



AUSTRALIA – OVERVIEW



Geography and Demographics

Australia is the world's largest island with a land mass of 7.63 sq km (the mainland continent, excluding the island of Tasmania). (The country is considered a continent in its own right and, therefore, is sometimes not categorised as an 'island'.) The greatest distance from east to west is 3,800 km. and from north to south 3,150 km.

In addition to the mainland and the island of Tasmania, the country encompasses over 8,200 islands. Some of these are legally part of one of the states (e.g. Macquarie island—Tasmania and Lord Howe Island—New South Wales), but many are of separate territories such as Cocos Islands, Heard and McDonald Islands, Norfolk Island, Christmas Island, the Coral Sea Islands and Ashmore and Cartier Islands. In addition, Australia administers part of Antarctica as the Australian Antarctic Territory.

History and Politics

The original inhabitants of the island of Australia (the Aboriginals) are believed to have crossed over from the Indonesian archipelago around 40,000 years ago when it was that was a single land mass. These indigenous groups established themselves right across the territory from the far west to the southeast and on into Tasmania. By the time the first Europeans visited the shores there may have been up to 4 million inhabitants speaking up to 250 languages in different regions of the continent.

In 1522 Magellan sailed past the north-west of the continent and in the in 1606 the Dutch explorer, William Jansz, landed at Cape York at the continent's northern most tip and called it New Holland. Several other Dutch explorers touched the west coast and in 1642 Abel Janszoon Tasman landed on the island to the south which he named Van Dieman's land after the Dutch governor general of the East Indies. In 1688 the English explorer William Dapier made a brief visit to the north of the continent.

However, it was not until the 18th century that a true 'discovery' was made of Australia. Captain James Cook sailed to Tahiti, primarily to observe the transit of Venus, and then on to New Zealand. However, in addition to his astronomical objectives, Cook had a secret mission to look for a land suitable to transport convicted felons from Britain. He landed at Botany Bay (now part of the City of Sydney) in 1770 and considering this Southern Continent to be uninhabited, or virtually so (apart from a few 'dark people'), clearly suitable as a convict colony. Cook proclaimed the land (or at least the eastern parts he visited) to be a part of the Sovereign realm of Great Britain. Subsequently, this claim was extended to a British right of the Crown to own all the land, based on the same principles that William the Conqueror had applied in 1066 on landing on the south coast of England. The first party of convicts arrived in 1788 later these were followed by freemen seeking new opportunities away from the ravages of Europe.

Since their arrival British, European and other settlers from across the globe have grown exponentially. Starting with the original natives, then few convicts and their guards, freemen seeking a fortune in farming or mining, and now migrants from around the world, these people have brought the population to well over 22 million. Nonetheless, Australia is one of the most sparsely populated countries on the planet, albeit much of the land is desert and the population is predominately gathered around the coast.

Following its independence from Britain in 1901 Australia has become established as a parliamentary democracy, with a federation of States and Territories. There are six States (Queensland (QLD), New South Wales (NSW), South Australia (SA), Tasmania (Tas) and Victoria (VT) and Western Australia (WA)). The two Territories, which have a degree of self-government, are the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)—primarily the base for the Federal government—and the Northern Territory (NT). The Federal Parliament is seated in Canberra (an artificial city established in 1988 as such to fend off rivalry for capital status between Sydney and Melbourne).

The two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne may be considered respectively as the financial and cultural capital of Australia (although each may have similar claims on that title).

Communications

With the large distances around the country (Sydney to Perth – 3,950 km; Darwin to Adelaide – 3,025 km and Brisbane to Sydney – 925 km; Cairns to Melbourne – 2,840 km), in many cases the main means of transport is by air. There is a good road system that runs right around the outside of the continent (with the exception of the ‘top end’ where the route heads south through the Northern Territory towards Alice Springs and then east across to Northern Queensland). There are also good roads north-south from Darwin via Alice Springs to Adelaide and Melbourne, east-west from Perth to Sydney or Melbourne, mostly near the southern coast along the Great Eastern Highway and from Darwin across to Brisbane. However, the major road and rail transport is concentrated in the more densely populated areas in the south and east, from Adelaide and Melbourne in the south to Sydney, Brisbane and Cairns. Also there is a good road in Western Australia from Albany in the south-west via Perth to Geraldton and on to the mining region of the Kimberley and from Perth to the mining area of Kalgoorlie. Motorways run north and south from Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, although not all the way between these cities. In the case of freight, long distance trucks or road trains hauling two, three or even four trailers are the norm. There is a good rail system between the major conurbations in the south and east (Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney, Gold Coast, Brisbane, Sunshine Coast and Cairns) and a rail link from Perth to Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. Strategic freight links also run to the many mining areas of the country. In addition, there is a rail link across from Darwin to Adelaide. Much of the internal area of this vast continent is desert, served only by minor roads. There are 11 major ports or terminals that serve all the state capitals (except Hobart) and there are private mining ports in the Northern Territory, serving the ever growing exports to China, India and the rest of the world.

There are good broadband connections between Melbourne and Sydney and a reasonable service in and around other major cities. The government is committed to a national broadband network (NBN) that will serve all parts of the country and work on now well underway in Tasmania and between the major cities in the south, east, around Perth and from Brisbane to Darwin to establish this network (www.nbn.gov.au).

Economy and Trade

Historically, Australia was an agricultural and mining economy and after World War II the manufacturing sector grew in importance. However, agriculture, forestry, fishing now accounts for less than 3%, mining and quarrying less than 7% and manufacturing less than 8% of the economy. Finance, real estate and services now make up over 40% of the GDP. On the other hand, it is among the world’s largest producers of many minerals and precious metals (e.g. rank 1 for bauxite, ilmenite, rutile, opals and gold; rank 2 for diamonds and lead; rank 3 for cobalt, iron ore, nickel and zinc). In addition, manufacturing of products from base and fabricated metals are a significant part of the economy, as are chemicals.

Australia has a consistent balance of trade deficit, but is a major exporter of food and live animals, mineral fuels, chemicals and basic manufactured products. Imports are significant in the same areas, but the largest part of the deficit is made up of machinery and transport equipment and other manufactured products and petroleum. The major export destinations are Japan, China, South Korea, India, US, New Zealand and the UK. The largest trading nations for imports are China, US, Japan, Germany, UK, Singapore, Thailand and other Far East countries. Nearly 70% of exports and 55% of imports are to Asia.

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