

Australia

Australia (/əˈstreɪljə/), officially the Commonwealth of Australia,[10] is a country in the Southern Hemisphere comprising the mainland of the Australian continent as well as the island of Tasmania and numerous smaller islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.[N 4] It is the world's sixth-largest country by total area. Neighbouring countries include Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea to the north; the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia to the north-east; and New Zealand to the south-east.

For at least 40,000 years[12] before European settlement in the late 18th century, Australia was inhabited by indigenous Australians,[13] who belonged to one or more of roughly 250 language groups.[14][15] After discovery by Dutch explorers in 1606, Australia's eastern half was claimed by Great Britain in 1770 and settled through penal transportation to the colony of New South Wales from 26 January 1788. The population grew steadily in subsequent decades; the continent was explored and an additional five self-governing Crown Colonies were established.

- On 1 January 1901, the six colonies federated, forming the Commonwealth of Australia. Since Federation, Australia has maintained a stable liberal democratic political system which functions as a federal parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy. The federation comprises six states and several territories. The population of 22.9 million is heavily concentrated in the Eastern states and is highly urbanised.
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- A highly developed country, Australia is the world's 13th-largest economy and has the world's fifth-highest per capita income. Australia's military expenditure is the world's 13th-largest. With the second-highest human development index globally, Australia ranks highly in many international comparisons of national performance, such as quality of life, health, education, economic freedom, and the protection of civil liberties and political rights.[16] Australia is a member of the G20, OECD, WTO, APEC, UN, Commonwealth of Nations, ANZUS, and the Pacific Islands Forum

Geography and climate

- Australia's landmass of 7,617,930 square kilometres (2,941,300 sq mi)[131] is on the Indo-Australian Plate. Surrounded by the Indian and Pacific oceans,[N 4] it is separated from Asia by the Arafura and Timor seas, with the Coral Sea lying off the Queensland coast, and the Tasman Sea lying between Australia and New Zealand. The world's smallest continent[132] and sixth largest country by total area,[133] Australia—owing to its size and isolation—is often dubbed the "island continent",[134] and is sometimes considered the world's largest island.[135] Australia has 34,218 kilometres (21,262 mi) of coastline (excluding all offshore islands),[136] and claims an extensive Exclusive Economic Zone of 8,148,250 square kilometres (3,146,060 sq mi). This exclusive economic zone does not include the Australian Antarctic Territory.[137] Excluding Macquarie Island, Australia lies between latitudes 9° and 44°S, and longitudes 112° and 154°E.
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- The Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest coral reef,[138] lies a short distance off the north-east coast and extends for over 2,000 kilometres (1,240 mi). Mount Augustus, claimed to be the world's largest monolith,[139] is located in Western Australia. At 2,228 metres (7,310 ft), Mount Kosciuszko on the Great Dividing Range is the highest mountain on the Australian mainland. Even taller are Mawson Peak (at 2,745 metres or 9,006 feet), on the remote Australian territory of Heard Island, and, in the Australian Antarctic Territory, Mount McClintock and Mount Menzies, at 3,492 metres (11,457 ft) and 3,355 metres (11,007 ft) respectively

- Australia's size gives it a wide variety of landscapes, with subtropical [rain forests](#) in the north-east, mountain ranges in the south-east, south-west and east areas, and a dry desert in its centre.^[141] It is the flattest continent,^[142] with the oldest and least fertile soils;^{[143][144]} [desert](#) or semi-arid land commonly known as the [outback](#) makes up by far the largest portion of land.^[145] The driest inhabited continent, only its south-east and south-west corners have a [temperate climate](#).^[146] The [population density](#), 2.8 inhabitants per square kilometre, is among the lowest in the world,^[147] although a large proportion of the population lives along the temperate south-eastern coastline.^[148]
- Eastern Australia is marked by the Great Dividing Range that runs parallel to the coast of Queensland, New South Wales, and much of Victoria—although the name is not strictly accurate, as in parts the range consists of low hills and the highlands are typically no more than 1,600 metres (5,249 ft) in height.^[149] The [coastal uplands](#) and a [belt of Brigalow grasslands](#) lie between the coast and the mountains, while inland of the dividing range are large areas of grassland.^{[149][150]} These include the [western plains](#) of New South Wales, and the [Einasleigh Uplands](#), [Barkly Tableland](#), and [Mulga Lands](#) of inland Queensland. The northern point of the east coast is the tropical rainforested [Cape York Peninsula](#)

