Niño effect, and even the hole in the ozone layer – which is disturbingly close to the country – are probably part of a long-term pattern.

Visitors from the northern hemisphere should remember that, as early colonials observed, in Australia “nature is horribly reversed”: when it’s winter or summer in the northern hemisphere, the opposite season prevails Down Under, a principle that becomes harder to apply to the transitional seasons of spring and autumn. To confuse things further, the four seasons only really

**ABORIGINAL ART**

Aboriginal art has grown into a million-dollar industry since the first canvas dot paintings of the central deserts emerged in the 1970s. Though seemingly abstract, early canvases are said to replicate ceremonial sand paintings – temporary “maps” fleetingly revealed to depict sacred knowledge. In the tropics, figurative bark and cave paintings are less enigmatic but much older, though until recently they were ceremonially repainted. The unusual x-ray style found in the Top End details the internal structure of animals. The Northern Territory – and Alice Springs, in particular – are the best places to look.

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Averages temperatures (°C) and rainfall (mm)

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All temperatures are in Centigrade: to convert to Fahrenheit multiply by 9/5 and add 32.

are higher and beaches more crowded at this time. In the tropical north, the best months are from May to October, while in the Centre they are from October to November and from March to May. If you want to tour extensively, keep to the southern coasts in summer and head north for the winter.
01. Sailing in the Whitsundays (QLD)  
There’s fantastic sailing and diving – and whale watching in season – in the idyllic white-sand Whitsunday Islands.

02. Blue Mountains (NSW)  
World Heritage–listed, the Blue Mountains, just west of Sydney, get their name from the blue mist of fragrant eucalyptus oil hanging in the air all year round.

03. Beer Can Regatta, Darwin (NT)  
Wacky boat races in sea craft made entirely from beer cans, held in early August.

04. Coober Pedy (SA)  
The underground homes, shops and churches of Coober Pedy – where temperatures soar to over 50˚C in summer – are the most enduring symbol of the harshness of Australia’s Outback.

05. Skiing in the Snowy Mountains (NSW)  
The Snowy Mountains have the best skiing in Australia.

06. Humpback whales (QLD)  
Saved from extinction by a ban on whaling, humpback whales migrate up the Queensland coast between June and October to calve around the Whitsundays’ warm tropical waters.

07. Overland Track in Cradle Mountain–Lake St Clair National Park (Tas)  
The eighty-kilometre Overland Track is Australia’s greatest extended bushwalk, spread over five or more mud- and leech-filled days of physical, exhilarating exhaustion.

08. Melbourne Cup (Vic)  
Melbourne’s venerable horse race brings the entire country to a standstill around the radio or TV.

09. Diving at the Great Barrier Reef (QLD)  
Come face-to-face with stunning coral and shoals of curious fish.

It’s not possible to experience everything Australia has to offer in one trip – and we don’t suggest you try. What follows, in no particular order, is a selective taste of the country’s highlights: beautiful beaches, outstanding national parks, spectacular wildlife and lively festivals. They’re arranged in five colour-coded categories, which you can browse through to find the very best things to see and experience.
10. **Bushtucker** Witchetty grubs and wattle seeds, possum-tail soup and rooburgers – a few restaurants around the country are now experimenting with bushtucker.

11. **Fraser Island (QLD)** The giant dunes, freshwater lakes and sculpted, coloured sands of the world’s largest sand island form the backdrop to exciting 4WD safaris.

12. **Kangaroo Island (SA)** Unspoilt Kangaroo Island boasts fantastic coastal scenery and excellent wildlife-spotting opportunities.

13. **The Franklin River (Tas)** White-water rafting is the only way to explore the wild Franklin River, one of the great rivers of Australia.

14. **Climbing Sydney Harbour Bridge (NSW)** Scale the bridge for adrenaline thrills and great vistas – or walk or cycle across it for free.

15. **Kakadu National Park (NT)** Australia’s largest national park is a vast World Heritage-listed wilderness with an amazing diversity of wildlife.

16. **Crocodiles (NT)** Head up north to see the Territory’s growing population of fearsome crocs.

17. **Canoeing up the Katherine Gorge (NT)** Hop on a cruise or paddle a canoe through the dramatic orange cliffs of the Katherine Gorge – you won’t have it to yourself, but it’s still hugely enjoyable.

18. **Sydney Opera House (NSW)** Take in a performance at one of the world’s busiest performing-arts centres – interval drinks certainly don’t have such spectacular harbour views anywhere else in the world.
19. The Kimberley (WA) Regarded as Australia’s last frontier, the Kimberley is a sparsely populated, untamed wilderness that contains some stunning landscapes.

20. Boating on the Murray River (SA) By far the best way to see the great brown Murray River is to get out on the water – hop on a paddle steamer, splash about in a canoe or rent a houseboat.

21. Mardi Gras (NSW) The irreverent Oxford St parade, from “dykes on bikes” to the “Melbourne marching boys”, ends the summer season.

22. Aboriginal Dance Festival at Laura (QLD) Electrifying celebration of Aboriginal culture, held in June in odd-numbered years.

23. Kings Canyon in Watarrka National Park (NT) The hike around the canyon’s rim takes you past exposed lookouts, domed outcrops, and a secluded waterhole that’s great for a dip on a hot day.

24. Giant termite mounds (NT) These impressively huge towers – up to 4m tall – are a regular feature of the Top End.

25. Watching a match at the MCG (Vic) Taking in a game of cricket or, even better, Aussie Rules Football at the venerable Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) is a must for sports fans.
26. Bondi Beach (NSW) Beach, surf and café culture: Sydney’s famous beach has something for everyone.

27. Hiking through Carnarvon Gorge (QLD) With its Aboriginal art sites and magical scenery, a day-hike into the Carnarvon Gorge takes some beating.


29. Wilsons Promontory National Park (Vic) Victoria’s most popular national park, “The Prom” boasts some superb coastal scenery and bushwalks.

30. The Great Ocean Road (Vic) On two wheels or four, the 280-kilometre ride along the rugged, surf-battered cliffs bordering the Great Ocean Road comes straight out of a road movie.

31. Lake Eyre (SA) This massive saline lake, topped by a glaring salt crust and walled by red dunes, creates a harsh, unforgettable landscape.

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Flying into Sydney provides the first snapshot of Australia for most overseas visitors: toy-sized images of the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House, tilting in a glittering expanse of blue water. The Aussie city par excellence, Sydney stands head and shoulders above any other in Australia. Taken together with its surrounds, it’s in many ways a microcosm of Australia as a whole – if only in its ability to defy your expectations and prejudices as often as it confirms them. A thriving, high-rise business centre, a high-profile gay community and inner-city deprivation of unexpected harshness are as much part of the scene as the beaches, the bodies and the sparkling harbour. Its sophistication, cosmopolitan population and exuberant nightlife are a long way from the Outback, and yet Sydney has the highest Aboriginal population of any Australian city, and bushfires are a constant threat.

The area around – everything described here is within day-trip distance – offers a taste of virtually everything you’ll find in the rest of the country, with the exception of desert. There are magnificent national parks – Ku-ring-gai Chase and Royal being the best known – and native wildlife, each a mere hour’s drive from the centre of town; while further north stretch endless ocean beaches, great for surfers, and more enclosed waters for safer swimming and sailing. Inland, the Blue Mountains, with three more national parks, offer isolated bushwalking and scenic viewpoints. On the way are historic colonial towns that were among the earliest foundations in the country – Sydney itself, of course, was the very first. The commercial and industrial heart of the state of New South Wales, especially the central coastal region, is bordered by Wollongong in the south and Newcastle in the north. Both were synonymous with coal and steel, but the smokestack industries that supported them for decades are now in severe decline. This is far from an industrial wasteland, though: the heart of the coal-mining country is the Hunter Valley, northwest of Newcastle, but to visit it you’d never guess, because this is also Australia’s oldest, and arguably its best-known, wine-growing region.

The 2000 Olympics were a coming-of-age ceremony for Sydney. The impact on the city was all-embracing, with fifty years’ worth of development compressed into four years under the pressure of intense international scrutiny. Transport infrastructure was greatly improved and a rash of luxury hotels and waterside apartments added to the skyline. The City of Sydney Council spent $200 million to enhance and beautify the city streets, public squares and parks; and licensing laws changed, too, creating a European-style bar culture. Sydney now has all the vigour of a world-class city, with the reputation of its restaurants in particular turning the lingering cultural sneers to swoons. It seems to have the best of both worlds – twenty minutes from Circular Quay by bus, the high-rise office buildings and skyscrapers give way to colourful inner-city suburbs where you can get an eyeful of sky and watch the lemons ripening above the sidewalk, while to the centre’s north and south are corridors of largely intact bushland where many have built their dream homes. During every heatwave, however, bushfires threaten the city, and sophisticated Sydney becomes closer to its roots than it sometimes feels. In the summer, the city’s hot offices are abandoned for the remarkably unspoilt beaches strung along the eastern and northern suburbs.

It’s also as beautiful a city as any in the world, with a setting that perhaps only Rio de Janeiro can rival: the water is what makes it so special, and no introduction to Sydney would be complete without paying tribute to one of the world’s great harbours.
SYDNEY HIGHLIGHTS

* **Opera House performance** Admire the stunning exterior of this Australian icon, or better still, take in a performance.
* **Climbing Sydney Harbour Bridge** Scale the famous coathanger for great harbour views.
* **Bondi Beach** Bold, brash Bondi is synonymous with Australian beach culture.
* **Manly Ferry** The ferry trip out to Manly, with its unbeatable views of the harbour, is a must.
* **Mardi Gras** The biggest celebration of gay and lesbian culture in the world.
* **Cruising on the Hawkesbury River** Explore the pretty Hawkesbury River and surrounding national parks.
* **Oxford Street** Crammed with bars, clubs and restaurants, a night out on Oxford Street is essential.
* **Paddington Market** Visit Paddington on Saturday, when the famous market is in full swing.
* **Hunter Valley wineries** One of Australia’s most famous wine-growing regions.
* **Blue Mountains** Take a weekend break in the World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains.

**MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN SYDNEY**

The urge to emigrate always surfaces when you take the public ferry across Sydney Harbour: for the views from the deck not only encompass the city’s two biggest icons – the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House – but also the stuff of daily Sydney life. Who wouldn’t want to live in a harbour-view apartment, drop by one of the countless sandy beaches on the way home from work, learn to sail? And to cap it all, you could be taking this ferry on your daily commute from downtown Sydney to a home in Manly, 12km north, a suburb which has not one but two beaches of its own, one facing the harbour, the other overlooking the high-rolling surf of the Pacific Ocean.

Fittingly, the Manly ferry sets off from alongside Sydney’s oldest neighbourhood. The Rocks, site of the first permanent European settlement in 1788, and now a sort of neighbourhood theme park, with its preserved homes, museums and twee cafes. A few minutes later it chugs you within waving distance of the Bridge before all eyes swivel right for captivating views of the shell-shaped Opera House, at its most dazzling like this, with sea-sparkle in the foreground.

Need a different perspective? Then sign up for the Bridge Climb, a three-and-a-half-hour tour that takes you on to the girders of Sydney Harbour Bridge itself, and up to the summit of its eastern arch, 134m above the harbour waters. Once primed and prepped, you’re clad in a regulation steel-grey jumpsuit and clipped on, steeplejack-style, to the railings, as you negotiate ladders and catwalks in the footsteps of your tour leader. Aside from awesome high-level vistas, you get to learn about the construction of its mammoth 503-metre-long arch, completed in 1932. Seventy-five years on and the Harbour Bridge is still the enduring symbol of the Sydney good life, linking the city’s energetic business and historical districts with those ever-so-desirable North Shore suburbs across the water.

**COASTAL NSW AND THE ACT**

New South Wales is Australia’s premier state in more ways than one. The oldest of the five states, and also the most densely populated, its 6.7 million residents make up a third of the country’s population. The vast majority occupy the urban and suburban sprawl which straggles along the state’s thousand-plus kilometres of Pacific coastline, and the consistently mild climate and many beaches draw a fairly constant stream of visitors, especially during the summer holiday season, when thousands of Australians descend on the coast to enjoy the extensive surf beaches and other ocean side attractions.

South of Sydney, there’s a string of low-key family resorts and fishing ports, good for watersports and idle pottering. To the north the climate gradually becomes warmer, and the coastline more popular – the series of big resorts up here includes Port Macquarie and Coffs Harbour – but there are plenty of tiny national parks and inland towns where you can escape it all. One of the most enjoyable beach resorts in Australia is Byron Bay, which is just about managing to retain its slightly offbeat, alternative appeal, radiating from the still-thriving hippie communes of the lush, hilly North Coast Hinterland.

Just over 280km southwest of Sydney is the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), which was carved out of New South Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century as an independent base for the new national capital, Canberra, a city struggling to shed its dull image. Canberra is also the gateway to the Snowy Mountains, where the Great Dividing Range builds to a crescendo at Mount Kosciuszko (Australia’s highest at 2228m), marking the peak of the Australian Alps, which offer skiing in winter and glorious hiking in summer.

Far off the north coast of New South Wales are the Pacific islands; subtropical Lord Howe Island, 700km northeast of Sydney, and Norfolk Island, 900km further northeast and actually closer to New Zealand, inhabited by the descendants of the Bounty mutineers.

**AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

The first European squatters settled in the valleys and plains north of the Snowy Mountains in the 1820s, though until 1900 this remained a remote rural area. When the Australian colonies united in the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, a capital city had to be chosen, with Melbourne and Sydney the two obvious and eager rivals. After much wrangling, and partly in order to avoid having to decide on one of the two, it was agreed...
to establish a brand-new capital instead. In 1909, Limestone Plains, south of Yass, was chosen out of several possible sites as the future seat of the Australian government. An area of 2368 square kilometres was excised from the state of New South Wales and named the Australian Capital Territory, or ACT. The name for the future capital was supposedly taken from the language of local Aborigines: Canberra – the meeting place.

Canberra is situated on a high plain (600m above sea level). There’s a predominantly dry, sunny climate, and daytime temperatures can reach 40°C in summer, though they’re usually in the high twenties; in winter they drop to anything from 12°C to down below freezing. Spring and especially autumn – when the trees are dressed in exquisite reds and golds – can be really delightful, though. The mountain ranges to the west and south usually in the high twenties; in winter they drop to anything from 12°C to down below freezing.


NATIONAL PARKS

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) charges entrance fees at many of its parks – usually $4–15 per car and $4 for motorcycles (often on an honour system). If you intend to “go bush” a lot in New South Wales you can buy an annual pass for $45, which includes all parks except Kosciuszko. Because of its popularity as a skiing destination, entrance to Kosciuszko is a steep $27 per car per day in winter and $16 per car per day in summer – if you plan on spending any length of time here, or are going to visit other parks as well, consider the $190 annual pass which covers entry to all parks, including Kosciuszko. Passes can be bought at NPWS offices and some park entry-stations, over the phone using a credit card (002/9858 6068 or 1300 361 967) or online (www.npws.nsw.gov.au).

You can camp in most national parks. BushcAMPing is generally free, but where there is a ranger station and a designated campsite with facilities, fees are charged, usually around $6 per site. If the amenities are of a high standard, including hot showers and the like, or if the spot is just plain popular, fees can be as high as $25 per tent. There are often electric or gas barbecues on campsites, but you’ll need a fuel stove for hard-core bushcAMPing. Open fires are banned in most parks and forbidden everywhere on days when there is high danger of fire – it’s worth checking the NPWS for details of any current bushfires and park closures before you visit.

NSW & ACT HIGHLIGHTS

✱ **New Parliament House, Canberra** The stunning angular design of the New Parliament House is matched by its interior, which shows contemporary Australian design at its best.

✱ **Australian War Memorial** Located near the heart of Canberra, this moving memorial commemorates Australia’s war dead from Gallipoli to Vietnam.

✱ **Snowy Mountains** Cozy lodges and good skiing in winter, fine bushwalking in summer, plus spectacular drives all year round.

✱ **Bellinger** Arty little town in the beautiful Bellinger Valley where everyone has a smile on their face – take a lazy canoe trip, drink great coffee at the enticing cafés and soak up the good vibes.

✱ **Byron Bay** New-Age Mecca with 30km of sandy beaches – an essential stop on the backpacker circuit.

✱ **Lord Howe Island** On the UNESCO World Heritage list because of its rare bird and plant life and its virtually untouched coral reef, this tiny Pacific island is an ecotourist’s paradise.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN COASTAL NSW

Situated at the end of a long sweeping bay, the township of **BYRON BAY** boasts 30km of almost unbroken sandy beaches and is a “must do” on the backpacker circuit. What once made the place special – the small-community feel, the free-for-all atmosphere, the barefoot hippies and the Bohemians – is fast disappearing. Byron these days is still beautiful and undeniably good fun, but the ever-encroaching chain stores and its parks – usually $6–15 per car and $4 for motorcycles (often on an honour system). If you intend to “go bush” a lot in New South Wales you can buy an annual pass for $45, which includes all parks except Kosciuszko. Because of its popularity as a skiing destination, entrance to Kosciuszko is a steep $27 per car per day in winter and $16 per car per day in summer – if you plan on spending any length of time here, or are going to visit other parks as well, consider the $190 annual pass which covers entry to all parks, including Kosciuszko. Passes can be bought at NPWS offices and some park entry-stations, over the phone using a credit card (002/9858 6068 or 1300 361 967) or online (www.npws.nsw.gov.au).

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The stunning angular design of the New Parliament House is matched by its interior, which shows contemporary Australian design at its best.

Located near the heart of Canberra, this moving memorial commemorates Australia’s war dead from Gallipoli to Vietnam.

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INLAND NEW SOUTH WALES

Inland New South Wales is a very different proposition from the populous coast, and although it’s not a stand-alone holiday destination and it might strike you as boring at times, travelling here gives you a real insight into the Australian way of life. The region stretches inland for around a thousand kilometres, covering a strikingly wide range of landscapes, from the rugged slopes of the Great Dividing Range to the red-earth desert of the Outback, dotted with relatively small agricultural and mining communities. The Great Dividing Range itself runs parallel to the coast, splitting the state in two.

West of the range, towns such as Bathurst and Dubbo date back to the early days of Australian exploration, when the discovery of a passage through the Blue Mountains opened up the rolling plains of the west. Free (non-convict) settlers appropriated vast areas of rich pastureland here and made immense fortunes off the back of sheep farming, establishing the agricultural prosperity which continues to this day. When gold was discovered near Bathurst in 1851, and the first goldrush began, New South Wales’ fortunes were assured. Although penal transportations ceased the following year, the population continued to increase rapidly and the economy boomed as fortune-seekers arrived in droves. At much the same time, Victoria broke off to form a separate colony, followed by Queensland in 1859.

Agriculture also dominates the southern section of the state, where the fertile Riverina occupies the area between the Murrumbidgee, Darling and Murray rivers (the last dividing New South Wales from Victoria). In the north, falling away from the Great Dividing Range, the gentle sheep- and cattle-farming tablelands of the New England Plateau extend from the northern end of the Hunter Valley to the border with Queensland.

Moving west away from the coast the land becomes increasingly desolate and arid as you head into the state’s harsh Outback regions, where the mercury can climb well above the 40°C mark in summer and even places which look large on the map turn out to be tiny, isolated communities. The small town of Bourke is traditionally regarded as the beginning of the real Outback (“Back O’Bourke” is Australian slang for a remote place in the Outback); other destinations in the area include the opal-mining town of Lightning Ridge and, in the far west of the state almost at the South Australian border, the mining settlement of Broken Hill, a surprisingly gracious city surrounded by the desert landscape of Mad Max.

Out beyond the Blue Mountains, the Great Western Highway takes you as far as Bathurst; from there the Mid-Western Highway goes on to join the Sturt Highway, which heads, via Mildura on the Victorian border, to Adelaide. Any route west is eventually obliged to cross the Newell Highway, the direct route between Melbourne and Brisbane that cuts straight across the heart of central New South Wales.

