

Destination Australia

It's a totally inhospitable place, you shouldn't be here, the sun, you live about three quarters of a mile from it, I've seen insects walking around with kneepads, you fling yourselves into the sea when you're not actually walking around audibly crackling in the heat and the sea is full of jellyfish and sharks and other things who hate you, but you persist in living here... So you know, it's a jail, you live in, it's lovely, you've done wonderful things with it, but you're all still in denial.

Dylan Moran, Irish comedian, Melbourne International Comedy Festival

FAST FACTS

Population: 20,990,381

GDP growth: 3.5%

Inflation: 2.5%

Unemployment: 4.3%

Average gross weekly income (full-time work): \$1050

Tourism generates over \$8.1 billion annually (0.9% of Australia's GDP).

Australia's coastline is 25,800km long and is dusted with over 7000 beaches.

Australia currently exports around 793 million litres of wine per year, with a value of \$2.8 billion.

Australia has almost 112,600 Surf Life Savers, who collectively spend some 1.4 million hours patrolling Australian beaches, where they rescue approximately 10,000 people per year.

Yep, it's a tough life down under. The locals seem to be cursed with an insatiable yen for the unknown and they bend to it willingly, fleeing for weeks, months even, into that vast spot in the middle called the outback. And it's a big out back; you can travel indefinitely without coming within cooee of a phone call or an email. Nuts! Instead you have to make do with landscapes that shift from saffron to ochre beneath a seamless canopy of deep indigo. And then there are ancient Aboriginal cultures, dazzling salt pans, secretive reptiles, rough-cut canyons and pristine gorges. Some Australians simply go walkabout, traversing national parks filled with such devilish critters as koalas, sugar gliders and knee-high wallabies. Others whiz through world heritage rainforests on mountain bikes or apply ropes to their limbs, chalk to their hands, truly skimpy shorts to their nether regions and scale lofty summits like bronze-backed insects. And some simply launch themselves into the sky with parachutes attached to their backs.

Then there are the Australians who feel separation pains if they stray from the coast. So they don't. They sport permanent golden hues, adopt languid gaits and wear cheeky grins. They glue themselves to surfboards, kayaks and boats and loll in the surf for hours (days even!). As if that weren't enough, they flee to the Whitsunday Islands (Qld), the Ningaloo Reef (WA) or the immense Great Barrier Reef (Qld) and spend days under the water defending themselves from kaleidoscopic marine life, colossal whale sharks, giant turtles and mischievous dolphins.

Fortunately, this lovely country is not without its urban havens, and in its dizzying cities you'll find folk who indulge in saner delights. Rather than risk life and limb in the feisty Australian bush, they litter the beaches like comatose seals, reluctant to move unless emergency dictates. Or they populate pubs with enormous beer gardens and focus all their energy on the pint/schooner bicep curl. They watch hours of sport and possess a vast amount of knowledge about most games, without ever having actually played them. Of course Australia's metropolises also offer glorious ways to wrap your head around the country's culture in myriad museums, theatres, festivals and galleries. A solid study of the bars and restaurants will reveal the population's helpless addiction to coffee, seafood, organics and global cuisine; and the wine industry delights discerning connoisseurs from around the world.

Ask an Australian what issues make them tick and you'll get a diversity of responses to match the multicultural mix. In general, they're a pretty laid-back mob and the fundamentals of family, friends and fun tend to keep them relatively placated. To avoid 'spirited' discussions it's best to keep talk regarding lacklustre performances of Australian sports

teams to a minimum. Many Australians feel a strong connection to the land, regardless of their background, and in recent years, the fragile state of the environment has emerged as a universal equalizer. As much of the world tackles climate change at a theoretical level, Australians experience it at a micro level. This is the driest continent in the world, and water restrictions are now the norm in most cities. But Australians tend to face such difficulties with the same cocky spirit as anything else, and although the question of when will it rain/how will it rain/will it please bloody rain is a constant, they cope with little complaint.

So yep, it's a tough life down under. But only if you're averse to wide open skies, dramatic landscapes, countless activities, fine wining and dining, and friendly locals. We know, because we've done our research.

