



about Australia

people, culture and lifestyle

- Australia's diverse culture and lifestyle reflect its liberal democratic traditions and values, geographic closeness to the Asia–Pacific region and the social and cultural influences of the millions of migrants who have settled in Australia since World War II.

Australia is a product of a unique blend of established traditions and new influences. The country's original inhabitants, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are the custodians of one of the world's oldest continuing cultural traditions. They have been living in Australia for at least 40 000 years and possibly up to 60 000 years.

The rest of Australia's people are migrants or descendants of migrants who have arrived in Australia from about 200 countries since Great Britain established the first European settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788.

In 1945, Australia's population was around 7 million people and was mainly Anglo-Celtic. Since then, more than 6.5 million migrants, including 675 000 refugees, have settled in Australia, significantly broadening its social and cultural profile.

Today Australia has a population of more than 21 million people. More than 43 per cent of Australians either were born overseas themselves or have one parent who was born overseas. Australia's Indigenous population is estimated at 483 000, or 2.3 per cent of the total.

Many of the people who have come to Australia since 1945 were motivated by a commitment to family, or a desire to escape poverty, war or persecution. The first waves of migrants and refugees came mostly from

key facts

- More than 6.5 million migrants have settled in Australia since 1945.
- English is the national language but other languages are valued.
- Australia is predominantly Christian but people are free to practise any religion they choose.
- Around 88 per cent of Australians go to at least one cultural event each year.
- More than 11 million Australians aged 15 or over take part in sport or other physical activity.
- Australia has one of the most diverse cuisines in the world but has no national dish.

Europe. Subsequent waves have come from the Asia–Pacific region, the Middle East and Africa.

Migrants have enriched almost every aspect of Australian life, from business to the arts, from cooking to comedy and from science to sport. They, in turn, have adapted to Australia's tolerant, informal and broadly egalitarian society.

Shared values

The defining feature of today's Australia is not only the cultural diversity of its people, but the extent to which they are united by an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia.

Within the framework of Australia's laws, all Australians have the right to express their culture and beliefs and to participate freely in Australia's national life. At the same time, everyone is expected to uphold the principles and shared values that support Australia's way of life.

These include:

- respect for equal worth, dignity and freedom of the individual
- freedom of speech and association
- freedom of religion and a secular government
- support for parliamentary democracy and the rule of law
- equality under the law
- equality of men and women
- equality of opportunity
- peacefulness
- a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces tolerance, mutual respect, and compassion for those in need.

Australia also holds firmly to the belief that no one should be disadvantaged on the basis of their country of birth, cultural heritage, language, gender or religious belief.

An egalitarian society

In most practical ways, Australia is an egalitarian society. This does not mean that everyone is the same or that everybody has equal wealth or property.

But it does mean that there are no formal or entrenched class distinctions in Australian society, as there are in some other countries. It also means that with hard work and commitment, people without high-level connections or influential patrons can realise their ambitions. The unemployment rate is relatively low (in December 2007 it was 4.3 per cent) and the gross per capita income is around \$39 000.

All people are equal under the law in Australia and all Australians have the right to be respected and treated in a fair manner.

A typical Australian?

Given the diverse nature of today's Australia, some people question whether there is a 'typical' Australian.

There is, of course, no shortage of popular stereotypes, some of which contradict each other. For example, some people see Australians as egalitarian, irreverent people with a deep suspicion of authority while others regard them as mostly law-abiding and even conformist.

Some people, particularly those living overseas, believe Australians live mainly in country areas, the Australian outback or the bush. In fact, more than 75 per cent of Australians live a cosmopolitan lifestyle in urban centres, mainly in the capital cities along the coast. Others see Australians as people who live in a 'lucky country' who love their leisure, particularly sport, both as spectators and as participants. In fact, Australians are among the hardest-working people in the world with some of the longest working hours in the developed world.

Another common perception of Australians is that they are informal, open and direct and say what they mean. They are also seen as

people who believe in the principle of giving people a *fair go* and standing up for their *mates*, the disadvantaged and the underdog.

Many of these popular images have some truth to them and most Australians conform to at least some of them. But Australians, like people everywhere, cannot be so easily stereotyped.

There are 'typical' Australians everywhere. But they are not all the same.

Language

All people in Australia are encouraged to learn English, which is the national language and an important unifying element of Australian society.

However, languages other than English are also valued.

In fact, more than 15 per cent of Australians speak languages other than English at home. The most commonly spoken languages after English are Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin. Australians speak more than 200 languages, including Indigenous Australian languages.

Australian English

While English is Australia's national language, there are certain words and expressions that have become regarded as uniquely Australian through common usage. Some of them might seem strange to non-Australians.

