



7 AUSTRALIA



Australia is the smallest of the five permanently settled continents. It covers 7.7 million square kilometers (2.3 million square miles) – a mere one-sixth of Asia's total land area. China alone surpasses Australia in size. This smallest continent is home to 21 million inhabitants, with a population density totaling not more than 2.75 inhabitants per square kilometer (7.3 per sq mi). This could become a problem in the future, because neighboring Indonesia has a population of 231 million with a density of 120 inhabitants per square kilometer (323 per sq mi). Australia thus faces and will continue to face the increasing pressure of illegal migrants.

Australia now ranks among the most developed countries in the world (despite the fact that large dry areas in the interior have retained the character of wilderness) but its initial conditions were far from easy. Following occasional visits by fishermen and traders in the 17th century, in the 18th century the eastern coast of Australia was settled by convicts from Great Britain. The continent long suffered from the "tyranny of distance". Access was only possible by sea and travelling here from Asia or Europe took weeks or even months. With the mass air transport we have today, this obstacle is no longer there.

Nearly 400,000 indigenous people, called aboriginals, live in Australia today. They have been living on the continent for over 40,000 years, having arrived (by sea) from Southeast Asia. It is still a mystery how and why people with no maps or compasses travelled several hundreds of kilometers into the unknown.

Aboriginals have paid dearly for coming into contact with European civilization, something they are still not able to cope with today. The vast majority of them have long replaced the nomadic lifestyle with a hand-to-mouth existence in cities; the men are often addicted to alcohol.

The aboriginals were not in general considered equal by the white colonists. In the first half of the 20th century the authorities would take children away from some families and educate them in religious boarding schools. In most cases the parents would never see their children again or only many years or even decades later. In 2002 a touching movie entitled "Rabbit-Proof Fence" was made about this, in which three little girls run away from a boarding school and travel back to their parents' home for hundreds of miles through the wilderness, along a fence built to stem the uncontrollable proliferation of rabbits.

Australia is extremely interesting for its nature (for example, the Great Barrier Reef off the east coast) but also instructive in terms of the functioning of the ecosystems. As a result of the continent's isolation, there developed the only mammals that lay eggs – marsupials. When the settlers began bringing foreign species from Europe and elsewhere, the introduced animals would not encounter any natural enemies here (there was no negative feedback mechanism of prey – predator). Therefore, the animals quickly multiplied, whether they were goats, sheep, horses, camels, or first and foremost the above-mentioned rabbits, which were finally eliminated only after a viral disease – myxomatosis – was introduced into Australia on purpose. This story resembles HG Wells' sci-fi "The War of the Worlds". The aggressive visitors from the space cannot be fought with military weapons because they are stronger. In the end they are only eliminated thanks to an invisible enemy – bacteria and a disease against which the aliens have no immunity.

It will be interesting to see in the future whether the character of society will develop and how, and to see whether immigrants from Asia will gradually transform this "Western civilization" into a different one, and if so into what.



6.1 Commonwealth of Australia



The Commonwealth of Australia is a country which includes the Australian continent, the island of Tasmania and numerous smaller islands in the Pacific, Indian, and Southern Oceans. Most of the continent consists of deserts and arid regions, with the exception of the east coast. The local soil is not very fertile and the ecosystems are fragile and vulnerable.

The capital is Sydney, with a population of 4.5 million. It is the site of the first British colony in Australia, founded in January 1788. The symbol of the city is the Sydney Opera House, designed by the Danish architect Jorn Utzon. His project was selected from 233 submitted proposals. Although the competition was announced in 1957, it was not until 1973 that the construction was completed. The budget rose from the original 7 million Australian dollars to 102 million. In 1966 Utzon finally withdrew from the project after constant disputes with the government of New South Wales. The construction was then finished by Australian architects.



Probably only railway enthusiasts would travel around Australia by train. The connection is slow, expensive and many places are not accessible by train at all.