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Getting Started

Australia is so vast and diverse it fulfils the full spectrum of adventure fantasies. A well-developed tourism industry and ample information provides options for travellers on all budgets and enables you to land in any city or well-touristed destination with little more than your first night's accommodation sorted. An intrepid road trip through the outback or tropical Top End requires more investigation and planning. The most important thing to remember is that Australia is big – *really* big – so time is of the essence. Think about what you want to see and how you're going to get there, and then make sure you don't underestimate how long you'll need for your visit.

WHEN TO GO

Truth be told, any time is a good time to be *somewhere* in Australia. When it's cold down south, it's magnificent in the north and the Centre; when it's too hot and sweaty up north, the southern states are at their natural finest. There are also the numerous festivals and other public spectacles that are on show every month, from the summertime food-and-wine banquets and large-scale concerts, through mid-year arts celebrations, to end-of-year footy finals, horse races and yachting contests.

The seasons in Australia are the antithesis of those in Europe and North America. Summer is December to February; the weather and longer daylight hours are tailor-made for swimming and other outdoor activities across much of the country. Summer is also school holiday period and consequently high season for most places. Unless you want to compete with hordes of grimly determined local holiday-makers in 'Are we there yet?' mode for road space, places on tours, seats on transport, hotel rooms, camp sites, restaurant tables and the best vantage points at major attractions, you should try to avoid Australia's prime destinations during the peak of school (January) and public holidays. See Holidays (p1008) for more information. During these times, you're also likely to encounter spontaneous rises in the price of everything from accommodation to petrol.

Winter is June to August, when temperatures drop with the latitude. This is officially designated the tourism low season for most of the country, but not the Northern Territory, Queensland and top of Western Australia. Winter in this northern stretch offers respite from the humidity of the wet season (which runs roughly from October to March, with the heaviest rain falling from January onwards; the Dry lasts from April to September) and the temperatures are highly agreeable. It's also when roads and tracks are most accessible up north. Autumn (March to May) and spring (September to November) both enjoy a lack of climatic extremes everywhere.

COSTS & MONEY

Australia is affordable by Western European and American standards, but certainly not a budget destination compared to say Southeast Asia. Your biggest costs will be accommodation and transport.

If you're a midrange traveller hiring a car, seeing the sights, staying in hotels and motels, and enjoying the fabulous food and grog, budget for \$110 to \$160 per person per day. In cities you can push that figure up by \$50 or so, but in less-touristed areas you can reduce it by around \$30. Escalated petrol prices make multi-week road trips in a 4WD an expensive affair, but small, economical 2WDs are still wallet-friendly.

Travellers with a demanding brood in tow will find there are many ways to keep kids inexpensively satisfied, including beach and park visits, camping grounds and motels with pools and games rooms, kids' menus and youth/family concessions for attractions. For more information on travelling with children, see p998.

At the low-cost end of travel, if you camp or stay in hostels, cook your own meals, restrain your urge for entertainment and move around by public transport, you could probably eke out an existence on \$70 to \$80 per day; for a budget that realistically enables you to have a good time, aim for \$100 per day.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Australia's enormity of social and geographical extremes – from cityscapes to isolation, yuppies to nomads, outback to the reefs – can be hard to wrap your head around. Fortunately, some inspiring, thought-provoking and just plain entertaining books have been written about this country.

Knockabout Girl (2007) by Pip Newling is an endearing and humorous account of the author's experience moving to Halls Creek in remote Western Australia at the age of 23. It provides an insightful snapshot of life in remote Australia.

Steve Strevens' *Slow River: A Journey Down the Murray* (2006) portrays an exploration and love affair with one of Australia's great waterways and its myriad towns, communities and wilderness.

David Astle's *Cassowary Crossing* (2005) is a gem for off-the-beaten-trackers with a quirky look at some of Australia's weirdest destinations.

In Tasmania (2004) by Nicholas Shakespeare is a mixture of erudite history and the contemporary musings of the author, who moves to Tasmania's east coast and discovers a personal ancestry.