- The landscapes of the northern part of the country—the Top End and the Gulf Country behind the Gulf of Carpentaria, with their tropical climate—consist of woodland, grassland, and desert.[155][156][157] At the north-west corner of the continent are the sandstone cliffs and gorges of The Kimberley, and below that the Pilbara. South and inland of these lie more areas of grassland: the Ord Victoria Plain and the Western Australian Mulga shrublands.[158][159][160] At the heart of the country are the uplands of central Australia; prominent features of the centre and south include the inland Simpson, Tirari and Sturt Stony, Gibson, Great Sandy, Tanami, and Great Victoria deserts, with the famous Nullarbor Plain on the southern coast.[161][162][163][164]
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- The climate of Australia is significantly influenced by ocean currents, including the Indian Ocean Dipole and the El Niño-Southern Oscillation, which is correlated with periodic drought, and the seasonal tropical low pressure system that produces cyclones in northern Australia.[165][166] These factors induce rainfall to vary markedly from year to year. Much of the northern part of the country has a tropical predominantly summer rainfall (monsoon) climate.[167] The southwest corner of the country has a Mediterranean climate.[168] Much of the southeast (including Tasmania) is temperate

Environment

- Although most of Australia is semi-arid or desert, it includes a diverse range of habitats from alpine heaths to tropical rainforests, and is recognised as a megadiverse country. Because of the continent's great age, extremely variable weather patterns, and long-term geographic isolation, much of Australia's biota is unique and diverse. About 85 per cent of flowering plants, 84 per cent of mammals, more than 45 per cent of birds, and 89 per cent of in-shore, temperate-zone fish are endemic.[169] Australia has the greatest number of reptiles of any country, with 755 species

- Australian forests are mostly made up of evergreen species, particularly eucalyptus trees in the less arid regions, wattles replace them in drier regions and deserts as the most dominant species.[171] Among well-known Australian fauna are the monotremes (the platypus and echidna); a host of marsupials, including the kangaroo, koala, and wombat, and birds such as the emu and the kookaburra.[171] Australia is home to many dangerous animals including some of the most venomous snakes in the world.[172] The dingo was introduced by Austronesian people who traded with Indigenous Australians around 3000 BCE.[173] Many plant and animal species became extinct soon after first human settlement,[174] including the Australian megafauna; others have disappeared since European settlement, among them the thylacine.[175][176]
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- Many of Australia's ecoregions, and the species within those regions, are threatened by human activities and introduced plant and animal species.[177] The federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 is the legal framework for the protection of threatened species.[178] Numerous protected areas have been created under the National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity to protect and preserve unique ecosystems;[179][180] 65 wetlands are listed under the Ramsar Convention,[181] and 16 natural World Heritage Sites have been established.[182] Australia was ranked 51st of 163 countries in the world on the 2010 Environmental Performance Index

- Climate change has become an increasing concern in Australia in recent years, and protection of the environment is a major political issue.[184][185] In 2007, the Rudd Government signed the instrument of ratification of the Kyoto Protocol. Nevertheless, Australia's carbon dioxide emissions per capita are among the highest in the world, lower than those of only a few other industrialised nations.[186] Rainfall in Australia has slightly increased over the past century, both nationwide and for two quadrants of the nation,[187] According to the Bureau of Meteorology's 2011 Australian Climate Statement, Australia had lower than average temperatures in 2011 as a consequence of a La Nina weather pattern, however, "the country's 10-year average continues to demonstrate the rising trend in temperatures, with 2002-2011 likely to rank in the top two warmest 10-year periods on record for Australia, at 0.52 °C above the long-term average".[188] Water restrictions are frequently in place in many regions and cities of Australia in response to chronic shortages due to urban population increases and localised drought.[189][190] Throughout much of the continent, major flooding regularly follows extended periods of drought, flushing out inland river systems, overflowing dams and inundating large inland flood plains, as occurred throughout Eastern Australia in 2010, 2011 and 2012 after the 2000s Australian drought.
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- Economy

Demography

- For almost two centuries the majority of settlers, and later immigrants, came from the British Isles. As a result the people of Australia are mainly a mixture of British and Irish ethnic origin. In the 2006 Australian census, the most commonly nominated ancestry was Australian (37.13 per cent),[216] followed by English (32 per cent), Irish (9 per cent), Scottish (8 per cent), Italian (4 per cent), German (4 per cent), Chinese (3 per cent), and Greek (2 per cent).[217]
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- Australia's population has quadrupled since the end of World War I,[218] much of the increase from immigration. Following World War II and through to 2000, almost 5.9 million of the total population settled in the country as new immigrants, meaning that nearly two out of every seven Australians were born in another country.[219] Most immigrants are skilled,[220] but the immigration quota includes categories for family members and refugees.[220] By 2050, Australia's population is currently projected to reach around 42 million

