

# Mike's Australia



Mike was born in England and emigrated to Australia as a young man. He started his working life as an astrophysicist and made his way into tourism via the scuba diving industry. He built one of Australia's first backpacker hostels. The stories in this book were written to entertain and provide travel advice.

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## 1 Big Country



**Some call it the world's smallest continent. Others say it's the world's largest island. Either way ... AUSTRALIA IS BIG!**

The distance from Perth to Cairns is about 3,500 km (2,000 miles), which is roughly the same as Gibraltar to St Petersburg, Vancouver to New Orleans or Tokyo to Hanoi.

Australia is almost exactly the same size as the USA (minus Alaska) but has only 23 million people to America's 300 million. Apart from the coastal fringes, it is a dry sunbaked land. The south has a temperate (sometimes cold) climate and the top third is in the tropics.

A range of mountains runs down the east coast. Rain falls on the seaward side and this is where the bulk of the population lives. Further areas of habitation are to be found in soggy Tasmania, around Adelaide and in the vicinity of Perth. The rest of the continent (marked yellow on the map) is sparsely populated.

## 2 The Outback



**It's Australia's "Never Never Land": If you *never never* go you'll *never ever* know what it's like. But where the hell is it?**

That's a frequently asked question and you'll get a heap of different answers from a heap of different people. City folk talk about their outback cousins but the cousins don't necessarily see themselves that way.

Eighty percent of Australians live within a few hours drive of the sea. When you leave the settled areas on the coast and travel inland you enter a different world. The trees get smaller, woodland gives way to scrub and scrub to semi-desert.

The huge, sparsely inhabited interior of Australia stretches all the way from the eastern coastal mountains to the Indian Ocean. It is about the size of the USA (minus Alaska and the east coast). On the map of Europe, it would reach from the Atlantic to the Black Sea.

When I use the term outback I'm talking about Australia's vast dry interior. There are few bitumen (tarmac) roads and few settlements. Names on the map may be no more than that. Sometimes, when you reach them, all you find is a post with a name on it. Bear this in mind when you go travelling. If you have an accident, help may be further away than you think.

Most outback towns have populations numbered in hundreds rather than thousands. The exceptions are mining centres such as Mt Isa and Broken Hill. Apart from mining, the only major industry is cattle and sheep grazing. Homesteads are frequently fifty or more kilometres apart and reached by dirt roads.

Homestead kids receive their early education, via the internet, through the School of the Air. Older children attend boarding schools in the cities.

Over much of the interior, the majority of people are of Aboriginal descent. They live in small communities and own large tracts of land. You require their permission to enter these lands.

Some people think the outback is boring. Others find it fascinating and I'm one of them. It is so totally different from the crowded world in which most of us live. Life is different and so are the people. Some have roots that go back generations. Others were born overseas or have parents who were born overseas. They come from all over Europe and Asia but have a lot in common. When you live in a remote area you have to be resourceful and that shapes the person you become.

In recent years, large numbers of young people from Europe have taken jobs in the outback. On a recent trip to Central Australia I met a lot. The locals welcome them. They fill the gap left when young Australians migrate from the outback to the cities.

The photos, below, were taken on that trip. The first is of a road that has recently been graded and is in good condition. Non-sealed roads get badly churned up when it rains and vehicles drive over them. Recent policy is to close them to non-essential traffic (e.g. tourists) when that happens. Bear that in mind if you have a tight schedule.

The last three photos are of the small town of Tibooburra in the far north-west of New South Wales. It is famous for its pub which was frequented by (now) famous artists. As undiscovered geniuses, they earned their keep by painting every nook and cranny of the place. Their later, more transportable, works fetch a fortune when they come up for sale.





Driving in the outback has a lot in common with driving anywhere else ... until something goes wrong. It is easy to forget how vulnerable you are as you drive along, cocooned in air-conditioned luxury. It's as well to remember that people die in the outback when their cars break down.

Aboriginals whose ancestors roamed the lands have died of thirst on their way home from a trip into town. Workers on cattle ranches have got lost and died of exposure. If they are vulnerable, think of what could happen to you as a tourist in a strange land.