For comfortably predictable reading, pick up a copy of Bill Bryson's *Down Under* (2001, also titled *In a Sunburned Country*), in which the mass-market humorist takes his usual well-rehearsed pot-shots at a large target.

Bypass: The History of a Road (2004) by Michael McGirr weaves folklore, history, contemporary characters and the touching personal journey of an ex-priest cycling the Hume Hwy from Melbourne to Sydney.

Around Australia in 80 Days (2004) by Jonathon Green is essential reading for anyone planning to eat/sleep/live out of their vehicle while touring Australia, with 20,000km worth of wit, advice and inspiration.

HOW MUCH?

Coffee	\$2.50-3.50
Schooner/midi of beer	\$4/2.50
Meat pie	\$3.50
1L petrol	\$1.10-1.40
Metropolitan train ticket	\$3-6

See Climate Charts (p999) for information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A willingness to call absolutely everyone 'mate'
- Taking yourself less seriously, for the inevitable times when locals 'take the piss'
- A decent hangover cure for prolonged bouts of 'sinking piss'
- Sewing a pouch onto the front of your jeans, so that stray kangaroos have somewhere to rest when they hop into your hotel
- A travel insurance policy (p1008) covering skydiving, bungee jumping, diving, skiing and possibly goanna pulling (p190)
- Extra-strength insect repellent to fend off merciless flies and mosquitoes (p1002)
- Sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat to deflect fierce UV rays (p1057)
- A towel and bathers/togs/swimmers/swimming costume/cossie/trunks/Speedos/budgie smugglers...for the beach
- Good maps for outback meanders and good sherry for cold, quiet outback nights

TOP 10



TOP FESTIVALS

Australians celebrate at the drop of a hat. Music and arts feature highly on the festival calendar, but cultural celebrations get plenty of attention too. The following festivals showcase Australian energy and diversity at its finest.

- 1 **Big Day Out** (p1006) In Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and the Gold Coast in January.
- 2 **Country Music Festival** (p207) In Tamworth in January.
- 3 **Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras** (p115) In Sydney in February.
- 4 **Womadelaide** (p717) In Adelaide in March.
- 5 **East Coast International Blues & Roots Music Festival** (p197) Held over Easter in Byron Bay.
- 6 **Melbourne International Film Festival** (p494) In July and August in Melbourne.
- 7 **Garma Festival** (p791) In August in Arnhem Land.
- 8 **Alice Desert Festival** (p846) In September in Alice Springs.
- 9 **Falls Festival** Held in December in Lorne (p531) and Hobart (p623).
- 10 **Perth International Arts Festival** (p887) In November in Perth.

TOP SOUNDTRACKS

Music has a knack for capturing a landscape, event or era. The following albums do this for many Australians, conjuring up long breezy road trips, boozy beer-garden sessions, memorable backyard parties, summer afternoons on a warm beach, endless nights in neon-lit clubs, and long arguments about politics in the wee small hours. See p51 for more musical inspiration.

- 1 **A Brief History...** (2004) The Waifs
- 2 **Swingshift** (1981) Cold Chisel
- 3 **Claim** (1989) Not Drowning Waving
- 4 **Songs from the South: The Best of Paul Kelly** (1997) Paul Kelly
- 5 **Messenger** (1999) Jimmy Little
- 6 **Diesel & Dust** (1987) Midnight Oil
- 7 **Tribal Voice** (1991) Yothu Yindi
- 8 **Vulture Street** (2004) Powderfinger
- 9 **The Boatman's Call** (1997) Nick Cave
- 10 **John Butler** (2000) John Butler

MUST-SEE MOVIES

If you're in need of instant inspiration, nothing provides a quicker fix than a good flick. These quintessential Australian films, which range from the intelligent and thrilling to the uber-cheesy, will fill your head with larrikin wit and breathtaking landscapes. See p48 for some reviews of these and other films.