Inland New South Wales still has a fairly extensive rail network, although the operator, Countrylink (13 22 32 for reservations, www.countrylink.info), has replaced many train services with buses. The train journey from Sydney to Broken Hill ($260 return; 13hr each way) is a great way to see the vast desert in air-conditioned comfort – if you’re lucky the train will pass through one of the huge sand storms that ravage the region from time to time. A one-month Backtracker pass ($275) with Countrylink will get you just about anywhere in the state. Greyhound buses run through Scone, Tamworth, Armidale and Glen Innes en route between Sydney and Brisbane via the New England Highway, and Kean’s Travel services Armidale, Uralla, Walcha and Tamworth on its way from Port Macquarie to Scone.
**INLAND NSW HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Tamworth Country Music Festival** Fans from all over the world descend on Tamworth for this famous annual festival.
- **Bald Rock** Climb one of the largest granite monoliths in the world for unbeatable views.
- **Warrumbungle National Park** The rugged Warrumbungle National Park is especially beautiful in spring, when the wild flowers are in bloom.
- **Gunnedah** Home to one of the healthiest koala populations in the state, and a good place to spot them in the wild.
- **Broken Hill** Take a mine tour, visit the Royal Flying Doctor Service or browse the art galleries of this gracious Outback town.
- **Menindee Lakes** Boat through flooded red gum trees among hundreds of water birds in this magical desert oasis.
- **Mutawintji National Park** Aboriginal rock art is the main draw of the remote Mutawintji National Park.

**MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN INLAND NSW**

The ghosts of mining towns that died when the precious minerals ran out are scattered all over Australia. **BROKEN HILL**, on the other hand, celebrated its centenary in 1988, and its famous “Line of Lode”, one of the world’s major lead-silver-zinc ore bodies and the city’s raison d’être, still has a little life left in it after being mined continuously for over 110 years.

Almost 1200km west of Sydney and about 500km east of Adelaide, this surprisingly gracious Outback mining-town – with a population of around 21,000 and a feel and architecture reminiscent of the South Australian capital – manages to create a welcome splash of green in the harsh desert landscape that surrounds it. Extensive revegetation schemes around Broken Hill have created grasslands that, apart from being visually pleasing, help contain the dust that used to make the residents’ lives a misery. It’s aided by a reliable water supply – secured for the first time only in 1953 – via a one-hundred-kilometre pipeline from the Darling River at Menindee.

Inevitably, Broken Hill revolves around the mines, but in the last decade it has also evolved into a thriving arts centre, thanks to the initiative of the Brushmen of the Bush, a painting school founded by local artists Hugh Schulz, Jack Absalom, John Pickup and the late Pro Hart and Eric Minchin. Diverse talents have been attracted to Broken Hill, and their works are displayed in galleries scattered all over town. Some may be a bit on the tacky side, but others are excellent, and it’s well worth devoting some time to gallery browsing.

Remember to adjust your watch here: Broken Hill operates on South Australian Central Standard Time, half an hour behind the rest of New South Wales. All local transport schedules are in CST, but you should always check. The city is also a convenient base for touring far-northwest New South Wales and nearby areas in South Australia.

**COASTAL QUEENSLAND**

Running for over 2500 kilometres from the New South Wales border to Australia’s northernmost tip at Cape York, **Coastal Queensland** contains almost everything that lures visitors to Australia. Set down in the more developed southeastern corner, the state capital **Brisbane** is a relaxed city with a lively social scene and good work possibilities. South between here and the border, the **Gold Coast** is Australia’s prime holiday destination, with a reputation founded on some of the country’s best surf – though this now takes second place to a belt of beach-front high-rises, theme parks, and the host of lively bars and nightclubs surrounding Surfers Paradise. An hour inland, the **Gold Coast Hinterland**’s green heights offer a chain of national parks packed with wildlife and stunning views. Heading north of Brisbane, fruit and vegetable plantations behind the gentle **Sunshine Coast** benefit from rich volcanic soils and a subtropical climate, overlooked by the spiky, isolated peaks of the Glass House Mountains. Down on the coast, **Noosa** is an up-and-coming resort town with more famous surf. Beyond looms **Fraser Island**, whose surrounding waters host an annual whale migration and where huge wooded dunes, freshwater lakes and sculpted coloured sands form the backdrop for exciting safaris.

North of Fraser the humidity and temperature begin to rise as you head into the tropics. Though there’s still an ever-narrowing farming strip hugging the coast, the Great Dividing Range edges coastwards as it progresses north, dry at first, but gradually acquiring a green sward which culminates in the steamy, rainforest-draped scenery around **Cairns**. Along the way are scores of beaches, archipelagos of islands and a further wealth of national parks, some – such as Hinchenbrook Island – with superb walking trails. Those with work visas can also recharge their bank balances along the way by fruit and vegetable picking around the towns of Bundaberg, Bowen, Ayr and Innisfail. Moving north of Cairns, rainforested ranges ultimately give way to the savannah of the huge, triangular **Cape York Peninsula**, a sparsely populated setting for what is widely regarded as the most rugged 4WD adventure in the country.

Offshore, the tropical coast is marked by the appearance of the **Great Barrier Reef**, among the most extensive coral complexes in the world. The southern reaches, out from the towns of Bundaberg and 1770, are peppered with sand islands or cays, while further north there’s a wealth of beautiful granite islands between the coast and reef, covered in thick pine forests and fringed in white sand – the pick of which are the Whitsundays near Airlie Beach and Magnetic Island off Townsville. Many of these islands are accessible
on day-trips, though some offer everything from campsites to luxury resorts if you fancy a change of pace from tearing up and down the coast. The reef itself can be explored from boat excursions of between a few hours and several days’ duration; scuba divers are well catered for, though the best of the coral is within easy snorkelling range of the surface.

**The quick Rough Guide to Australia**

✱ **Gold Coast** The beaches, bars and theme parks of Australia’s prime domestic holiday destination provide raucous thrills around the clock.

✱ **Glass House Mountains National Park** One of the few really special places on the Sunshine Coast; it’s worth climbing at least one of the dramatic pinnacles for the fantastic views.

✱ **Fraser Island** The giant dunes and pristine lakes of beautiful Fraser Island are best explored on an action-packed 4WD safari.

✱ **Great Barrier Reef** Scuba diving is the best way to explore one of the world’s most beautiful coral complexes.

✱ **The Whitsundays** Lying inside the Great Barrier Reef, the rainforested peaks and long white beaches of the Whitsunday Islands offer some of Australia’s most picturesque cruising.

✱ **The Sanctuary at Mission Beach** Rare cassowaries inhabit the rainforest at this outstanding eco-friendly retreat.

**COASTAL QLD HIGHLIGHTS**

Most of us have little use for 4WDs but in a particular corner of Australia these all-terrain machines can provide the sort of adventure they were truly built for. Cape York, Australia’s northernmost point, is over a 1000km from Cairns, with challenging driving that will demand concentration and an understanding of your vehicle’s abilities as you gingerly inch across tidal creeks inhabited by crocodiles.

From Cairns head out along the scenic Captain Cook Highway to Cooktown: the last settlement of any size on your ‘Trip to the Tip’. Choose either the coastal route via Cape Tribulation, where Cook’s Endeavour nearly sank in 1770 or, for a real adventure, the infamous “CREB Track” out of Daintree. Here’s your chance to play with the transfer levers as you run along the CREB’s tyre-clawing gradients to the Lion’s Den Hotel, a classic “bush pub” dating back to 1875.

Past Cooktown the Lakefield National Park is Queensland’s answer to Kakadu, with “magnetic” anthills aligned north–south to avoid overheating in the noonday sun, 180 species of birds and a rich colony of flying foxes.

But there’s more. A tough, creek-ridden diversion leads east to the Iron Range National Park, where the creeper-festooned rainforests don’t recede until Chilli Beach campsite on the Coral Sea. Ecologically this extraordinary park has more in common with New Guinea and is famed for the nocturnal green python and brilliant blue-and-red eclectus parrot.

Back on the main road die-hards avoid the newer bypasses to follow the Old Telegraph Track’s numerous creek crossings. Eventually you arrive at Twin Falls, with its safe swimming holes, before reaching the 100-metre-wide Jardine River, a once demanding crossing now made easier by the nearby ferry. Then suddenly the road runs out near a rocky headland overlooking the Torres Straits. A sign marks the tip of mainland Australia and the end of your journey.
OUTBACK QUEENSLAND

Outback Queensland, the west of the state, is thinly populated by tenacious farming communities swinging precariously between famine and survival, and seems hard to reconcile with Queensland’s lush, wet tropics. The population is concentrated in the relatively fertile highlands along the Great Dividing Range, which run low behind the coast; on the far side, featureless plains slide over a hot horizon into the fringes of South Australia and the Northern Territory. Untouched by overseas visitors, the only places attracting tourists in any numbers are the Stockman’s Hall of Fame at Longreach, the oases of Carnarvon Gorge in the Central Highlands and the north-west’s Lawn Hill Gorge. But elsewhere the opportunities for exploration are immense, with precious stones, fossils, waterholes and Aboriginal art in abundance. The region is also responsible for producing two of Australia’s best-known icons: Banjo Paterson first performed *Waltzing Matilda* in a hotel in Winton; and the same town tussles with nearby Longreach for the right to claim the honour of being the birthplace of Qantas airlines.

Choosing where to go is often determined by the most convenient starting point. **Main roads and trains** head west from the coast at Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville and Cairns; **buses** from Brisbane, Cairns and Townsville cross outback Queensland as they head interstate, but otherwise there’s little in the way of public transport. If you’re **driving**, your vehicle must be well maintained and you should carry essential spares, as even main centres often lack replacement parts.

Unless you’re experienced and well equipped, you’ll find that western summers effectively prohibit travel, as searing temperatures and violent flash floods can isolate areas especially in the Channel Country on the far side of the Great Dividing Range for days or weeks on end. Consequently, many tour companies, tourist offices and motels simply shut up shop between November and March, or at least during January and February. On the other hand, water revives dormant seeds and fast-growing desert flowers, which cover the ground to the horizon in good years. At other times, expect hot days and cool nights, plenty of dust and sparse landscapes.

