

AUSTRALIA – KEY FACTS

<http://www.australia.com/about/key-facts/cities-states-territories.aspx>

Geography



Covering a total area of 7.69 million square kilometres, mainland Australia is **the world's largest island - but smallest continent**.

In distance, the continent stretches about 3700 kilometres from north to south and 4000 kilometres from east to west, making it **the sixth-largest nation** after Russia, Canada, China, the United States and Brazil.

Australia is also **the only continent that is governed as a single country**. It is sometimes informally referred to as an 'island' continent, surrounded by oceans.

Its ocean territory is also the third-largest in the world, spanning three oceans and covering around 12 million square kilometres. Australia also has one of the most urbanised and coast-dwelling populations in the world, with more than 80 per cent of residents living within 100 kilometres of the coastline. Australia currently has a population of **almost 23 million people**.

Australian Government

Australia has **three levels of government** – the federal Australian Government, the governments of the six states and two territories, and around 700 local government authorities. Australia has been a nation with a single national government since 1 January

1901. Although it is divided into states and territories which have their own state governments, we are all united as one nation.

Australia is a **constitutional monarchy** with Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom as its head of state, which is why Australia's national flag comprises the Union Jack (along with the Commonwealth Star and the Southern Cross). The Queen appoints **the Governor-General of Australia** as her representative on the advice of the elected Australian Government. The Governor-General appoints ministers on the advice of the Prime Minister. Australia's system of government is based on the liberal democratic tradition, which includes religious tolerance and freedom of speech and association.

The Australian Constitution sets out the functions of the Australian Government, such as foreign relations and trade, defence and immigration. States and territories are responsible for matters not assigned to the federal government.

There are two major political groups that usually form government, federally and in the states: the Australian Labor Party, and the Coalition which is a formal grouping of the Liberal Party and its minor partner, the National Party. This majority party or coalition becomes the government, decided at an election by Australian citizens. The other major political party or coalition is called 'the opposition'.

Cities, states and territories

Australia is divided into **six states** and **two territories**.



Canberra is the national capital and the centre of government. It is located approximately 290 kilometres south of Sydney in the **Australian Capital Territory** (ACT). Canberra lies on the ancient lands of the Indigenous Ngunnawal people, and its name is thought to mean 'meeting place', from the Aboriginal word 'Kamberra'. It is home to important national institutions, including the Australian Parliament and the High Court of Australia.

New South Wales is Australia's oldest and most populated state. It was originally settled as a penal colony on the shores of Port Jackson where the bustling capital city of Sydney now stands. More than a third of Australians live in New South Wales, and **Sydney** is the nation's largest city.

Victoria is the smallest of the mainland states in size but the second most populated. **Melbourne** is the capital and is Australia's second most populated city. During the gold rush of the 1850s, it became one of the world's largest and wealthiest cities. Melbourne is sometimes referred to as the "cultural capital of Australia" and is the birthplace of Australian film, television, art, dance and music. Victorians' enthusiasm for sport is also legendary and this is where Australian Rules football began.

Queensland is Australia's second-largest state in size. The state capital is **Brisbane**, the third most populated city in Australia. Queenslanders enjoy more winter sunshine and warmth than most other Australian states and it's perfect for all types of outdoor activities and water sports. Queensland is also home to the world famous **Great Barrier Reef** as well as five World Heritage listed areas.

South Australia is a state in the southern central part of the country which covers some of the most arid parts of the continent. It is the fourth largest of Australia's states and shares its borders with all of the mainland states and the Northern Territory. The state capital is **Adelaide**, the fifth-largest city in Australia. South Australia has a thriving arts scene and is sometimes known as the 'Festival State', with more than 500 festivals taking place there every year.

At the top end of Australia lies the **Northern Territory**. **Darwin**, on the northern coast, is the capital, and Alice Springs the principal inland town. Alice Springs is the physical heart of Australia, almost exactly at the nation's geographical centre. The Northern Territory is home to the famous **Uluru** (Ayers Rock), Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) and **Kakadu National Park**.

Western Australia is Australia's largest state by area. About three-quarters of the state's population live in the capital **Perth**, which is the fourth most populated city in Australia. The east of the state is mostly desert while to the west the state is bound by almost 13000 kilometres of pristine coastline. In the 1890s gold was discovered and mining is still one of the state's biggest industries.

Tasmania is separated from mainland Australia by Bass Strait and is the smallest state in Australia. The capital, **Hobart**, was founded in 1804 as a **penal colony**, and is Australia's second oldest capital city after Sydney. One-fifth of Tasmania is covered by national parks and

wilderness areas. It is one of the world's most mountainous islands whose geology reflects Australia's connection millions of years ago with Antarctica.

Australia also administers **Ashmore and Cartier Islands, Christmas Island, the Cocos (or Keeling) Islands, the Coral Sea Islands, Heard and McDonald Islands, Norfolk Island** and the **Australian Antarctic Territory** (covering 42 per cent of the Antarctic continent) as external territories.

Multicultural Australia

Australian society is made up of people from a rich variety of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds, and this is a defining feature of modern Australian society. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have inhabited Australia for tens of thousands of years. Most Australians are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants who arrived during the past two hundred years **from more than 200 countries**. The most commonly spoken language in Australia is **English**, and the most commonly practiced religion is **Christianity**, although foreign languages and other religions are also common.