- 1 **Rabbit-Proof Fence** (2002) Director: Phillip Noyce
- 2 **Jindabyne** (2006) Director: Ray Lawrence
- 3 **Kenny** (2006) Director: Clayton Jacobson
- 4 **Two Hands** (1999) Director: Gregor Jordan
- 5 **Somersault** (2004) Director: Cate Shortland
- 6 **Gettin' Square** (2003) Director: Jonathon Teplitzky
- 7 **The Sound of One Hand Clapping** (1998) Director: Richard Flanagan
- 8 **Beneath Clouds** (2002) Director: Ivan Sven
- 9 **Little Fish** (2005) Director: Rowan Woods
- 10 **Gallipoli** (1981) Director: Peter Weir

Travels in Outback Australia (2003) by Andrew Stevenson aptly portrays the difficulty and wonder of traversing the Australian outback, from the diversity of characters to the lonely but sublime landscape and the opportunity to discover Aboriginal culture.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Australian Government (www.gov.au) Gateway to all federal, state, territory and local government sites.

Australian Newspapers Online (www.nla.gov.au/npapers) National Library—maintained listing of Australian newspaper websites.

Australian Tourist Commission (www.australia.com) Official federal government-run tourism site with nationwide info for visitors.

Department of the Environment & Heritage (www.deh.gov.au/parks/links/index.html) Links to info on Australia's national parks and reserves.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Get quick Australian info and inspiration from the 'Destinations' tab, a rundown of guidebooks from the bookshop, accommodation reviews and bookings from 'Haystack', and travellers trading information on the Thorn Tree.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

EAST COAST RUN

Six to Eight Weeks/Sydney to Cairns

Lured by sun and surf, both international and domestic travellers hug the east coast between Sydney and Cairns, making it the most well-trodden path in Australia.

Start with the bright lights and glitz of **Sydney** (p91) and then meander north along the Pacific Hwy through central and northern New South Wales (NSW). Hang out in the **Hunter Valley** (p160) for vino-quaffing and national-park tramping, and stop for watersports in family-friendly **Port Stephens** (p165), **Myall Lakes National Park** (p169) and **Coffs Harbour** (p186). Skip up to **Byron Bay** (p194) for New Age indulgences and great beaches, then head over the Queensland border into the honey-hued, surf-addicted **Gold Coast** (p327). Pause in **Brisbane** (p295) and then amble up through **Noosa** (p344) and the glorious **Sunshine Coast** (p339).

The Bruce Hwy wends along the stunning coast into the far north. Nature lovers should visit the whale-watching haven of **Hervey Bay** (p357) and then make their way further north, up to the blissful **Whitsunday Islands** (p393), the coral charms of the **Great Barrier Reef** (p390) and the scuba-diving nexus of **Cairns** (p421).

The East Coast Run is 2864 kilometres of bare, blissful beaches, dense national parks, dizzying theme parks, serious surfing, marine wonders and urban fun. You might do it in a fortnight, but what a waste – take a month or two and chill out.



FROM THE WEST INTO THE OUTBACK

Six to Eight Weeks/Perth to Alice Springs

This route gives you the best of the country's lush southwest and then takes you through the burnt, bare and beautiful outback. Start in **Perth** (p875) and exhaust all of your urban urges in the great pubs, galleries, bars and restaurants. Then snake your way south via the stunning beaches of Cape Naturaliste, before camping out in **Margaret River** (p912). Go surfing and winery-hopping before continuing south, to **Augusta** (p915) and magnificent Cape Leeuwin, where whales drop by. Meander through the giant old-growth forests of the southwest and rest a while in **Albany** (p923) for its historic architecture and world-class diving. Follow the southern coast to **Esperance** (p927) where you can visit seals, penguins and seabirds in the Archipelago of the Recherche.

Bid the coast farewell for a spell and head north to the iconic outback town of **Kalgoorlie-Boulder** (p931). Play 'wild west', succumb to hedonism and buy a miner a beer. Then hit the Eyre Hwy and follow it through to South Australia (SA), past the Nullarbor Plain and into the coastal towns, surfing beaches and fishing hideouts that skirt the Great Southern Bight. Pause in ambient **Port Lincoln** (p768) for fishing expeditions and all things tuna-related, and then climb north to **Port Augusta** (p766).