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BRISBANE TO COOPERS CREEK AND BIRDSVILLE

The thousand-plus-kilometre haul from the comforts of the coast to Queensland’s remote southwestern corner dumps you tired and dusty on the South Australian border, with some exciting routes down the Birdsville and Strzelecki tracks or through the hostile red barrier of the Simpson Desert yet to come. There are two ultimate targets: the outpost of Birdsville, with its annual horse races, and the Dig Tree at Nappa Merrie on Cooper Creek, monument to the tragic Burke and Wills expedition across the continent in 1860-61. The highway scenery is as bleak as you’d expect: after crossing the fertile disc of the Darling Downs, the country withers and dries, marooning communities in isolation and hardship. Detour north through Queensland’s Central Highlands, however, and you’ll find a landscape peppered with forested sandstone gorges and the Aboriginal sites at Carnarvon National Park – worth the journey even if you don’t go any further.

From Brisbane, the most practical route through the area is on the Warrego Highway, through Toowoomba, Roma and Charleville towards Quilpie. Roma is the jumping-off point for the highlands and from Quilpie there are largely unsurfaced roads to Birdsville and the Dig Tree. The twice-weekly Westlander train runs in this direction from Brisbane to Charleville, as do daily buses en route from Brisbane to Mount Isa. Alternatively, there’s the southern Cunningham Highway via Warwick and Goondiwindi (the limit of bus services in this direction) to Cunnamulla, beyond which lesser roads head across oil, gas and opal fields towards the Dig Tree – you might need a 4WD vehicle to get this far.
OUTBACK QLD HIGHLIGHTS

✱ Artesian hot spa at Mitchell The hot springs in single-street Mitchell make for an enjoyable wallow on a cold winter’s morning.

✱ Carnarvon Gorge Reach fantastic Aboriginal art sites with a hike through the verdant Carnarvon Gorge.

✱ Crayfish Derby at Winton The winner nets $1500 and the runner-up gets to eat all the competitors at the biennial Australian Crayfish Derby, held in September in the archetypal frontier town of Winton.

✱ Lawn Hill Gorge Taking to the water is a wonderful way to explore the lush Lawn Hill Gorge, a spectacular Outback oasis.

✱ Undara Lava Tubes Explore the massive, contorted lava tubes at Undara, formed by a volcanic eruption 190,000 years ago.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN OUTBACK QLD

Come September, locals flee the dusty desert township of Birdsville, as a six-thousand-strong crowd descends for a weekend of hard drinking and, if they sober up for long enough to work out the odds, the chance to win a packet on the ponies running in the Birdsville Races. This is the archetypal, good-natured Aussie piss-up, in a bizarre Outback setting. The racegoers are a mix of young cowpokes making the most of their one opportunity of the year to whoop it up and meet folk they’re not related to, and townies who have just driven 1400km from the coast on atrocious roads to get there. Even by Australian standards, that’s a long way to go for a drink. Although you might see the odd fist-fight between drunken mates on account of the effort involved in reaching Birdsville, nobody has anything to prove by the time they arrive, and there’s nothing left for it but to down a slab and party.

The Birdsville Races (officially known as the Birdsville Cup Carnival) kick off on Friday, though most people skip the trackside opening ceremonies in favour of spending the day easing themselves onto a liquid diet. After dark, the town fires up in fairground mode, with a host of sideshow attractions – whip-cracking competitions, guess my weight, arm wrestling, you name it – setting up along the main street. A huge, mainly male crowd materializes at the fundraising auction, impatiently watching all sorts of farm junk going under the hammer as they wait for the real attraction: the draw at the end to win a T-shirt off the back of a stripper.

Saturday is the day to hit the racetrack – a baking hot, shadeless stretch of dust and gravel 3km west of town. The races end mid-afternoon, when everyone retires for a wash-and-brush-up before heading back to town to celebrate – or drown their sorrows.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

For the majority of Australians the Northern Territory – usually known as “the Territory”, or simply “NT” – embodies the antithesis of the country’s cushy suburban rim. The name itself conjures up a distant, frontier province – and, to an extent, this is still the case. Only around one percent of Australians inhabit an area covering a fifth of the continent, which partly explains why the Territory has never achieved full statehood. Territorians play up the extremes of climate, distance and isolation that mould their temperaments and accentuate their tough, maverick image as outsiders in a land of “southerners”. The Territory attracts those wanting to escape their past, and it’s a place where people ask few questions: most people were born elsewhere and that Australian institution, the “character”, is in his element here, propping up the bars and bolstering the more palatable myths of the Territory’s frontier history. The real “Crocodile Dundee” met his end here, and episodes like regular croc attacks and highway psycho killers help augment the Territory’s untamed, Outback mystique.

The Territory’s boundaries include some of Australia’s oldest sites of Aboriginal occupation and some of the last regions to be colonized by Europeans. Darwin, the Territory’s capital, is a prospering tropical town, while travellers from around the world flock to explore the Top End (as tropical NT is known), primarily Kakadu National Park’s wildlife, waterways and Aboriginal art sites. Adjacent Arnhem Land, to the east, is also Aboriginal land – and out of bounds to casual visitors, although many tours now visit this never-colonized wilderness of scattered communities. Heading south you arrive at Katherine, where the main attraction is the nearby gorges within the Nitmiluk National Park.

By the time you reach Tennant Creek, 650km south of Katherine, you’ve left the interminable light woodland of the Top End and have begun to pass pastoral tablelands on the way to the central deserts surrounding Alice Springs. By no means the dusty Outback town many expect, Alice Springs makes an excellent base to explore the region’s natural wonders, of which that famous monolith, Uluru – or Ayers Rock – 450km to the southwest, is but one of many. This is one of the best areas to learn about the Aborigines of the Western Desert, among the last to come into contact with European settlers and the most studied by anthropologists.
DARWIN AND THE TOP END

Darwin, the Territory's capital, lies midway along Australia’s convoluted northern coast. The majority of tourists come up here to visit nearby Kakadu and Litchfield national parks, continue their Australian circuit or maybe fly on to Indonesia. However, whilst the city possesses little to detain short-term visitors, there are a few attractions worth seeking out and plenty more within half a day’s drive. The Mary River National Park offers a chance to explore a croc-infested wetland environment not accessible in Kakadu, while to the east, little-known and never colonized Arnhem Land is slowly opening up to tourism. In the southwest, the Daly River region comprises small Aboriginal communities and riverside fishing haunts.

SOME HISTORY

Setting up a colonial settlement on Australia’s remote northern shores was never going to be easy, and it took four abortive attempts in various locations over a period of 45 years before Darwin (originally called Palmerston) was finally established in 1869 by the new South Australian state keen to exploit its recently acquired “northern territory”. The early colonists’ aim was to pre-empt foreign occupation and create a trading post – a “new Singapore” for the British Empire.

Things get off to a promising start with the arrival in 1872 of the Overland Telegraph Line (OTL), following the route pioneered by explorer John McDouall Stuart in 1862, that finally linked Australia with the rest of the world. Gold was discovered at Pine Creek while pylons were being erected for the OTL, prompting a goldrush and the construction of a southbound railway. After the goldrush ran its course, a cyclone flattened the depressed town in 1897, but by 1911, when Darwin adopted its present name, the rough-and-ready frontier outpost had grown into a small government centre, servicing the mines and properties of the Top End. Yet even by 1937, after being razed by a second cyclone, the town had a population of just 1500.

The first boom came with World War II after Japanese air raids destroyed Darwin once again at a cost of hundreds of lives, though this information was suppressed at the time, as was news of systematic looting by the army. The fear of invasion and an urgent need to get troops to the war zone led to the swift construction of the Stuart Highway, the first reliable land-link between Darwin and the rest of the country.

NORTHERN TERRITORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Aboriginal culture You won’t get all the answers, but the Territory is the best place to ask.
- Top End crocs The Mary River Wetlands have the highest concentration of crocodiles in Australia.
- Kakadu National Park Australia’s largest national park is home to fascinating ancient rock art and an extraordinary diversity of flora and fauna.
- Katherine Gorge Cruise or canoe beneath the orange walls of this spectacular gorge system.
- Shopping for Aboriginal art in Alice Springs A cluster of galleries in and around Todd Mall make finding a special souvenir easy.
- Four-wheel driving in the Red Centre Hop into your 4WD and explore the network of dirt tracks that radiate outwards from Alice Springs.
- Kings Canyon The two-hour walk around Kings Canyon, with a swim in a secluded waterhole halfway, is a classic.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN NT

As you cruise westwards along the Lasseter Highway, you get your first glimpse of Uluru over cinnamon-red dunes while still 50km distant. Slowly the ochre-coloured monolith invades the empty horizon; it’s hard to look at anything else. Then, just past the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, you turn a bend, and suddenly it fills your field of vision. You simply have to stop and take a picture.

The Rock means different things to different people. To the Pitjantjarra people who’ve lived in its shadow for 20,000 years, “Uluru” is actually the name of a seasonal waterhole near the summit, formerly revealed only to initiates of the Mala wallaby clan during secret ceremonies. To them the mountain is no Mecca-like shrine, but a vital resource-rich landmark at the intersection of various trails in the region. These “songlines” criss-cross the desert and any conspicuous natural features found along them were put into songs celebrating the “Dreaming” or Creation, to help memorize the way and so “learn the country.”

To most tourists Uluru – or Ayers Rock (as it was named by explorer William Gosse in 1873 to honour his benefactor) – is still a climb to be conquered or a radiant landmark to be photographed en masse from the Sunset Viewing Area. But a far better way of getting into the spirit of the place is to take the nine-kilometre walk through waist-high grass around its base. Geologically the massif is a series of near-vertical strata inexplicably thrust up above all around it. Looking rather like a weathered loaf of sliced bread, its grooves and cliffs vary with your perspective. Approaching the “slices” end-on reveals smooth gullies carved into the rock and feeding waterholes like Mutijulu Springs shaded by groves of casuarina oaks. A few kilometres further the steep flanks harbour caves and bizarre scalloped formations, some of them sacred sites fenced off from visitors: every bend in the track offers another startling profile. When you’re back at the start of the circuit, hot and sticky from the sun, you can be satisfied that you’ve experienced the Rock and not merely stood on top of it.
Western Australia (WA) covers a third of the Australian continent; almost the size of India, yet with less than half a percent of that country’s population. Conscious of its isolation from the more populous eastern states or indeed anywhere else, WA is ironically the most suburban of Australian states: almost all of its 1.9 million inhabitants live within 200km of Perth and most of the rest live in communities strung along the coastline.