Road transport is more common, both for passengers and goods. These road trains are, therefore, a common sight – a powerful tractor unit pulls not one but several trailers. It takes up to a kilometer for such a giant to brake. It can also stop quickly but then it destroys its tires. That is why there are so many road-killed kangaroos as well as other animals along the roads. If a creature appears in the road and it is not a human being, the driver will not slow down.





In summer the temperature often reaches 40 degrees Celsius in the shade, while in winter the temperatures drop sharply at night. This is due to the desert climate – few clouds and almost no vegetation encourage temperature fluctuations during the day and night. That is why people have learned to live underground. A few meters below the surface they have dug dwellings, where the temperature is around 20–22 degrees Celsius all year long, with no heating in winter and no air conditioning in summer. The only drawback is the lack of light; the rooms need to be lit year-round. The image shows a church carved into a wall. This makes the temperature inside comfortable.

850 kilometers (528 mi) north of Adelaide there lies Coober Pedy, "the opal capital of the world". The gemstone has been mined here continuously since 1916. Some larger companies use machinery, while others dig manually. Every year a few lucky people become rich by finding a larger gemstone, which keeps the opal fever going. Anyone can rent a piece of land to try their luck. The local soil is therefore riddled with holes, of which we could count here well over 250,000.





From time to time you will come across an eccentric who has run away from civilization to live alone in the desert. After all, even prophets used to often leave for the desert to rise high above earthly things. I have forgotten the name of the man who lived in this house but I heard he nevertheless appeared in a Hollywood sci-fi movie, made here, about life after the collapse of civilization, entitled "Mad Max" and starring Mel Gibson.



In the geographical center of Australia lies the second largest city in the Northern Territory, Alice Springs (27,000 inhabitants). The location has been inhabited by the aborigines since pre-historic times. The beginnings of European settlement date back to 1872, the year a telegraph station was established here. The telegraph ran from Adelaide across the continent to Darwin in the north and on to Great Britain. Alice Springs is "in the middle of nowhere". The nearest towns to the south (Adelaide) and north (Darwin) are both 1,500 km (932 miles) away.



Not so far from Alice Springs to the southwest (only 335 kilometers or 208 miles) is Ayers Rock, the famous symbol of Australia and a sacred site for the aborigines. Nowadays, it increasingly goes by its indigenous name of Uluru. This sandstone monolith towers 348 meters (1,142 feet) above the surrounding terrain.



In length the rock measures 3.6 kilometers (2.2 miles) and if you want to walk around it, prepare yourself to walk for nearly 10 kilometers (5.8 miles). On the way you will come across a few places that are sacred to the aborigines. They are fenced and tourists are not allowed to enter.

Uluru can be climbed on foot but the natives do not like it as they consider the mountain sacred. Any climbing is prohibited from 10am to 4pm due to high temperatures that reach up to 38 degrees Celsius; the risk of dehydration or heart attack for the elderly is too high.

The picture was taken from the top of Uluru. Although precipitation is very scarce here, rainwater collects in small ponds, which then serve as a source of water for birds and some smaller animals. In the distance you can see another rock formation, Kata Tjuta.