Hit the Stuart Hwy – a must for avid road trippers – and journey up to the opal-tinted dugout town of **Coober Pedy** (p781). You're now well and truly into an 'outback odyssey' and the obvious route is through the Simpson Desert to awe-inspiring **Uluru (Ayers Rock)** (p862) and the spectacular, vertigo-inducing **Watarrka (Kings Canyon) National Park** (p859). Finish up in the desert oasis of **Alice Springs** (p838) in the heart of the steep-sided **MacDonnell Ranges** (p851).



Pack a tent, do your homework (p73) and bid the neighbours farewell for a while – this route takes in around 4750km of the best of the southwest and the outback's big empty. Make the most out of the landscape and take a good two months.

THE GIANT LOOP

Six Months/Sydney to Sydney

After bidding *au revoir* to **Sydney** (p91) and following your suntanned nose up the east coast into Queensland (see p26), veer west from **Townsville** (p397) towards the tunnel-threaded Queensland mining town of **Mt Isa** (p376). Leave a vigorous trail of footprints (via **Tennant Creek**; p836) in the red centre, where you can inspect **Alice Springs** (p838) and the awesome splendour of **Uluru (Ayers Rock)** (p862) before doglegging it up to **Darwin** (p794). Cross into Western Australia (WA) for a pit stop at pretty **Kununurra** (p988), then negotiate the Great Northern Hwy to the cosmopolitan beachside getaway of **Broome** (p972).

Take a peninsular sidetrack to the snorkel-friendly **Cape Range National Park** (p965) and the marine brilliance of **Ningaloo Reef** (p965), followed by a date with a bottlenose dolphin at **Monkey Mia** (p956). Continue south to the 'life is a beach' city of **Perth** (p875) and the latte-flavoured enclave of **Fremantle** (p896), then wine away the hours at **Margaret River** (p912) until you're ready to tackle the flat immensity of the **Nullarbor Plain** (p937).

In SA bushwalkers can trudge towards the challenging **Flinders Ranges** (p772), while tiplers can refuel their palates in the **Barossa Valley** (p743). Beyond **Adelaide** (p707) it's a shortish trek into Victoria (Vic) to check out surfboard-strewn **Torquay** (p529) and cultured **Melbourne** (p474), from where there's a ferry to **Devonport** (p673), your gateway to the stunning island highlights of **Tasmania** (p605).

Further along the Victorian coast, enjoy the secluded wilderness of **Wilson's Promontory National Park** (p594) and spend a couple of days somewhere along the **Ninety Mile Beach** (p597), then cruise around **Narooma** (p235) on the southern NSW coast, and bask in idyllic **Jervis Bay** (p233). After you've detoured to the national capital, **Canberra** (p265), return to the bright lights of Sydney.

Experiencing the furthest reaches of the land can mean tallying up over 14,000km of highway, not counting side trips to beaches, forests, mountains, reefs, towns... Where you start and finish is up to your imagination, but allow for around six months of discovery.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

THE MURRAY, OUTBACK AND HINTERLAND ROUTE

Six Weeks/Melbourne to Byron Bay

This trip provides a mixed bag of national parks, outback vistas, river journeys and country hospitality. It begins in **Melbourne** (p474), the metropolitan melting pot of Oz. Caffeinate yourself and delve into its wonderful multiculturalism, then head west along the (aptly titled) Western Fwy into the goldfields. Stop in **Ballarat** (p562) for fine art, political history, and a bout of gold mining. Head further west into the immense and rugged beauty of the **Grampians National Park (Gariwerd)** (p545) for superb bushwalking and camping. Exit in the north and use **Horsham** (p549) as a base to visit **Little Desert National Park** (p550) for wildflowers and **Mt Arapiles State Park** (p550) for world-renowned rock-climbing.

Make your way to the Sunraysia Hwy and **Mildura** (p552). Take a paddle boat down the Murray River and an indigenous tour to **Mungo National Park** (p262). Head into the vast NSW outback and course the Silver City Hwy to **Broken Hill** (p257), with its rich history of artists, poets, Aboriginal culture and mining.