**For the average traveller in an average vehicle:**

- 1 Keep to the bitumen (tarmac sealed roads) whenever possible. There aren't many and they carry a fair amount of traffic so you shouldn't have to wait too long in the event of a breakdown or accident.
- 2 Carry lots of spare water. I use 2-litre plastic milk bottles, which are easy to pack amongst luggage.
- 3 Take a mobile phone but don't count on reception everywhere. Better still: take a satellite phone.
- 4 Take spare fanbelts, spare radiator hoses and jump leads.
- 5 Make sure you have enough petrol to get between filling stations. Don't assume you will come to one before your tank is empty. And bear in mind that the filling station might be out of your sort of fuel. If that happens go to the local police station and seek advice. On two occasions, I've had my tank filled by a man in police uniform with a key to emergency supplies.
- 6 Never drive off the highway.
- 7 If you do breakdown, stay with the vehicle unless you are one hundred percent certain that help is nearby and you can safely walk to it.
- 8 Don't attempt to walk anywhere in the heat of a hot summer's day.
- 9 Bear in mind that accommodation is not as easy to find in the outback as in the more densely populated parts of the country. In some places you have to provide your own in the form of tent, caravan etc. Plan your outback travel

accordingly. Make sure you secure your night's accommodation at least a day in advance.

10 Remember that it does rain in the outback. Months and sometimes years of drought can be followed by torrential rain. Roads are cut and travellers are marooned for days on end.

11 Yes. It is possible to cross the deserts of Central and Western Australia. You need special permits and may be required to carry satellite distress beacons. My friends in the rear vehicle (photo above) kept going when we headed back home. They had all the necessary permits for the desert crossings and were required to keep to a tight schedule.

### 3 Great Barrier Reef



**The Great Barrier Reef is clearly visible from space. It stretches for over 1500 km (1000 miles), along the tropical coast of Queensland, from Rockhampton in the south to the tip of Cape York Peninsular in the far north. It is not continuous, as the name suggests, but is made up of hundreds of individual reefs. Some are tens of kilometres across. Others are much smaller.**

The reefs are living. They are built by coral animals that secrete hard shells about their soft bodies. The small creatures crowd together to form colonies and it is these that we think of when we talk about "coral". Break a piece of dead coral and you will see the small tubes where the coral animals once lived.

The corals come in a variety of shapes and colours and are home to a huge variety of iridescent fish, giant clams, conga eels, starfish, turtles, giant manta rays and other creatures ... a veritable wonderland.



You can visit the Reef as a scuba diver, snorkeler or someone who is happy to sit in a glass-bottom boat. The most southerly point is Great Keppel Island near Rockhampton. As you go northward, you will find boats taking people out from McKay, Airlie Beach, Townsville, Mission Beach, Cairns, Port Douglas and other places.

### **Where is the best point to see the Reef?**

As a divemaster, I was often asked that question. People expected me to say Cairns or some other top tourist spot. The answer is not that simple since it depends on what you want to see.

If you are vaguely interested in the Reef and don't want to spend a lot of time or money then I would recommend a trip to one of the inshore reefs or inshore islands such as Great Keppel or Green Island (off Cairns). You won't see the Reef at its most spectacular and the water will not be as clear as



further out to sea. Nevertheless, you will experience some nice coral. I rank Keppel and Green Island as good value for money.

Water clarity is important. The sea is muddy inshore and crystal clear further out. This is glaringly apparent if you fly along the coast and take a look downwards. The transition from murky to acceptable varies with the weather. In my experience, you are fairly safe if you go at least 20 nautical miles (40km) offshore.

Suppose you are a snorkeler and want to get into nice clear water. In your place, I would ask two things of the tourist boats competing for my money. Firstly, I would want to know how far out to sea they were going to take me. Some of the reefs off Cairns and Airlie Beach are too close inshore for clear water, by my reckoning. Secondly, I would want to know about safety provisions. There have been horrific tales of poor swimmers left to their own devices. **A good operator will provide buoyancy jackets and/or put out lines to prevent swimmers from being swept away by the currents.**

One way to see the reef is by helicopter. This way you get a superb overview. A number of companies offer site-seeing trips, from Cairns and other places.