The use of these colloquial or slang words, often coupled with an Australian sense of humour that is characterised by irony and irreverence, can sometimes cause confusion for international visitors. There are a number of books on Australian colloquialisms and slang, including the *Macquarie Book of Slang*.

Religious worship

Australia is a predominantly Christian country, with around 64 per cent of all Australians identifying as Christians. However, most other major religious faiths are also practised, reflecting Australia's culturally diverse society.

Australia's earliest religions or spiritual beliefs date back to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who have inhabited Australia for between 40 000 and 60 000 years. Indigenous Australians have their own unique religious traditions and spiritual values.

Australia has no official state religion and people are free to practise any religion they choose, as long as they obey the law. Australians are also free not to have a religion.

Vibrant arts scene

Australia has a vibrant arts scene that reflects both the nation's Indigenous cultural traditions and its rich mosaic of migrant cultures. All forms of the visual and performing arts have strong followings, including film, art, theatre, dance and music.

According to one survey, almost 13 million or 88 per cent of adult Australians attend at least one cultural event or performance every year. The most popular art form is film, attended by about 70 per cent of the population each year. More than 26 per cent attend a popular music concert; 25 per cent go to an art gallery or museum; 19 per cent see an opera or musical; 18 per cent attend live theatre; 11 per cent attend a dance performance; and 9 per cent attend a classical music concert.

Visual artists have played an important role in shaping and reflecting Australia's image. They range from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to the nationalist painters of the Heidelberg School in Victoria, symbolic surrealists such as Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd

and Albert Tucker and modern artists reflecting issues confronting contemporary Australia. Other notable Australian artists include John Brack, William Dobell, Russell Drysdale, Margaret Olley, John Olsen, Margaret Preston, Clifton Pugh, Jeffrey Smart, Brett Whiteley and Fred Williams.

Australia has a strong literary tradition, which started with the storytelling of Indigenous Australians and continued with the oral stories of convicts arriving in Australia in the late 18th century. Australia has one Nobel Prize for Literature to its credit, with novelist Patrick White receiving the award in 1973. Other recent Australian novelists whose work has a particularly Australian flavour include Peter Carey, Bryce Courtenay, Kate Grenville, Elizabeth Jolley, Thomas Keneally, Christopher Koch, David Malouf, Colleen McCullough, Christina Stead, Morris West and Tim Winton.

A sporting culture

Australians love their sport, both playing it and watching it.

Australia has often achieved impressive results at the elite level. In the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, Australia ranked fourth overall in the medal tally behind the United States, China and Russia. In the 2006 Football World Cup, Australia reached the final 16. Australia is also ranked the top cricketing nation in the world.

But it's not just at this top level that Australians enjoy their sport. A recent national survey showed that more than 11 million Australians aged 15 or over participated at least once a week in physical activity for exercise, recreation and sport—a participation rate of almost 70 per cent. The 10 most popular physical activities were walking, aerobics/fitness, swimming, cycling, tennis, golf, running, bushwalking, football (often referred to as soccer in Australia) and

netball. Other popular sporting activities include Australian football, rugby, hockey, basketball, baseball, car racing, horse racing, sailing and snow skiing.

The most watched sports in Australia include Australian Rules Football, a uniquely Australian game with roots traceable to early forms of rugby and Gaelic football, rugby league, rugby union and cricket. The Australian Open, held in Melbourne, is one of tennis's four Grand Slam events.

Australia has more than 120 national sporting organisations and thousands of state and local bodies.

A national cuisine?

Australia has one of the most diverse cuisines in the world, thanks to Asian and European migrant influences, a dining public that is happy to try innovative dishes and access to a plentiful supply of fresh and high-quality produce.

Australia, one of the world's most efficient agricultural nations, produces high-quality vegetables, fruit and grains, meat, poultry, seafood, and cheeses and other dairy products. In addition, many new industries have been established to accommodate the growing Australian taste for exotic foods, including Asian greens, nashi pears, lychees, olives and herbs. Aquaculture products such as farmed Atlantic salmon and southern bluefin tuna are now available as well as the great range of seafood that comes from the ocean surrounding Australia, including Moreton Bay bugs (shellfish), 'banana' prawns, barramundi fish and oysters.

Australians enjoy a huge range of food in restaurants and homes, reflecting the country's cultural diversity. Southern Europe has combined with Asia and the Pacific for

new flavours and tastes. Italian, Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Greek, Thai, Malay, French and Vietnamese restaurants are common, particularly in the capital cities. Middle Eastern flavours are also rapidly emerging, with Moroccan and Lebanese flavours being used with local ingredients in mainstream cooking with notable success.