From here follow the long Barrier Hwy into the heart of NSW and take time out in **Dubbo** (p219), where you can go wildlife-spotting at the outstanding **Western Plains Zoo** (p219). Then take the Newell Hwy north onto the Oxley Hwy for a few days of good ol' country fun in **Tamworth** (p206). Scoot yer boots and then amble up to **Armidale** (p209) for verdant foliage and heritage buildings. Drive the breathtaking **Waterfall Way** (p210), pop into picturesque **Bellingen** (p212) and **Dorrigo** (p210) and then hightail it to the New Age, lush, remote NSW **Far North Coast Hinterland** (p201), before finishing up in **Byron Bay** (p194).



Escape the coast altogether and muddle your way through Victoria's verdant interior, New South Wales' amber outback and a rich, New Age hinterland. This route traverses around 2500km and four to six weeks will do it justice.

ACROSS THE CONTINENT

One to Two Months/Cairns to Perth

If you prefer solitude and travelling rough you'll love the Australian outback, which is crisscrossed with roads and tracks, some sealed and others little more than a pair of dirty ruts. There are many potential hazards in heading off the beaten track, so wherever you go, make sure you're well informed and fully prepared – see Extra Precautions for Outback Driving (p81) for more information.

The following is a long, difficult route from the tropics to the Indian Ocean. Start in **Cairns** (p421), gateway to the arduous Mulligan Hwy that (in case you're interested) snakes towards the tip of **Cape York** (p459). Head west from Cairns to **Normanton** (p419), the biggest town in the Gulf of Carpentaria region, then south down the Matilda Hwy to the mining roughhouse of **Mt Isa** (p376).

To the southwest is the frontier outback town of Urandangi, after which you run into the **Plenty Hwy** (p1033), a monotonous – or to some, gloriously desolate – road with plenty of bone-jolting challenges (4WD recommended). Over 500km later you'll hit the Stuart Hwy and then the dead-centre city of **Alice Springs** (p838).

The Lasseter Hwy turn-off takes you to weighty **Uluru (Ayers Rock)** (p862) and the captivating **Kata Tjuta (the Olgas)** (p863) rock formations, beyond which is the beginning of the **Great Central Rd** (p1032). This lonely trail, suitable for well-prepared 2WDs and lined with saltbush, spinifex and desert oaks, stretches 750km to the tiny gold-mining town of **Laverton** (p936), from where it's another 400km to the gold-mining concern of **Kalgoorlie-Boulder** (p931). Finally, the ocean beckons from behind the beaches of Scarborough and Cottesloe in **Perth** (p875).

Few roads are less travelled than this monster 4560km trail from the tidal rivers of the Gulf Savannah to the pounding surf at the bottom of Western Australia, with undulating desertscape between. Conditions can be unpredictable, so plan on up to two months.



TAILORED TRIPS

WORLD HERITAGE WONDERS

...Australia's full of 'em. Let's start in the west with the stunning peninsulas, rich marine park and indigenous cultural tours of **Shark Bay** (p954) and the colossal domes of the **Bungle Bungles** in **Purnululu National Park** (p987).

The sultry Top End is home to the world-famous **Kakadu National Park** (p819), full of rare species and ancient rock art.

Far North Queensland encompasses the enormous **Wet Tropics World Heritage Area** (p453), sheltering a huge array of flora and fauna. Offshore the wilderness is just as rich beneath the waves along the **Great Barrier Reef** (p390). Potter south and you'll discover **Fraser Island** (p360), the world's largest sand island, brimming with forests, mineral lakes and wildlife.

In the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves in NSW there's **Nightcap** (p203), the **Border Ranges** (p205) and **Mt Warning National Parks** (p205); all prime bushwalking territory. New England boasts the dramatic and rugged **Gibraltar Range & Washpool National Parks** (p213), **Richmond Range National Park** (p215) and the superb **Dorrigo National Park** (p211).

Then there's the glorious Tasmanian wilderness, with the mighty rivers and snow-capped summits of **Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park** (p690), pristine lakes of **Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park** (p691), glacial landscape of the **Walls of Jerusalem National Park** (p677) and virgin rainforest of **Southwest National Park** (p695).