- Although Australia has no official language, English is so entrenched that it has become the de facto national language.[2] Australian English is a major variety of the language with a distinctive accent and lexicon. General Australian serves as the standard dialect. Spelling is similar to that of British English with a number of exceptions.[240] According to the 2006 census, English is the only language spoken in the home for close to 79 per cent of the population. The next most common languages spoken at home are Italian (1.6 per cent), Greek (1.3 per cent) and Cantonese (1.2 per cent);[241] a considerable proportion of first- and second-generation migrants are bilingual. A 2010–2011 study by the Australia Early Development Index found that the most common language spoken by children after English was Arabic, followed by Vietnamese, Greek, Chinese, and Hindi.[242]
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- Between 200 and 300 Indigenous Australian languages are thought to have existed at the time of first European contact, of which only about 70 have survived. Many of these are exclusively spoken by older people; only 18 Indigenous languages are still spoken by all age groups.[243] At the time of the 2006 Census, 52,000 Indigenous Australians, representing 12 per cent of the Indigenous population, reported that they spoke an Indigenous language at home.[244] Australia has a sign language known as Auslan, which is the main language of about 5,500 deaf people.[

Religion

- Australia has no state religion, and section 116 of the Australian Constitution prohibits the federal government from making any law to establish any religion, impose any religious observance, or prohibit the free exercise of any religion.[246] In the 2006 census, 64 per cent of Australians were counted as Christian, including 26 per cent as Roman Catholic and 19 per cent as Anglican. About 19 per cent of the population stated "no religion" (which includes humanism, atheism, agnosticism and rationalism), which was the fastest-growing group from 2001 to 2006, and a further 12 per cent did not answer (the question is optional) or did not give a response adequate for interpretation. The largest non-Christian religion in Australia is Buddhism (2.1 per cent), followed by Islam (1.7 per cent), Hinduism (0.8 per cent) and Judaism (0.5 per cent). Overall, fewer than 6 per cent of Australians identify with non-Christian religions.[247]
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- Prior to European settlement in Australia, the animist beliefs of Australia's indigenous people had been practised for millennia. In the case of mainland Aboriginal Australians, their spirituality is known as The Dreamtime and it places a heavy emphasis on belonging to the land. The collection of stories that it contains shaped Aboriginal law and customs. Aboriginal art, story and dance continue to draw on these spiritual traditions. In the case of the Torres Strait Islanders who inhabit the islands between Australia and New Guinea, spirituality and customs reflected their Melanesian origins and dependence on the sea. The 1996 Australian census counted more than 7000 respondents as followers of a traditional Aboriginal religion

- History
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- The first inhabitants of Australia were the Aborigines, who migrated there at least 40,000 years ago from Southeast Asia. There may have been between a half million to a full million Aborigines at the time of European settlement; today about 350,000 live in Australia.
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- Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish ships sighted Australia in the 17th century; the Dutch landed at the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1606. In 1616 the territory became known as New Holland. The British arrived in 1688, but it was not until Captain James Cook's voyage in 1770 that Great Britain claimed possession of the vast island, calling it New South Wales. A British penal colony was set up at Port Jackson (what is now Sydney) in 1788, and about 161,000 transported English convicts were settled there until the system was suspended in 1839.
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- Free settlers and former prisoners established six colonies: New South Wales (1786), Tasmania (then Van Diemen's Land) (1825), Western Australia (1829), South Australia (1834), Victoria (1851), and Queensland (1859). Various gold rushes attracted settlers, as did the mining of other minerals. Sheep farming and grain soon grew into important economic enterprises. The six colonies became states and in 1901 federated into the Commonwealth of Australia with a constitution that incorporated British parliamentary and U.S. federal traditions. Australia became known for its liberal legislation: free compulsory education, protected trade unionism with industrial conciliation and arbitration, the secret ballot, women's suffrage, maternity allowances, and sickness and old-age pensions
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Geography

- The continent of Australia, with the island state of Tasmania, is approximately equal in area to the United States (excluding Alaska and Hawaii). Mountain ranges run from north to south along the east coast, reaching their highest point in Mount Kosciusko (7,308 ft; 2,228 m). The western half of the continent is occupied by a desert plateau that rises into barren, rolling hills near the west coast. The Great Barrier Reef, extending about 1,245 mi (2,000 km), lies along the northeast coast. The island of Tasmania (26,178 sq mi; 67,800 sq km) is off the southeast coast