Perth itself retains the leisure-oriented vitality of a young city, while the port of Fremantle resonates with a largely European charm. South of Perth, the wooded hills and trickling streams of the southwest support the state’s expanding wine-growing and holiday-making area, and the giant eucalyptus forests around Pemberton further ripen a land fed by generous winter rains. East of the forests is the state’s intensively farmed wheat belt, an interminable man-made prairie struggling against the saline soils it has created. Along the Southern Ocean’s stunning storm-washed coastline, Albany is the primary settlement, part summer holiday, part retirement resort; the dramatic granite peaks of the Stirling Ranges just visible from its hilltops are among the most botanically diverse habitats on the planet. Further east, past Esperance on the edge of the Great Australian Bight, is the Nullarbor Plain, while inland are the Eastern Goldfields around Kalgoorlie, the only inland town of any size and sole survivor of the century-old mineral boom on which WA’s prosperity is still firmly based.

While the temperate southwest of WA has been tamed by colonization, the north of the state is where you’ll discover the raw appeal of the Outback. The virtually unpopulated inland deserts are blanketed with spinifex and support remote Aboriginal and mining communities, while the west coast’s winds abate once you venture into the tropics north of Shark Bay, home of the amicable dolphins at Monkey Mia. From here, the mineral-rich Pilbara region fills the state’s northwest shoulder with the dramatic gorges of the Karijini National Park at its core. Visitors also home in on the submarine spectacle of the easily accessible Ningaloo Reef, surrounding the North West Cape’s beaches – some consider it superior to Queensland’s Barrier Reef.

Northeast of the Pilbara, Broome, once the world’s pearling capital, is indeed a jewel in the cyclone-swept coastline of the rugged “Nor’west”, and an ideal preliminary to the Kimberley’s wilderness and hard-won cattle country. Cut off in the wet season, the Kimberley is regarded as Australia’s last frontier, its convoluted and barely accessible coasts washed by huge tides and occupied only by secluded pearling operations, a handful of Aboriginal communities and crocodiles. On the way to the Northern Territory border is the surreal enigma of the World Heritage-listed Bungle Bungles massif – one of WA’s greatest natural wonders.

Travellers never fail to underestimate the massive distances in WA, which is half the size of the USA. If you hope to explore any significant part of the state’s million and a half square kilometres, and in particular the remote Northwest, your own vehicle is essential, although you’ll get to the most interesting places by combining local tours with buses. Either way, WA offers an essential mix of Outback grandeur, albeit more dispersed than elsewhere, and continues to attract tourists keen to break away from “the East”, as the rest of Australia is known in these parts.

WA’s climate is a seasonal mix of temperate, arid and tropical. Winters are cool in the south and wet in the southwest corner, while at this time the far north basks in daily temperatures of around 30°C, with no rain and tolerable humidity: this is the tropical dry season. Come the summer, the enervating wet season or “Wet” (from December to March) washes out the north while the rest of the state, particularly inland areas, crackles in the mid-40s°C heat. The southern coast is the only retreat for the heat-struck; the southwest coast is cooled by dependable afternoon sea breezes, known in Perth as the “Fremantle Doctor”.

WA is eight hours ahead of GMT, one and a half hours behind the Northern Territory and South Australia and two hours behind the other eastern states. From October to mid-March time differences increase by an hour, as New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, ACT and South Australia adopt daylight saving.
WESTERN AUSTRALIA HIGHLIGHTS

✱ Fremantle Eclectic, authentic and alive – worth more than the usual day-trip.
✱ Tall Timber Country Hike or cycle forest tracks, paddle the Blackwood River or drive among magnificent karri forests.
✱ South Coast Between Walpole and Cape Le Grand you’ll find perfect sandy bays squeezed between granite headlands pounded by the Southern Ocean.
✱ Shark Bay There’s much more here than the regimented dolphin visits at Monkey Mia.
✱ Ningaloo Reef “A barrier reef without the barriers”.
✱ The Kimberley Barely populated and still untamed, the Kimberley is Australia’s Alaska.
✱ Bungle Bungles Accessible only by 4WD or air, but the gorges and beehive domes of the Bungles are worth the effort.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN WA

Canyoneering through Karijini National Park is an Indiana Jones-style adventure through a rarely seen wonderland of towering red rock canyons, trickling waterfalls and hidden pools. Be prepared for half a day of walking then crawling, wading then swimming, climbing along ledges and up waterfalls and then jumping into freezing pools.

Part of the experience includes Knox Gorge; descending the steep track into the ravine you’ve little idea of what awaits ahead. Paths and ledges peter out and you’re forced to swim across a couple of pools until the walls narrow suddenly into a shoulder-wide slot that never sees direct sunlight. You enter the chasm, bridging over jammed boulders, deafened and disoriented by sunlight. You enter the chasm, bridging over jammed boulders, deafened and disoriented by water running through your legs until it seems there is no way ahead. There is, but to continue you must hurtle blindly down the “do-or-die” Knox Slide into an unseen plunge pool below. Amazed that you’ve survived that, you now make a six-metre jump or abseil off the next waterfall to emerge into the broad sunlit waters of Red Gorge, the park’s main canyon.

From here you swim, wade and scramble over the debris washed down by the last cyclone until you reach the Four Gorges area. Hundreds of feet above, tourists at Oxer’s Lookout point and stare, wondering how on earth you got there. Meanwhile, you’re wondering how you’re going to get out. The secret is to ascend the stepped ledges alongside Weano Falls and follow the canyon upstream until you emerge at Handrail Pool in the regular tourist zone. Once you’re out, all that remains is to stagger over to Oxer’s Lookout yourself and peer down in amazement at what you’ve just achieved.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

South Australia, the driest state of the driest continent, is split into two very distinct halves. The long-settled southern part, watered by the Murray River, and with Adelaide as its cosmopolitan centre, enjoys a Mediterranean climate that makes it tremendously fertile and has been thoroughly tamed. The northern half, arid and depopulated, most definitely has not and as you head further north the temperature hots up to such an extreme that by Coober Pedy people live underground to escape the searing summer temperatures.

Most of southeastern South Australia lies within three hours’ drive of Adelaide. Food and especially wine are among its chief pleasures: this is prime grape-growing and wine-making country. As well as wineries the Fleurieu Peninsula, just south of Adelaide, has a string of fine beaches, while nearby Kangaroo Island is a great place to see Australian wildlife at its unfettered best. Facing Adelaide across the Investigator Strait, the Yorke Peninsula is primarily an agricultural area, preserving a little copper-mining history and offering great fishing. The superb wineries of the Barossa Valley, originally settled by German immigrants in the nineteenth century, are only an hour northeast from Adelaide on the Sturt Highway, the main road to Sydney. This crosses the Murray River at Blanchetown and follows the fertile Riverland region to the New South Wales border.

Following the southeast coast along the Princes Highway, you can head towards Melbourne via the extensive coastal Coorong lagoon system and enjoyable seaside towns such as Robe, before exiting the state at Mount Gambier, with its crater lakes. The inland trawl via the Dukes Highway is faster but far less interesting. Heading north from Adelaide, there are old copper-mining towns to explore at Kapunda and Burra, the area known as the mid-north, which also encompasses the Clare Valley, a quieter, more down-to-earth wine centre than the Barossa Valley.

In contrast with the gentle and cultured southeast, the remainder of South Australia – with the exception of the relatively refined Eyre Peninsula and its strikingly scenic west coast – is unremittingly harsh desert, a naked country of vast horizons, salt lakes, glazed gibber plains and ancient mountain ranges. Although it’s tempting to scud over the forbidding distances quickly, you’ll miss the essence of this introspective and subtle landscape by hurrying. For every predictable, monotonous highway there’s a dirt alternative, which may
be physically draining but enables you to get closer to this precarious environment. The folded red rocks of the central Flinders Ranges and Coober Pedy’s post-apocalyptic scenery are on most agendas and could be worked into a sizeable circuit, but overall the Outback lacks any real destinations. Making the most of the journey is what counts here though – the fabled routes to Oodnadatta, Birdsville and Innamincka are still real adventures, and not necessarily only for 4WDs.

ADELAIDE

ADELAIDE is always thought of as a gracious city and an easy place to live in, although despite a population of around one million and a veneer of sophistication, it still has the feel of an overgrown country town. It’s a pretty place, laid out on either side of the Torrens River, ringed with a green belt of parks and set against the rolling hills of the Mount Lofty Ranges. During the hot, dry summer the parklands are kept green by irrigation from the waters of the Murray River, on which the city depends, though there’s always a sense that the rawness of the Outback is waiting to take over.

The original occupants of the Adelaide plains were the Kaurna people, whose traditional way of life was destroyed within twenty years of European settlement. After a long struggle with Governor John Hindmarsh, who wanted to build around a harbour, the colony’s surveyor-general, Colonel William Light, got his wish for an inland city with a strong connection to the river, formed around wide and spacious avenues and squares.

Postwar immigration provided the final element missing from Light’s plan: the human one. Italians now make up the city’s biggest non-Anglo cultural group, and in the summers, Mediterranean-style alfresco eating and drinking lend the city a vaguely European air. Not surprisingly, one of Adelaide’s chief delights is its food and wine, with South Australian vintages in every cellar, and restaurants and cafés as varied as those in Sydney and Melbourne, only much cheaper.

Adelaide may not be an obvious destination in itself, but its free-and-easy lifestyle and liberal traditions make it a great place for a relaxed break on your way up to the Northern Territory or across to Western Australia.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA HIGHLIGHTS

✱ Adelaide Festival of Arts
  The country’s best-known and most innovative arts festival.

✱ Kangaroo Island
  Spectacular scenery and a huge range of wildlife.

✱ Murray River
  Stay in a houseboat on the beautiful Murray River, lined with majestic river red gums.

