



British Hills Knowledge Base: Australia

Australia is both the smallest continent in the world, and the 6th largest country. It lies between the Indian and Pacific oceans, and is made up of the Australian mainland, the island of Tasmania, and many smaller islands.



The capital city of Australia is Canberra, though the largest city is Sydney. The currency of Australia is the Australian dollar, and the country has a population of about 26 million people. This means Australia has the lowest population of any inhabited continent.

Australia is also the driest inhabited continent, and is sometimes known as the "oldest continent," This is because, unlike the other inhabited continents, Australia has had far less physical change in geography caused by events such as volcanoes, ice ages, and changes in climate.

Humans first arrived in Australia around 65,000 years ago. These people are today called Aboriginals or the First Peoples of Australia, and they represent one of the oldest continuous cultures on Earth. There was wide variety in aboriginal culture, but many of these people were semi-nomadic and moved to different areas with the seasons. There was also a shared religious/cultural tradition which, in English, is called "the Dreamtime."

Much of Aboriginal history was lost with the arrival of Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries. Australia was discovered and claimed first by the Dutch in 1606. but it was the British who would control and settle the land. Famously, the British would use Australia as a penal colony - an open prison that criminals were sent to. The term 'criminals', of course, has a very different meaning today, and 'criminals' sent to the harsh environment of Australia included the poor, women, and children.

From the 18th century until 1901, Australia was not one united nation, but rather many different British colonies with different standards of living. Tasmania, for example, was often referred to as a hell on earth. It was even the site of what has been called "the only true genocide in English colonial history," when the aboriginal people of the island were completely exterminated or deported.

Australia was, however, very attractive to many for the possibility of a better life, and by the mid-18th century more people chose to go to Australia than were sent as punishment. By 1868, no more criminals were sent to Australia, but large numbers of British and European people traveled there to live and work.

Shockingly, it was official policy until the 1970s that only white Europeans be



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allowed to live in the country, in the racist "White Australia" policy.

Today, however, Australia is a stable, wealthy nation with a high standard of living. Around 30% of the nation's people are immigrants, making it a very multicultural society. The national language is English, and with its unique environment and wildlife both on land and in the sea, Australia attracts tourists from all around the world.