

Australia's Outback: Journeys and Discoveries



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Yet any people will tell you that Australia's soul lies somewhere in the ancient-looking and worn land of the continent's outback. Where its spirit may be exactly doesn't matter; for everyone will find it in a different place. For some it may lie deep in a craggy, colourful gorge or in a strange monolith flaring red at sunrise or sunset or by a river of sand lined with big red gums. For others it may be a lily-covered billabong where herons, egrets and honking hordes of magpie geese feed and where restless, screeching corellas festoon nearby trees like cottonwool. Or it may be in the immense desert plains with their red sand-dunes, white salt pans, seas of shimmering gibber stones and far horizons that stretch the mind and evoke a tremendous sense of awe. There is no specific boundary to the outback; some even say it

begins and ends in our minds. Broadly it applies to the land lying beyond the coastal cities towns the settled rural areas and the green slopes of the Great Dividing Range; this means that it covers more than three-quarters of the continent. A good portion of the outback pushes into tropical regions where the climate is more stable with its two distinct seasons the Wet and the Dry. Despite the lush tropical vegetation around its rivers and lagoons this northern region is as inhospitable and as sparsely populated as the rest of the outback. Further inland the climate can be unpredictable since normal weather-patterns are frequently disrupted by droughts or excessive rains. The outback may be harsh but there is little doubt that its 1 500 000 square kilometres contain some of the Earth's most unusual scenery. Its warm rich colours are a delight for photographers and artists. No scene is the same in the morning as in the afternoon at sunrise as at sunset for the land responds wonderfully to the changes of light as the sun progresses across the sky. The outback has a character and atmosphere that is as unique as its scenery. It is often full of surprises: who would think that one of the country's toughest mining towns would have more art galleries than pubs? Broken Hill in New South Wales is home to some of Australia's most famous outback artists. For the Aborigines the original inhabitants much of the outback is a ritual ground of sacred Dreamtime legends. For white Australians it is the heartland of our legends and traditions: since its settlement seemingly ordinary men and women have carried out many extraordinary feats often under severe hardship in a land that will never tolerate the weak. These remarkable people and their exploits now live on in the outstanding Smockman's Hall of Fame in Longreach western Queensland. For many visitors there is often a heightened expectation of adventure when setting out on a journey to the outback. This is largely because much of the region is still its frontier country. It should never be taken lightly by travellers however

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