As a diver, my most memorable experiences have been on reefs at the far outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef at the continental drop-off. To reach them you need to go on an extended tour of several days. Looking at a map of Australia, it is easy to underestimate distance. The outer edge of the Reef is about 150 km (90 miles) offshore in many places. An extended tour, calling at reefs on the way, would cover at least three times that distance.

I've made repeat trips to memorable places only to be disappointed. The Reef is a living thing. It's like a garden. Some parts are spectacular one year and dull the next. By the same token, parts that have been degraded, by storms, starfish infestations or some other cause, can come good again.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is responsible for the protection of the Reef, which has World Heritage status. The Authority's headquarters are in Townsville where it operates an impressive visitors centre featuring a large aquarium and other displays.

## 4 Tropical Rainforest



**There have been rainforests in the mountains of tropical Queensland for over 100 million years. Even during the last Ice Age, when the climate was far drier, small pockets survived in mountain gullies and other wet areas. When the Ice Age ended, about 15,000 years ago, rainfall increased and the forests expanded to cover much larger areas.**

Australia's rainforests have survived from the time when the first flowering plants appeared on Earth and are home to an amazing variety of species. The forests of Europe and North America date from only 15,000 years ago and are impoverished in comparison. Their plants and animals are newcomers that moved north to colonise land made available by the retreating glaciers of the Ice Age.

Like the Great Barrier Reef, Australia's tropical rainforests are veritable wonderlands. They are luxuriant places where one form of forest gives way to another in rapid succession. Walk along a forest path and you will pass gullies stacked with slender palms. Further on, you will come to trees with huge buttress roots. Turn a corner and you'll see trees bedecked with orchids. Iridescent butterflies flutter in clearings. Ferns cling to branches. Waterfalls cascade down rocks. Tree ferns tower above your head and ancient cycads line your path.

The forest birds are as colourful as the butterflies. Many have the raucous voices that film producers like to use in their jungle movies. It's not difficult to picture Tarzan and Jane swinging on jungle creepers.







Walking is one way to see the rainforest. That's my way. But not everyone has the time and walking in the rain does not appeal to a lot of us. So you might think of other ways. One is to take a trip to Mount Tamborine Mountain, just south of Brisbane, and go out onto the walkway there (top picture). Another is to go to Cairns and take a trip on the sky train (bottom picture). I give these as examples. Lots of places have similar attractions.

Alternatively, you might hire a car and drive into the rainforest. That would be my choice. There's no shortage of roads. The National Parks Services of Queensland and New South Wales provide detailed information on the internet ... or consult Google maps.

Tropical rainforest begins near Coffs Harbour, in northern New South Wales, and patches dot the coastal mountains all the way to Cape York Peninsular. You can visit rainforest from Coffs Harbour, Gold Coast, Mackay, Airlie Beach, Hinchinbrook, Cairns and Daintree, to name just a few places. For more detailed information, surf the net using tags: *rainforest, Australia, World Heritage, National Parks*.

## 5 Beach



**Whether you are into marine sports or just want to lazy around and relax, you will love our beaches. There are awesome opportunities for wave surfing, wind surfing, kite surfing, wake surfing, kayaking, jet skiing, scuba diving, snorkelling, swimming and much more.**

The golden sands, fringed with palm trees, are what dreams are made of but have their hazards. Bear in mind that it's not healthy to sun bake, drowning is bad for you, jellyfish sting, sharks bite and crocodiles kill.

Australia is the skin cancer capital of the world. When I was a divemaster, my gear for supervising dives from boats was dark blue cotton shirt, jeans and a wide-brimmed army hat. I applied sun screen to every inch of bare flesh including the tops of my bare feet. A fellow divemaster of Maori ancestry took a good tan but was equally diligent. He had an uncle who died of skin cancer. It's not just fair-skinner northern Europeans who are at risk.