✱ The Nullarbor Plain
  Drive across – or, even better, catch a train – and appreciate how vast Australia is.

✱ Coober Pedy
  The inhabitants of scorching Coober Pedy live underground to escape the heat of summer.

✱ Wilpena Pound
  The main attraction of the Flinders Ranges National Park is the huge natural basin of Wilpena Pound.

✱ The Strzelecki, Birdsville and Oodnadatta tracks
  Fill up your tank and head off into the Outback on one of Australia’s fabled journeys.

✱ Lake Eyre
  This massive salt lake has filled up with water only four times in over a hundred and thirty years.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN SA

While it’s still said that “real men drink beer”, nowadays many a true-blue Aussie bloke can tell his Shiraz from his Cabernet, his Semilont from his Riesling. And a wine-tasting weekend is now as much part of the Australian lifestyle as a barbecue in the backyard. By far the best-known wine region in Australia is the Barossa Valley, an hour’s drive northeast of Adelaide; it is also one of Australia’s oldest – some of the vines planted over 150 years ago still bear fruit today. The valley’s Mediterranean climate and soil are perfect for producing full-bodied reds and robust whites. Almost every Barossa winery has a Shiraz or Shiraz blend on their books – strong, dark wines with a full-fruited aroma and a round, velvety structure, while Riesling is the staple among the Barossa whites, rounded and full-flavoured with passionfruit and lime aromas.

The Winemaker Trail takes you through Barossa’s picturesque hamlets and across rolling hills to its sixty wineries, many of which offer tastings and cellar door sales. Among the big-name establishments, Wolf Blass and Jacob’s Creek are perennially popular, but also worth checking out is Bethany Wines, run by the same family for six generations, and up-and-coming Two Hands.

For the novice, wine-tasting can be a daunting experience. Try the wine in the order suggested by the winery, moving from whites and sparkling to reds, following the five S’s of wine-tasting: See (study the colour); Swirl (allows the wine to reds, following the five S’s of wine-tasting: See (study the colour); Swirl (allows the wine to breathe); Sniff (our sense of smell is more acute than our sense of taste); Sip; Savour (swirl around in the mouth to appreciate the flavour). Swallowing is optional; if you’re visiting a lot of wineries it’s probably better to spit out. Chances are you will walk away with a few bottles of your favourite — and a brand new vocabulary to boot.
MELBOURNE AND AROUND

MELBOURNE is Australia’s second-largest city, with a population of 3.7 million, around half a million less than Sydney. Rivalry between the two cities – in every sphere from cricket to business – is on an almost childish level. In purely monetary terms, Sydney is clearly in the ascendency, having stolen a march on Melbourne as the nation’s financial centre. However, as Melburnians never tire of pointing out, they have the incredible good fortune to inhabit what is often described as “one of the world’s most liveable cities”, and while Melbourne may lack a truly stunning natural setting or in-your-face sights, its subtle charms grow on all who spend time here, making it an undeniably pleasant place to live, and enjoyable to visit, too.

In many ways, Melbourne is the most European of all Australian cities: magnificent landscaped gardens and parks provide green spaces near the centre, while beneath the skyscrapers of the Central Business District (CBD), an understorey of solid, Victorian-era facades ranged along tree-lined boulevards present the city on a more human scale. The European influence is perhaps most obvious in winter, as trams rattle past warm cafés and bookshops, and promenaders dress stylishly against the chill. Not that Europe has supplied the city’s only influences: large-scale immigration since World War II has shaken up the city’s formerly self-absorbed, parochial WASP mindset for good. Whole villages have come here from Lebanon, Turkey, Vietnam and all over Europe, most especially from Greece, furnishing the well-worn statistic that Melbourne is the third-largest Greek city behind Athens and Thessaloniki. Not surprisingly, the immigrant blend has transformed the city into a foodie mecca, where tucking into a different cuisine each night – or new hybrids of East, West and South – is one of the great treats.

Melbourne’s strong claim to being the nation’s cultural capital is well founded: laced with a healthy dash of counterculture, the city’s artistic life flourishes, culminating in the highbrow Melbourne International Arts Festival for two weeks in October, and its slightly more offbeat [and shoestring] cousin, the Fringe Festival. The city also takes pride in its leading role in Australian literary life, based around the Writers’ Festival in August. Throughout the year, there are heavyweight seasons of classical music and theatre, a wacky array of small galleries, and enough art-house movies to last a lifetime. Sport too, especially Australian Rules Football, is almost a religion here, while the Melbourne Cup in November is a public holiday, celebrated with gusto.

Melbourne is an excellent base for day-trips out into the surrounding countryside. Closest to Melbourne are the quaint villages of the eucalypt-covered Dandenong Ranges, while the scenic Yarra Valley, in the northeast, is Victoria’s answer to South Australia’s Barossa Valley, and one of many wine-producing areas around Melbourne. To the south, huge Port Phillip Bay is encircled by the arms of the Bellarine and Mornington peninsulas. Mornington Peninsula offers more opportunity for wine tasting, and in addition to bucolic scenery there are beaches galore, the windswelt ones facing the sea popular with surfers, while the placid waters of the bay are good for swimming and messing about in boats. Geelong and most of the Bellarine Peninsula are maybe not quite so captivating, but Queenscliff near the narrow entrance to Port Phillip Bay, with its beautiful, refurbished grand hotels, is a stylish (and expensive) weekend getaway.

Melbourne boasts a reasonably cool climate (although January and February are prone to barbaric hot spells when temperatures can climb into the forties with the threat of bushfires which may close off certain areas to the public).
**Victoria**

Australia’s second-smallest state, **Victoria** is the most densely populated and industrialized, and has a wide variety of attractions packed into a small area. Although you’re never too far from civilization, there are plenty of opportunities to sample the state’s wilder days when it was a centre for gold prospectors and bushrangers. All routes in the state radiate from Melbourne, and no point is much more than seven hours’ drive away. Yet, all most visitors see of Victoria apart from its cultured capital is the Great Ocean Road, a winding 280km of spectacular coastal scenery. Others may venture to the idyllic Wilsons Promontory National Park (the “Prom”), a couple of hours away on the coast of the mainly dairy region of Gippsland, or to the Goldfields, where the nineteenth-century goldrushes left their mark in the grandiose architecture of old mining-towns such as Ballarat and Bendigo.

There is, however, a great deal more to the state. Marking the end of the Great Dividing Range, the massive sandstone ranges of the Grampians, with their Aboriginal rock paintings and dazzling array of springtime flora, rise from the monotonous wheatfields of the Wimmera region and the wool country of the western district. To the north of the Grampians is the wide, flat region of the Mallee – scrub, sand dunes and dry lakes heading to the Murray River, where Mildura is an irrigated oasis supporting orchards and vineyards. In complete contrast, the Victorian Alps in the northeast of the state have several winter ski slopes, high country that provides perfect bushwalking and horse-riding territory in summer. In the foothills and plains below, where bushranger Ned Kelly once roamed, are some of Victoria’s finest wineries (wine buffs should pick up a copy of the excellent hundred-page brochure, Wine Regions of Victoria, available from the visitor information centre in Melbourne and other towns). Beach culture is alive and well on this coastline with some of the best surfing in Australia.

The only real drawback is the frequently cursed climate. Winter is mild, and the occasional heatwaves in summer are mercifully limited to a few days at most (though they can create bushfires that last for weeks), but the problem is that of unpredictability. Cool, rainy “English” weather can descend in any season, and spring and autumn days can be immoderately hot. But even this can be turned to advantage: as the local saying goes, if you don’t like the weather, just wait ten minutes and it’ll change.

Public transport, by road and rail, is with **V/Line** and subsidiary country bus lines. However, using your own vehicle is definitely a more convenient option, as train and bus services are fairly infrequent and quite a few places can be reached only with difficulty, if at all.

### **Melbourne Highlights**

- **Chinatown** The narrow streets of Melbourne’s Chinatown haven’t changed much since the nineteenth century, when a goldrush brought every corner of the world to this cosmopolitan city.
- **Roller-blading in St Kilda** The beachside suburb of St Kilda is an ideal place for roller-blading, especially along the palm-lined boulevard.
- **Seal Rocks** Sail out to Seal Rocks, part of Phillip Island Reserve, to see the largest known colony of Australian fur seals.
- **Yarra Valley** Victoria’s answer to South Australia’s Barossa Valley boasts pretty scenery and some great wineries.
- **Healesville Sanctuary** Visit the beautifully located bushland zoo and wildlife sanctuary for injured and orphaned animals.
- **Riding Puffing Billy through the Dandenongs** Enjoy the quaint villages and shady forests of the Dandenong Range with a ride on the old Puffing Billy steam train.

### **Making the Most of Your Time in Melbourne**

A visit to Queen Victoria Market, or “Vic Market”, located on the northern fringe of the city centre, is a superb introduction to Melbourne’s vibrant food culture and will have you rubbing shoulders with everyone from government ministers to the city’s best chefs. Running for 128 years, it’s one of the oldest markets in Australia, and is live-liest on the weekends when buskers compete with spruiking stallholders for your attention. For foodies there are three main areas: the Deli section, the Meat and Fish Hall, and the fruit and vegetable market. The Deli is characterized by its strong smells and its shops selling regional specialties such as fine local cheeses, including the Jindi Triple Cream Brie and Milawa’s tasty goat varieties, as well as lesser-known fusions like kangaroo biltong (South African-style dried meat). Arriving hungry you’ll find the free tastings will put a stop to the pangs as quickly as they tempt you to lighten your wallet.

The fruit and vegetable market reflects the seasons, dominated by root vegetables in winter and stone fruits in summer – the proximity of Southeast Asia means exotic fruits like mangosteens, rambutan and the pungent-smelling durian are also available. If you’re after something less epicurean, however, try the German Bratwurst shop for a sausage, while speciality butchers sell emu and northern Australian wild Barramundi, Victorian crayfish and fresh Tasmanian oysters.