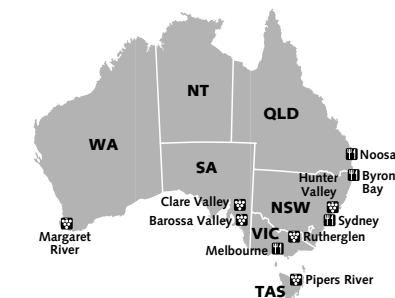


GASTRONOMIC DELIGHTS

If gastronomic pleasures are your caper then Australia is your arcadia. In Western Australia (WA) you can mix superlative wines with marinated marron (see p64) in the wineries surrounding **Margaret River** (p912). If nothing appeals to you more than following your bouquet-detecting schnozz head to the stalwart of the country's internationally praised viticulture scene – South Australia's (SA) **Barossa Valley** (p743), where the 60 plus wineries release more bottled varieties than you can pop a cork at. The roll call of SA's worthy vine-covered bits continues to the north in the Riesling-proficient **Clare Valley** (p750).

Another prominent wine-making region is the **Hunter Valley** (p160) in NSW, producing outstanding Shiraz and Semillon varieties. The rustic Victorian district **Rutherglen** (p560) specialises in fortified wines like Muscat, Tokay and port that owe a debt to its hot climate. In **Melbourne** (p500), locals rate their need to dine out on an even keel with oxygen, and global flavours and exquisite Mod Oz are up for grabs for every budget. **Sydney** (p124) rivals of course, but with a voguish cutting edge. Queensland's **Noosa** (p347) is a breeding ground for culinary inventiveness, and for salt-of-the-earth organic cuisine done with pure class, head to **Byron Bay** (p194).

The region around **Pipers River** (p661) in Tasmania releases many superb vintages that are characterised by their full, fruity flavours.



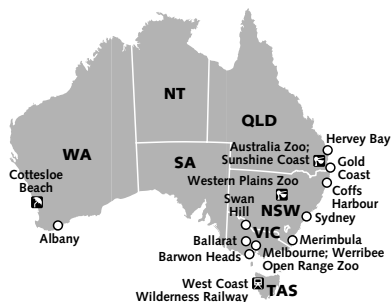
CHILDISH DELIGHTS

Australia's smorgasbord of man-made and natural sights makes it one giant playground for kids. Get them giddy on the feisty rides and theme parks of Queensland's **Gold Coast** (p327) and then temper the experience with the bounty of wildlife opportunities. Go whale-watching in **Albany** (p923) or **Hervey Bay** (p357) and then get them up close and personal with furred, feathered and finned critters from around the globe at Queensland's world-famous **Australia Zoo** (p341) New South Wales' **Western Plains Zoo** (p219) and Victoria's **Werribee Open Range Zoo** (p514).

A refreshing ocean dip must be near the top of everyone's outdoor activities list, with beaches such as those at **Merimbula** (p237) and **Coffs Harbour** (p187) in NSW, **Cottesloe Beach** (p885) in WA, **Barwon Heads** (p520) in Victoria, and numerous seaside spots in Queensland's **Sunshine Coast** (p339).

In Tasmania, the **West Coast Wilderness Railway** (p688) is an unforgettable ride across some of the west-coast's most exhilarating terrain, between Queenstown and Strahan. There's also stage-managed fun at period places like Swan Hill's **Pioneer Settlement** (p556), with seats up for grabs on a paddle steamer, vintage cars and horse-drawn wagons; or Ballarat's **Sovereign Hill** (p562) with period-dressed gold-digging fun.

Don't forget the urban fun – there is plenty of hands-on exploration to be found at the **Melbourne Museum** (p488) and at the **Art Gallery of NSW** (p106).



GET FESTIVE

Australians will seize on just about any excuse for a celebration, and while you're visiting this country it only makes sense to follow the light-hearted, self-indulgent lead of its inhabitants. The year gets off to a champagne-swilling start when fireworks explode high above Sydney Harbour on **New Year's Eve** (p116). The new year is also vigorously celebrated further south during the **Hobart Summer Festival** (p623), when Taswegians stuff themselves with food, wine and song.