Traditional Australian *bush tucker* is also becoming more common, particularly in northern Australian restaurants, where kangaroo, buffalo, crocodile and emu can often be found on menus.

Historically, there has never been a cuisine typically regarded as Australian. Instead, Australian fare has evolved with the distinct layers of flavours that each new culture has added.

Homesick expatriate Australians sometimes hanker for Australian food such as lamingtons (a sponge cake square dipped in chocolate and coconut), pavlovas (a meringue dessert named after the Russian ballet dancer Anna Pavlova) and vegemite (a commercially produced spread made from yeast products).

The Australian wine sector is recognised internationally as producing a full range of high-quality wine styles and varieties to match any dish, from full-bodied reds and deep fruity whites to sparkling, dessert and fortified wines.

Obeying the law

Community behaviour in Australia is governed by a combination of formal laws and informal social customs.

All people in Australia must obey the nation's laws or face the possibility of criminal prosecution or civil action. People are also

expected to generally observe Australian social customs, habits and practices even though they are not normally legally binding.

Serious criminal offences include murder, assault, sexual assault, paedophilia, violence against people or property, armed robbery or theft, dangerous driving of a motor car, possession and use of illegal drugs, fraud, and having sexual relations with young people who are aged below the legal age of consent, which is 16 in New South Wales but varies from state to state.

Smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol are not illegal, but there are many restrictions on their public use. It is against the law for any person to sell or supply alcohol or tobacco products to a person under the age of 18 years.

There are also laws against mistreating or neglecting animals, carrying weapons such as knives or guns, littering, polluting or disposing of wastes without permission and creating excessive noise.

There is no death penalty in Australia.

Warm climate, informal people

Australia is so large that it experiences most climatic conditions, from tropical monsoons to hot, dry weather and snow. Generally, however, the climate is warm and temperate, particularly in the major coastal cities.

This relatively benign climate has resulted in a country where people spend a good deal of time outdoors at beaches, in the countryside or on sporting fields as either spectators or participants.

Australians tend to be gregarious and outgoing. Most are relatively informal socially and in their relationships with acquaintances and work colleagues.

In the workplace and among friends, Australians generally call each other by their first names. But this informality does not extend to physical contact. When meeting someone for the first time, it is usual to shake the person's right hand with your right hand. People who do not know each other generally do not kiss or hug when meeting.

Australians queue or line up when waiting to be served in a shop, a bank, a government department, a cinema, or anywhere that a number of people are all seeking a service at the same time. Australians generally wait until it is their turn to be served or attended to. Being on time for meetings and appointments is important.

Clothing

The types of clothing that people wear reflect the diversity in Australian society and the variations in climate. There are no laws or rules on clothing, but Australians are expected to wear certain clothing in work situations—most workplaces have dress standards.

Outside the work situation, clothing is a personal choice—people dress for comfort, the social situation or the weather. Clubs, movie theatres and other places require people to dress in neat, clean clothes and wear appropriate footwear.

Australia does not have an official national dress.

Celebrations and holidays

Most workers in Australia have around 12 national and state public holidays throughout the year, in addition to their annual holidays. These include:

New Year's Day, which is on 1 January every year. The most common time for people in Australia to take their annual leave is between mid-December and the end of January.

Christmas and Easter, two of the most important dates in the Christian calendar. Christmas Day is on 25 December every year, while Easter is observed at some point between late March and late April each year.

Boxing Day, the day after Christmas Day, is also a public holiday.

Australia Day, on 26 January, is the day Australians celebrate the founding of the first European settlement in Australia in 1788.

Anzac Day, on 25 April, is the day the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) landed at Gallipoli in Turkey in 1915 during World War I. This day is set aside in memory of those who fought for Australia and those who lost their lives in war. The day is a national public holiday and is commemorated with ceremonies, the laying of wreaths and military parades.

There are also a number of other non-national holidays which are celebrated only in specific states and territories (or celebrated in all states, but at different times of the year). These include Labour (or Eight-Hour) Day and the official birthday of Queen Elizabeth.

Melbourne Cup Day, which occurs on the first Tuesday of November each year, is a public holiday in metropolitan Melbourne. The Melbourne Cup is a world-famous horse race which brings Australia almost to a standstill. For a few minutes, most people, whether at work, school or home, stop to watch the race on television.

Further information

Attorney-General's Department
www.ag.gov.au

Australian Government culture
and recreation portal
www.culture.gov.au

Australian Sports Commission
www.ausport.gov.au

Department of Immigration and Citizenship
www.diac.gov.au

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Western Australian coastline.

