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Introduction

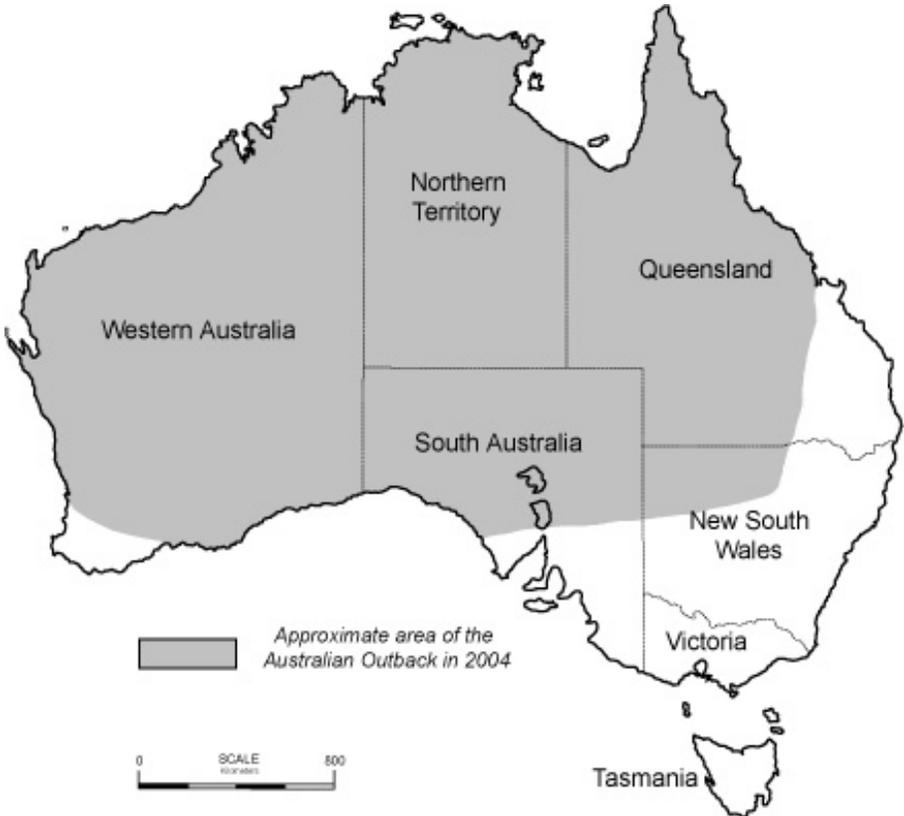


Illustration 1- The Australian Outback

Look at a map of Australia and you will see that the majority of Australians live around the coastal fringes. This is with good reason. The interior, often called the Outback, can be hot, dry, and inhospitable. In fact, it is so inhospitable that NASA has elected to test prototypes of space suits for a manned mission to Mars in the scorching Flinders Ranges in South Australia.¹ Yet it is a strangely compelling landscape, and for the Australians who live and work there, it offers a way of life unlike any other in the world. For the traveler prepared to cope with the dust, heat and flies it can be a rewarding and magical experience.

As a child, I was intrigued by Australia and the stories of the hardships faced by the early European explorers. Growing up in a cold, wet, cramped and

The Australian Outback

dark England, the allure of those vast open landscapes seemed like Utopia. Little did I think back then that one day I would sleep out under the stars in Central Australia, climb Uluru (Ayers Rock) or visit the underground opal mines in Coober Pedy. But a chance meeting in 1972 with an Australian school teacher in a London pub had me stepping off a Qantas 747 in Sydney's International Airport just a few months later and for the first time breathing in the hot dry air filled with the unforgettable scent of gum trees. OK, mixed just a little with the overtones of aviation fuel.

From that first experience, I spent the next thirty years coming to know and appreciate the many aspects of that great country. I spent most of my time in and around Sydney, but visited every State in Australia and spent the last three years of my time in Australia living alone on a remote property in rural New South Wales. I relied on solar power for electricity and hot water, rainwater for drinking and my two dogs for companionship as I struggled with unreliable telephone lines, floods and periods of drought. But the clean air, magnificent starry nights and the silence broken only by the sounds of nature made up for the primitive conditions.

There is no specific, fixed boundary to the Outback – to the first settlers the whole continent was strange and unreal. But gradually the explored areas expanded until today, in 2004, the Outback can be regarded as those areas that lie inland from the coastal urban settlements, the rural areas and the mountains running down the east coast. More than three-quarters of Australia are classified as Outback; the Northern Territory is virtually all Outback, as are South and Western Australia. Even New South Wales has enormous areas to the west that are inhospitable and sparsely populated.

In the first part of *The Australian Outback*, we'll explore Aboriginal legends regarding the Dreamtime, which recounts when and how Australia was formed. We will look at the geological history behind the formation and evolution of the continent and how that history has affected the development of the flora and fauna of Australia. We'll also dig into some of the possible origins of the earliest inhabitants of Australia, from the theories of Egyptian and Phoenician explorers and settlement from the Indonesian mainland. We'll sail with the early European explorers as they charted the great Southland and investigate the life of convict colony settlers, learning how lack of food and the need for arable land turned explorers toward the interior. We will follow in the footsteps of the pioneers and look at the country through their eyes as they battled the hostile country, in many cases pitting their own lives, sometimes unsuccessfully, against the barren deserts.

The second part of *The Australian Outback* takes a closer look at the flora and fauna of the Outback, the creatures and plants that seemed so strange to those first Europeans. We also look at historic events critical to Australia's modern development, including the gold rush, the drovers and stockmen, the bushrangers, the development of the Flying Doctor service and the unique

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system of education by radio, known as the School of the Air. We'll explore the customs, myths, legends and traditions of the Outback and examine the present-day problems such as climatic conditions, transport and communications faced by those who live and work there.

Finally, we'll look to the future. Modern communications have opened up the countryside, and with this opening up, even the words and expressions unique to the Outback are under threat. The most remote areas are being mined for natural resources such as iron ore, oil, gas and uranium. Traditional Aboriginal lands are the subject of exploration and although much work is being done to protect the environment, the pressures and demands of modern society are such that even the most secluded and culturally significant areas are in danger from commercial interests. Over clearing of lands, unwise use of the water resources for irrigation and the damage caused by introduced species of plants and animals are all contributing to the threat to the Outback.

All of these topics will be examined as we take a journey through space and time and explore the sparsely populated and beautiful landscape that is the Australian Outback.

Robin Bell
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