The Quick Rough Guide to Australia  
www.roughguides.com
**HISTORY**

Semi-nomadic Koories have lived in this region for at least forty thousand years establishing semi-permanent settlements such as those of circular stone houses and fish traps found at Lake Condah in western Victoria. For the colonists, however, Victoria did not get off to an auspicious start: there was an unsuccessful attempt at settlement in the Port Phillip Bay area in 1803 but Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) across the Bass Strait was deemed more suitable. It was in fact from Launceston that Port Phillip Bay was eventually settled, in 1834; other Tasmanians soon followed and Melbourne was established. This occupation was in defiance of a British government edict forbidding settlement in the territory, then part of New South Wales, but squatting had already begun the previous year when Edward Henty arrived with his stock to establish the first white settlement at Portland on the southwest coast. A pattern was created of land-hungry settlers – generally already men of means – responding to Britain’s demand for wool, so that during the 1840s and 1850s what was to become Victoria evolved into a prosperous pastoral community with squatters extending huge grazing runs.

**VICTORIA HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Goldfields** Mining memorabilia and grandiose architecture grace the old gold-towns of Ballarat and Bendigo.
- **Wilson’s Promontory National Park** There’s great bushwalking and fantastic coastal scenery at Victoria’s favourite national park.
- **Ned Kelly Country** Follow in the steps of Australia’s most famous bush outlaw, in the historic towns that dot the northeast.
- **Milawa Gourmet Trail** Excellent local produce washed down with great wines from the Brown Brothers winery – all sampled against a backdrop of stunning scenery.
- **Victorian Alps** Perfect for skiing in winter, the Victorian Alps make ideal bushwalking territory in summer.

**MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN VICTORIA**

The Great Ocean Road, Victoria’s famous south-western coastal route, starts at Torquay, just over 20km south of Geelong, and extends 285km west to Warrnambool. It was built between 1919 and 1932 with the idea of constructing a scenic road of world repute, equaling California’s Pacific Coast Highway – and it certainly lives up to its reputation. The road was to be both a memorial to the soldiers who had died in World War I, and an employment scheme for those who returned. Over three thousand ex-servicemen laboured with picks and shovels, carving the road into cliffs and mountains along Australia’s most rugged and densely forested coastline; the task was speeded up with the help of the jobless during the Great Depression. The road hugs the coastline between Torquay and Apollo Bay and passes through the popular holiday towns of Anglesea and Lorne, set below the Otway Range. From Apollo Bay the road heads inland, through the towering forests of the Otway National Park, before rejoining the coast at Princetown to wind along the shore for the entire length of the Port Campbell National Park. This stretch from Moonlight Head to Port Fairy, sometimes referred to as the “Shipwreck Coast”, is the most spectacular – there are two hundred known shipwrecks here, victims of the imprecise navigation tools of the mid-nineteenth century, the rough Southern Ocean and dramatic rock formations such as the Twelve Apostles, which sit out to sea beyond the rugged cliffs. Information on all the villages and sights on the Great Ocean Road can be found on the area’s website, www.greatoceanroad.org.
TASMANIA

There’s an otherworldly quality to TASMANIA, with its gothic landscape of rain clouds and brooding mountains. This was a prison island whose name, Van Diemen’s Land, was so redolent with horror that when convict transport ended in 1852 it was immediately changed. Yet the island has another, friendlier side to it, too, with distances comprehensible to a European traveller – it’s roughly the size of Ireland – and resonant echoes of England: cream teas, old-fashioned B&Bs and amiable, homespun people. In winter, when the grass is green, the gentle and cultivated midlands, with their rolling hills, dry stone walls and old stone villages, are reminiscent of England’s West Country. Town names, too, invariably invoke the British Isles – Perth, Swansea, Brighton and Somerset among them. It’s a “mainlander’s” joke that Tasmania is twenty years behind, and it’s true that in some ways it is very old-fashioned, a trait that is by turn charming and frustrating. However, things are changing fast: with the rise of its cool-climate wine industry, foodie accolades for its superb local produce used in a newly sophisticated café and restaurant scene, booming real estate and immigration, and cheaper and more frequent ferries and flights creating an increase in new and luxurious accommodation.

Tasmania is the closest point in Australia to the Antarctic Circle, and the west coast is windswept, wet and savage, bearing the full brunt of the Roaring Forties – and Australia’s whale-stranding hot-spot. The southwest has wild rivers, impassable temperate rainforests, buttongrass plains, and glacially carved mountains and tarns that together form a vast World Heritage Area, crossed only by the Lyell Highway, providing some of the world’s best wilderness walking and rafting. With forty percent of the island protected in parks and reserves, it’s still one of the cleanest places on earth: a wilderness walk, breathing the fresh air and drinking freely from tannin-stained streams, is a genuinely bucolic experience.

A north–south axis divides the settled areas, with the two major cities, Hobart, the capital, in the south, and Launceston in the north. The northwest coast, facing the mainland across the Bass Strait, is the most densely populated region, the site of Tasmania’s two smaller cities, Devonport (where the Bass Strait ferries dock) and Burnie. Tasmania’s central plateau, with its thousands of lakes, is sparsely populated, mainly by weekenders in fishing shacks. The sheltered east coast is the place to go for sun and watersports activities; set against a backdrop of bush-clad hills, it has plenty of deserted beaches and is safe for swimming.

It rarely gets above 25°C in Tasmania, even at the height of summer, and the weather is notoriously changeable, particularly in the uplands, where it can sleet and snow at any time of year; the most stable month is February. Winter (June–Aug) is a cold time to visit unless you choose the more temperate east coast; wilderness walks are best left to the most experienced and well equipped at this time of year. Although it’s small in Australian terms, make sure you give yourself enough time to see Tasmania; if you want to see only its cities, you need no more than a few days, but to get a flavour of the countryside – the great outdoors is the real reason to come here – a couple of weeks or longer is necessary. The Tasmanian Travel and Information Centre in Hobart (1300 655 145, www.tastravel.com.au) can provide information and also book all transport, tours and accommodation; their free information paper, Tasmanian Travelways (www.travelways.com.au), is extremely useful, filled with detailed, comprehensive information on accommodation, attractions, bus timetables, car rental, adventure tours and national parks. It can also be picked up at local tourist offices in Tasmania. For general tourist information, check out the government-funded Tourism Tasmania site www.discovertasmania.com.au.
**TASMANIA HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Salamanca Market** Lined with old stone warehouses and characterful old pubs, Hobart’s Salamanca Place comes alive for its colourful open-air Saturday market.
- **Port Arthur** The infamous old penal settlement is the biggest draw on the wild, scenic Tasman Peninsula.
- **Freycinet National Park** The hike to exquisite Wineglass Bay is one of the finest walks in the glorious Freycinet National Park.
- **Cradle Mountain–Lake St Clair National Park** Famed for its gruelling Overland Track bushwalk, Cradle Mountain–Lake St Clair National Park is one of the most glaciated areas in Australia.
- **Arthur River cruise** See the Tarkine, the world’s second-largest tract of temperate rainforest, on the five-hour Arthur River cruise.
- **Franklin River** Raft one of Australia’s most dangerous rivers – or see it safely from above on a seaplane flight.
- **Gordon River cruise** A cruise up the dark, brown Gordon River is the best way to get a glimpse of the World Heritage-listed wilderness.

**MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME ON EARTH**

Australia’s best-known long-distance bushwalk leads from Tasmania’s highest peak to Australia’s deepest lake across a magnificent alpine wilderness, unbroken by roads and adorned by brooding lakes, glacier-carved cirques and thundering waterfalls. Stormy skies are frequent on Tassie, but even on the ground there’s no shortage of drama with features named after their classical Greek counterparts – Mount Eros, the Acropolis, and Lake Elysia – providing a fitting backdrop to the Olympian landscape.

And though much of the 65-kilometre trail is boardwalk with bridged creeks, there’s no escaping several muddy interludes – be prepared to get wet.

This is Tasmania, so fresh drinking water is plentiful and need not be carried; the daunting task is lugging enough food and stove fuel for the duration. Once you accept that, the exhilaration of wandering completely self-sufficient through the mountain wilderness fills you with a sense of deep satisfaction. Up above, currawongs and eagles cut through the skies, while below you quolls and wallabies abound.

It takes about a week to tramp across Overland’s stirring range of landscapes, though you’ll want to add a day or two for side trips to waterfalls, lakes and scrambling up peaks such as Mount Ossa, Tasmania’s highest at 1617m, overlooking forests of King Billy pines and carpeted in fragrant wildflowers in early summer. Even then you’re sure to have rain and even snow at some point, and eventually you’ll stagger aboard the Lake St Clair ferry, aching, mud-caked but happy, for an uncelebrated return to civilization.
Five Aussie classics

Pie floater an upside down meat pie, slavered in mushy green peas and tomato sauce.
Chiko Roll a service station and fish ‘n’ chip shop staple: mutton, cabbage, barley and spices wrapped in thick floury dough, and then deep fried.

Vegemite Australia’s equivalent to Marmite, but thicker and stronger tasting.
Lamingtons a square of sponge cake, coated in thick chocolate icing, sugar and coconut.
Pavlova a meringue dessert which is crisp on the outside and soft and gooey in the middle, usually decorated with fresh fruit and cream.

Books on Australia

Five great Australian reads

Dirt Music by Tim Winton. Bleak but beautifully written saga of unravelling west-coast lives.
Songlines by Bruce Chatwin. Absorbing and accessible semi-fictional discourse on the meaning of Aboriginal mythology.
Bliss by Peter Carey. A Sydney executive drops out and heads for a New Age community in rural NSW.
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My Place by Sally Morgan. A Western Australian woman discovers her Aboriginal roots.

Colonization

Initially no one took much interest in Cook’s Antipodean discoveries of 1770, but following American independence from Britain a new penal colony became desperately needed when convicts started clogging up English jails. For seventy years after the First Fleet’s arrival in Botany Bay in 1787, 160,000 convicts were transported overseas. Most were poverty-stricken petty thieves and the vast majority served out their sentence to eventually receive a certificate of freedom or ticket of leave. Once free very few ever returned to England.

People

It is thought the ancestors of today’s Aboriginal people arrived on the continent via the Indonesian archipelago at least 40,000 years ago, though the date is probably much earlier. This makes today’s descendants part of the world’s oldest surviving culture. There were an estimated 750,000 Aboriginal people at the time of colonization in 1787. Following the disastrous impact of this, the population has recovered to around 450,000 or 2.5 percent of Australia’s population.