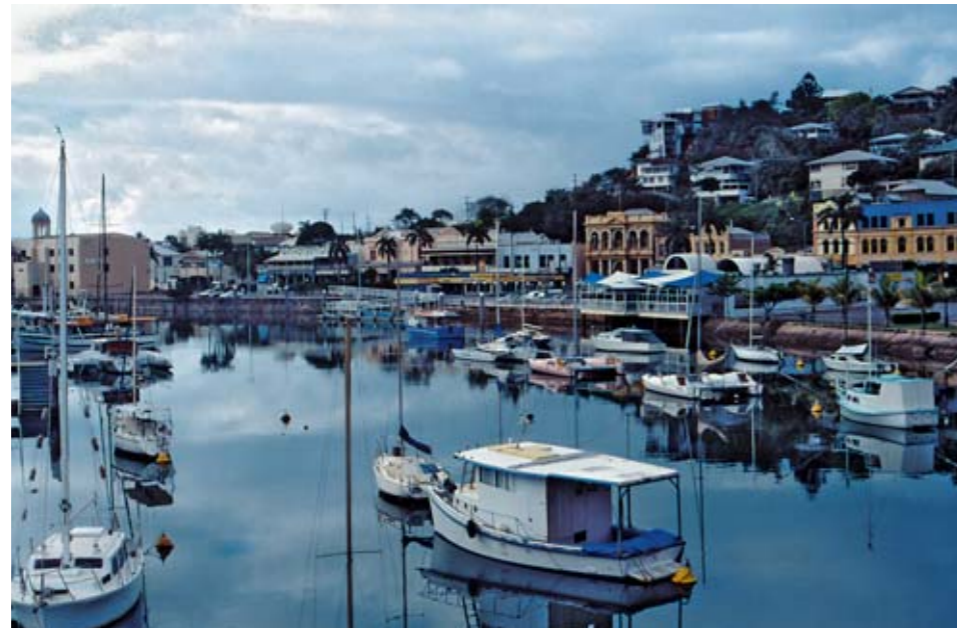
Uluru and Kata Tjuta form a national park. These two massive rock formations are 25 kilometers (16 miles) apart. At the highest point Kata Tjuta towers 546 meters (1,791 ft) above the surrounding terrain. This makes it 198 meters (650 ft) higher than Uluru and yet it is not as well known. This is most probably because unlike Uluru it is not one giant monolith but a group of several rock formations.





In 1788 rabbits were imported into Australia from Europe, which led to one of the best-known ecological disasters. In the new environment they met with no effective natural predators, and from the early 19th century they began to multiply in the wild uncontrollably (hence perhaps the saying “multiplying like rabbits”). Every year, they would cause multimillion-dollar damage to agricultural crops, gnaw trees that later perished, and by destroying vegetation they would also encourage soil erosion. Desperate farmers tried to introduce foxes and cats into the wild but with not much success. Between 1901 and 1907 they even built a rabbit-proof fence (photo) intended to prevent them from entering Western Australian pastoral areas from the east. In length the fence resembles the Great Wall of China – it stretches for 3,253 kilometers (2,021 miles).