The golden rule for swimmers is "swim between the flags". Our tourist beaches are patrolled by lifesavers and they put out flags. You will find surf lifesaving clubs in most coastal communities, sometimes within a kilometre of one another.

The main beaches are protected by shark nets and it is easy to think you are safe everywhere. You are not. I vividly recall a trip to the far northern gulf country. I went for a stroll down the beach and my family went for a paddle. The sea was flat and everything seemed safe to my over-relaxed mind. Then I saw a fin in the muddy water. A wave took it towards me and a sizeable shark was deposited at my feet. Although in the shallows, the ferocious animal propelled itself at me, jaws snapping. My heart missed a beat and I sprinted back to my family, yelling for them to get out of the water.

In remote tropical areas, crocodiles are a real risk. Signs warning you about the big amphibian are not put up as a tourist gimmick. There are laws to stop us killing them but no effective legislation to stop them eating us.

The other big hazard is the box jellyfish. I'm not talking about its cousin, the bluebottle or Portuguese Man-of-War, which merely imparts a nasty sting. The box jellyfish kills. It is common in tropical waters in the summer months. (see Hazards, below).

The internet provides a heap of information on what the Water Sports People have to offer. Remember that the surf gives out where the Great Barrier Reef begins.

## 6 Aboriginal Australians



**Australia's original people have a culture that goes back to the Stone Age. It's not known exactly when their ancestors first arrived on the Australian continent but good circumstantial evidence indicates that people were here at least forty thousand years ago. The silly theories about families being washed ashore on tree trunks following tsunamis have been discarded.**

The current view is that the first Australians were competent seafarers who made the voyage in boats or rafts. Australia has never been joined to the Asian mainland and the voyage from the nearest islands would have taken the early settlers far out of the sight of land.

With such a rich culture it is not surprising that visitors from overseas want to visit Aboriginal communities and see something of them. In the more settled parts of Australia, you won't find people living in anything like the old lifestyle. They live in houses like everyone else and their kids attend the local schools. That doesn't mean they don't have a sense of community. Sometimes this finds expression in the communal ownership of land belonging to their ancestral clans.

They often have visitors centres with museums and displays. Local tourist offices provide information about these and other activities, including dancing

and art. Many State Art Galleries have major displays featuring work by Aboriginal artists.



The top picture is a rock painting in the Kakadu National Park near Darwin. Many of the Kakadu paintings date back over thousands of years. Others are more recent. The second painting is by a contemporary Aboriginal artist, using modern materials. It is on display at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane. The third is of a dance troupe performing at the Laura Aboriginal Festival (2013). Search the internet for festivals and other opportunities to experience Aboriginal culture during your visit to Australia.

## 7 Social Clubs





**You'll find them everywhere. Football teams have them and so do surf clubs, bowls clubs, returned servicemen (RSL) and many other organisations, large and small. They are an Australian institution and most welcome visitors.**

I belong to a surf club. Like most surf clubs it has bars and restaurants. That's one of the ways we make money for our main activity, which is lifesaving.

Those bronzed young people, patrolling our beaches, are volunteers. They joined their clubs at an early age and received instruction from older members. It is no coincidence that many lifesavers on Asian beaches are Australian trained.

So, if you want an introduction to the Aussie way of life and you are a surfer, you could hardly do better than visit a surf club. Age is not a consideration. There's no shortage of grey-haired surfers on our beaches and plenty of teenagers. The sport is almost as popular amongst women as it is with men.

If you are not a surfer that is not a barrier. Go along and have a meal. You'll be asked to sign the visitor's book to comply with the licensing authorities but no more is involved. In many clubs, most of the staff are volunteers. You will be served by lifesavers and surfers.

My part of Australia, which is the Gold Coast, is home to some of the world's top ranking competitors. Go to the south of the strip for the best action. Despite its name, Surfers Paradise is not the main hot spot. That honour goes to Coolangatta where the incoming waves run along the beach.

On a good day at Coolangatta, you can stand on the shore and get a clear view of the surfers as they travel down the tubes created by the breaking waves. It's a great place for photographs. Major international surfing competitions are held there and news teams gather from all around the globe (photo).

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