In late January the streets of Tamworth in NSW are littered with broken guitar strings and broken hearts during its famous **Country Music Festival** (p207), while Sydney vamps itself up in February for the **Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras** (p118).

The exuberant **Adelaide Festival of Arts** (p717) and its eccentric sibling, **Adelaide Fringe** (p717), fill the South Australian capital with culture and idiosyncratic performances in March every two years. And in April in Victoria, Melbourne repeatedly smacks its own funny bone with the outstanding **International Comedy Festival** (p493).

In September, the **Brisbane Riverfestival** (p311) captivates the city with 10 days of performance, art and celebrations, and the city gets a musical work out during October's **Livid** (p312) festival.

In the Northern Territory, the **Garma Festival** (p791), held in August, celebrates indigenous culture in Arnhem Land.



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On the Road

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JUSTINE VAISUTIS

Coordinating Author

Melbourne flaunts its finest qualities on a sunny afternoon. On this particular Sunday, Flinders St Station hums in the background from my vantage point on Southbank, as a multicultural festival throbs behind the already buzzing Federation Sq.

BECCA BLOND

One of the highlights of my trip to Oz was petting a kangaroo at the Australia Zoo, Steve Irwin's hometown pet project on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. Experiencing first hand the tickle of a kangaroo's tongue or the bristle of a koala's fur is unbelievable, and something I won't soon forget.

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LINDSAY BROWN

Bushwalking in the Flinders in January is not as masochistic as it may seem. A hike was just the antidote to days plying the outback highways. Further east is my destination, Rawnsley Bluff, a red sandstone rampart glowering over the undulating hills towards the Chace Range.

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GEORGE DUNFORD

Travel writers don't buy a lot of souvenirs (they're excess baggage waiting to happen) and pets just make it harder to go away. In the Dandenongs, however, this corrugated-iron goat struck me as a good solution: no need to feed this goat. She fends for herself.

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TERRY CARTER

During a gruelling drive, we passed an untold number of brilliant surfing breaks. But the Margaret River area, Western Australia's spiritual home of surfing, is something else. The beauty of the wild coast, fine wine and fab food is unmatched... Australia, you bloody beauty!

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ALAN MURPHY

The Yorke Peninsula was the first place I headed for after Adelaide and I was surprised just how far, just how remote and just how spectacular Innes National Park was, at the tip of the peninsula. This sign caught my eye on the way – simple, welcoming and a little cheeky.

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SIMONE EGGER

The Territory's hugeness made me love the little things; little things like walking a section of the 20-day Larapinta Trail – albeit a 10-minute section, which this three-hour loop in the West MacDonnells incidentally covers.

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KATJA GASKELL

It'd been another brilliant, cloudless Queensland day and I'd spent most of it exploring 'Straddie' (North Stradbroke Island) by 4WD. In the afternoon I took a walk and saw several turtles, dolphins and manta rays swimming below – it was awesome!

ROWAN MCKINNON

We stopped at the Craggs outside Warrnambool on Victoria's wild western coast. This is a beautiful stretch of rugged coastline of rocky cliffs and white-sand beaches. That's four-year-old Wes in front – he and big sister Lauren did 6000km around regional Victoria in the back seat of the car.

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SARAH WINTLE

There's something about stuffing your backpack and embarking on an adventure. I always get an incredible sense of joy when I dig it out, and this trip was no different. In fact, travelling around your own country can be more enlightening than you think.

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CHARLES RAWLINGS-WAY

Tasmania looks small on the map, but bendy, two-lane roads prevail – 100km is never an hour's drive. Long days traversing rainy roads delivered me to Stanley – a walkable, pocket-sized town. A car-free day! But I was being lazy – 'a lap of the map' in Tassie is an essential Australian road trip.

LARA DUNSTON

Our first day, we swept north from Perth, through the Swan Valley to Cervantes. Nothing prepared me for the magic of the Pinnacles at sunset. Sublime. If other landscapes are as spectacular as this, I thought, it will be bliss. And 13,000km later? It was.