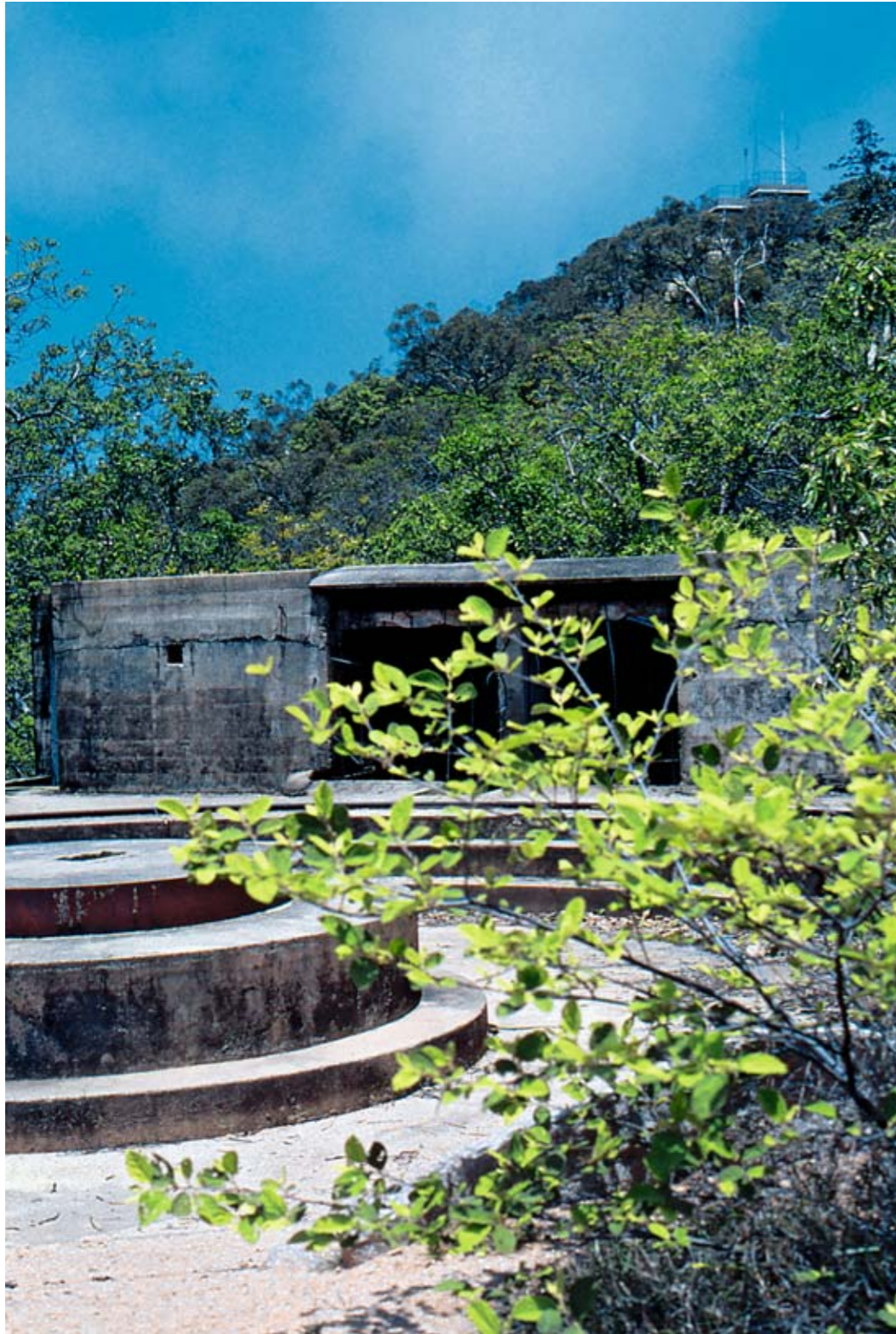
On the northeast coast it is worth visiting Townsville, a city of nearly two hundred thousand inhabitants. It is one of the starting points for visiting the Great Barrier Reef, which stretches along the east coast of Australia for 2,600 kilometers (1,600 mi) and consists of 2,900 individual reefs and 900 islands. Great Barrier Reef spreads over 344,400 square kilometers (133,000 sq mi). If an actual visit to the reef is impossible for time or financial reasons, it pays to at least go to the local tropical aquarium. It is the only place in the world with a living coral reef. Reefs are extremely sensitive to many factors – the salt content in water, its temperature, pollution, the amount of light, the movement of sea water, and so on. Other aquariums in the world only have dead corals with tropical fish and other animals swimming around.



Only eight kilometers from the Townsville coast there is Magnetic Island. Not more than 52 square kilometers (20.1 sq mi) in area, it is a popular tourist destination thanks to its tropical beaches. The island was given its name by Captain James Cook, whose compass “went haywire” while he was sailing along the eastern coast of Australia in 1770. We are still not sure what exactly happened.







During World War II, Magnetic Island was an important strategic point as it was to protect Townsville and Australia's east coast in general from the invasion of Japanese troops. Today the area still features the ruins of military forts, observation posts and artillery batteries, gradually disappearing under lush tropical vegetation.



The island features extensive mangrove forests and is home to the famous and typical Australian animal – the Koala. Although it looks like a small bear, it is in fact a marsupial (joeys develop in the mother's pouch, similarly to the kangaroo), which usually weighs 4–12 kilograms (8.8–26 pounds) and is about three-quarters of a meter (2.5 feet) tall. It lives only on the east coast of Australia because it is a food specialist – it feeds solely on eucalyptus leaves and bark.

In the past the koala almost became exterminated by humans for their fur. As it sleeps up to 20 hours a day and feeds mostly at night, it is extremely difficult to spot and photograph them. However, here, on the island, drivers are warned to be careful because they pass through woods where the koala lives.