

Understand Australia

AUSTRALIA TODAY1036

The hot issues around the nation: political tumult, ludicrous real estate prices and the economy after the mining boom. At least the cities are looking good.

HISTORY1038

An ancient continent, an ancient people and a few hundred years of European-style turmoil.

ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA.....1049

Aboriginal history, arts and culture will extend your holiday by at least 50,000 years.

ENVIRONMENT.....1055

Droughts, salination, bushfires... The resident marsupials of this wide brown land have seen it all before.

FOOD & DRINK.....1062

Food is Australia's new religion: worship at cafes, restaurants, farmers markets and less pious pubs and cellar doors.

SPORT1066

Is Australia losing its sporting mojo? A wavering cricket team and soccer disappointments aside, the country still punches above its weight.

Australia Today

Australia's cultural and geographic identity has been forged by 45 million years of isolation. The country's harsh but beautiful landscape continues to survive bushfires, droughts and floods – a resilience that has rubbed off on the Australian people. Hiding behind larrikin wit and amicable informality, Australians have an innate optimism that helped steer their economy through the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). But can the good times last? If the political landscape and real estate market are any indication, the future is far from clear.

Best on Film

Lantana (director Ray Lawrence; 2001) Mystery for grown-ups: a meditation on love, truth and grief.
Gallipoli (director Peter Weir; 1981) Nationhood in the crucible of WWI.
Mad Max (director George Miller; 1979) Mel Gibson gets angry.
The Hunter (director Daniel Nettheim; 2011) Grumpy Willem Dafoe goes hunting for the last Tasmanian Tiger.
Ten Canoes (directors Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr; 2006) The first Australian film scripted entirely in Aboriginal language.

Best in Print

The Narrow Road to the Deep North (Richard Flanagan; 2014) From Hobart to the Thai–Burma Death Railway. Man Booker Prize winner.
Dirt Music (Tim Winton; 2002) Guitar-strung Western Australian page-turner.
Oscar & Lucinda (Peter Carey; 1988) Man Booker Prize winner. How to relocate a glass church.
The Body surfers (Robert Drewe; 1983) Moody stories from Sydney's Northern Beaches.
The Secret River (Kate Grenville; 2005) Convict life in the 19th-century around Sydney.

Politics

Mimicking global warming, the Australian political climate has been overheated and irritable of late. In 2013, the left-wing Labor Party was ousted from federal government by the conservative Liberal-National Party Coalition. In the lead-up to the election, Labor was destabilised by an extraordinary period of divisive infighting and factional power plays. Australia's first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, lost the top job to Kevin Rudd in early 2013, whom she herself had ousted as PM in 2010.

Sitting back and rubbing their eyes in disbelief, the conservatives watched the prime-ministerial circus play out. They then easily won the 2013 election, surfing into office on a wave of public dismay over Labor's leadership soap opera. New prime minister Tony Abbott had the look of a man standing on the threshold of a future he wasn't quite anticipating.

Then, in 2015, things started to go awry for Abbott. His popularity flagging, he made the bizarre choice of bestowing a knighthood on Prince Philip (husband of the British Queen) on Australia Day – a move lambasted by the media and hailed as un-Australian by the public. A leadership spill was mooted, with PM-in-waiting and former leader of the Liberal Party Malcolm Turnbull the favoured candidate. But the leadership vote didn't happen: Abbott dodged a bullet, but by the time you read this, there may be a different PM ruling the roost.