Dreamtime

Aboriginal Dreamtime explains how creative forces shaped the landscape, how humans were created, provides verbal maps of tribal territory and links natural features to the actions of Dreamtime ancestors, who often had both human and animal forms. These stories were often passed down in the form of drawings on the ground or on cave walls, or as dot paintings in the Central and Western deserts.

Abed to sleep in

Five great hotels

Intercontinental, 117 Macquarie St, Sydney. Get high with stunning harbour views from the top thirty floors of this elegant five-star hotel.
Adelphi Hotel, 183 Flinders Lane, Melbourne. A striking exterior and an ultramodern interior featuring abstract designs make this one of Melbourne’s most stylish choices.
Latitude 131°, Ayers Rock Resort, NT. A tucked-away upmarket bush-camp with a handful of luxury tents set among the dunes, all with views of Uluru.
The Bush Camp, Faraway Bay, Kimberly, NT. “You never been this far away” is the tagline and they’re not kidding. Only accessible by small plane or boat, it’s a remote coastal wilderness retreat with basic cabins and great food.
Dunk Island Resort, Mission Beach, QLD. Low-key resort on a rainforest-clad humpbacked island 15 minutes by ferry from Mission Beach.

Hindu 0.5

Religion in Australia

With 104 trailers the train was nearly 1500 metres long and weighed over 1500 tonnes. It was ever assembled stands in Clifton, Queensland. Outback driving from the scores of Aboriginal languages.

Tucker

Five great hotels

Boomerangs are among the most popular souvenirs bought in Australia. Originally used for digging, hunting, fighting and ceremonial purposes, they have actually been found throughout the ancient world. Among those crafted by the Aborigines only some were specifically designed to come back when thrown, most used the same principle as that of today’s plane wing to create lift as the flattened stick spun through the air: thousands of years later Leonardo Da Vinci came up with the airfoil theory and a few hundred years after that the Wright Brothers put it into practice. Other popular mementos include stuffed koalas and kangaroos, didgeridoos and Uluru snow-shake globes.

Sport

Australia’s love of sport and gambling are closely related though gambling probably came first. The game of two-up was brought to Australia by English and Irish convicts and soon spread across the country. It’s basically heads or tails but with two coins, thrown up off a wooden “kip”. The coins must land as two heads or two tails for the betters of either to win. The greater odds of 4:1 against plain old

Language

“Strine” (the pronunciation of “Australian” with a very heavy local accent) has its origins in the archaic cockney and Irish of the colony’s early convicts as well as the adoption of words from the scores of Aboriginal languages.

Outback driving

Driving the Outback highways and even some dirt roads you’ll come across the aptly named roadtrain, a truck that is towing three and sometimes even four trailers. Commonly used to transport livestock where railways or suitable anchorages do not exist, they’re a familiar sight in the northwest of Australia. Overtaking on a sealed road requires a clear long straight but on dirt roads is often impossible as the dust cloud they throw up is up to half a mile long. Currently the record for the longest roadtrain ever assembled stands in Clifton, Queensland. With 104 trailers the train was nearly 1500 metres long and weighed over 1500 tonnes. It was driven over a set distance to claim a Guinness world record in 2006. Preparations are already underway to build a roadtrain over a kilometre long.

Natural attractions

Most visited natural attraction

Kangaroo Island (South Australia)
Blue Mountains (New South Wales)
Wilson’s Promontory (Victoria)
Great Barrier Reef (Queensland)
Lake St Clair (Tasmania)
The Pinnacles (Western Australia)
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Uluru (Northern Territory)
21 with heads or tails are what gives two-up its edge.

Top five sports & main places to watch

Footy (Aussie Rules): MCG, Melbourne
Cricket: SCG Sydney
Rugby League: Suncorp Stadium, Brisbane
Horse racing: Flemington Racecourse, Melbourne
Surfing: Bells Beach, Victoria; Manly Beach, Sydney; Gold Coast, QLD

Going Downunder

5 best dive sites
Bourgainville Reef, QLD. Clear water and 1000-metre coral walls attracts both fish and scuba divers from miles around. Boats leave from Cairns or Port Douglas.
Cod Hole, QLD. Pose with a huge maori wrasse or feed a fat-lipped giant potato cod; both weighing in at up to 100 kilos. Boats leave from Cairns.
Coral Bay, Ningaloo Reef, WA. Who needs boats or even scuba gear? Walk right off the beach and paddle out over the reef.
Princess Royal harbour, Albany, WA. A choice of shallow-water wreck dives in a huge but sheltered natural harbour.
Port Lincoln, SA. Your chance to see the great white shark’s toothy smile – from the safety of the dive platform.

Alexander technique

The Alexander Technique was developed in the late nineteenth century by Tasmanian-born Shakespearian orator Frederick Alexander, who set about ridding himself of debilitating voice loss on stage. His form of stress management sought to overcome instinctive or habitual control over his actions to enable him to cope better with performance anxiety. Highly regarded by singers, actors, dancers and musicians; Julie Andrews, Sting, John Cleese and Paul Newman have all practised the Technique.

Road etiquette

When driving desolate Outback roads it’s customary to give a one-finger salute to the infrequent oncoming traffic – no, not that one-finger salute, but a briefly raised index finger from your hand draped casually over the top of the steering wheel. It might be accompanied by a barely noticeable nod, although this can be considered exertion beyond the call of duty. Any excessive movement of the hand or worse still, the arm, designates you as a fresh-off-the-plane tourist or just a plain old drongo.

Politics

Exchanges between Australian politicians are famously robust and never more so than during the era of Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating (1991-97). His withering insults flung across the floor of Canberra’s New Parliament House became the scourge de jour, and were of course particularly barbed when aimed at opposition leaders. The performance of one time Liberal leader John Hewson was once likened to “being flogged with a warm lettuce” while the former PM John Howard was described as “… a dead carcass, swinging in the breeze, but nobody will cut it down to replace him.”

Weird beasts

European colonization had a drastic effect on indigenous flora and fauna. Hoofed animals were unknown and the introduction of sheep and goats, horses and cattle, along with rabbits, prematurely turned many areas into dustbowls. The highly poisonous cane toads, brought in to combat a plague of greyback beetles, have no natural enemies and for thirty years have been on a relentless march from the north Queensland sugar-cane fields, southwards along the coast and across northern Australia. But today the biggest threat to the country’s ecology are feral cats which are getting through indigenous birds and small marsupials at a devastating rate.

Dingo de-fence

Many have heard of the Rabbit-Proof Fence (or at least the film of that name) but the 5300-kilometre Dingo Fence is thought to be the world’s longest. Built 120 years ago to keep the indigenous wild dogs away from vulnerable sheep flocks in the southeast of the country, it was only ever partly successful.

Music

Five top Australian bands and musicians

Kylie
Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds
AC/DC
Midnight Oil
INXS

Five Australian rock albums

Business As Usual, Men At Work: CBS, 1981
Kick, INXS: WEA, 1987
Highly Evolved, The Vines: Capitol Records, 2002
Diesel and Dust, Midnight Oil: CBS, 1987

Inventions

Five Australian inventions

The Story of the Kelly Gang, made in 1906, is regarded as the world’s first feature length film. It ran for over an hour.
The Combine Harvester, which both stripped and collected grain, was developed in 1882 by Victorian farmer Hugh McKay.
Permaculture, a holistic system for human habitation based around sustainable and integrated environmental practices was developed by Bill Mollison from the 1970s onwards.
The black box flight recorder was invented in 1958 by Dr David Warren at the Aeronautical Research Laboratories in Melbourne.
The freestyle swimming stroke (originally called the “Australian Crawl”) was adopted by swimmers in Sydney in the early 1900s. Its most famous female exponent was Fanny Durack who in 1912 won an Olympic gold medal, in the process cutting four seconds off the men’s world record.

Staying alive

Australia’s ecology and wildlife remain among the most distinctive on earth; it also harbours some of the world’s deadliest creatures. Crocodiles come in two types; the misleadingly named saltwater or estuarine crocodile can grow to 7m, ranges far inland (often in freshwater), and is the only Australian animal that constitutes an active threat to humans; the smaller, shy, inoffensive freshwater crocodile feeds on fish and frogs. Three quarters of the world’s most venomous snakes can be found in Australia – although the small number of people that actually dwell in prime snake habitats means that India experiences thousands more fatalities a year. Two spiders whose bites can be fatal are the Sydney funnel-web, a black, sticky creature found in the Sydney area, and the small redback, a relative of the notorious black widow of the Americas, usually found in dry, dark locations all over Australia (i.e. outdoor toilets, under rocks and timber logs). The tropical coastal waters attract venomous box jellyfish during the summer months, these are saucer-sized jellyfish with long tentacles up to 3m long, whose venom can cause rapid unconsciousness and, in severe cases, paralysis of the heart muscles. Avoid swimming in tropical beaches during the stinger season, roughly October to May. Finally, you are more likely to be killed by bee sting or drown while surfing than be killed by shark attack in Australia.

Useful ‘o’ words

Arvo – afternoon
Dongo – fool, pillock
Garbo – refuse or garbage collector
Smoko – short break from work
BYO – bring your own (alcohol to a restaurant)

Australia in Film

Five great films set in Australia

Babakuikeria (Julian Pringler, 1988). Culture-reversing spoof about Aboriginal colonizers coming ashore to disrupt a beachside “barbecue area”.
Muriel’s Wedding (P.J. Hogan, 1994). Set in fictional Porpoise Spit on the less fictional Gold Coast, Toni Collette made her big screen debut in this pre-Kath and Kim satire on the ghastlier side of suburban Australia.
Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir, 1975). Three young ladies mysteriously disappear on Valentine’s Day 1900 while on a school outing. The disturbing sense of eeriness is aided by Gheorghe Zamfir’s panpipe soundtrack.
Walkabout (Nick Roeg, 1971). Dad shoots his brains out during a barbie and leaves his two kids to wander the Outback until an Aboriginal boy befriends them and leads them to safety.