

Understand Australia

AUSTRALIA TODAY 1016

The hot issues around the country: a so-so economy, soaring house prices, Indigenous reconciliation and the rise of the populist right. The nation's leaders are never in office long enough to respond.

HISTORY 1018

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

ABORIGINAL CULTURE..... 1031

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

ENVIRONMENT..... 1035

Cyclones, droughts, bushfires – the resident marsupials of this wide brown land have seen it all before.

FOOD & DRINK..... 1043

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

SPORT 1047

Is Australia losing its sporting mojo? A tapering Olympic medal count and middling cricket aside, the country still punches above its weight.

Australia Today

Australia seems caught between the populist disaffection sweeping Western countries and the innate optimism of its people – which will win? In the meantime, those touchstones and preoccupations of modern Australian life – the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the economy, the future of multicultural Australia – all still hold centre stage. If only the country's politicians could get their act together...

Best on Film

Crocodile Dundee (1986) Outback Australia hits the cinematic jackpot and Kakadu becomes famous.

Gallipoli (1981) Nationhood formed in the harsh crucible of WWI.

Mad Max (1979) Mel Gibson gets angry and creates an Aussie legend.

The Hunter (2011) Willem Dafoe goes hunting for the last Tasmanian Tiger.

Another Country (2015) Renowned actor David Gulpilil takes you on an arresting visit to his remote Arnhem Land community.

Best in Print

The Narrow Road to the Deep North (Richard Flanagan; 2014) From Hobart to the Thai-Burma Death Railway.

Dirt Music (Tim Winton; 2002) Guitar-strung Western Australian page-turner.

True History of the Kelly Gang (Peter Carey; 2000) Fictionalised re-creation of Australia's favourite bushranger.

The Secret River (Kate Grenville; 2005) A novel about 19th-century convict life around Sydney.

The Red Highway (Nicolas Rothwell; 2009) A lyrical exploration of Australia's interior.

Indigenous Australians

Australia's treatment of Indigenous Australians has come a long way since the days of *terra nullius* – the legal fiction that declared Australia devoid of human settlement and which the British empire used to prop up its colonisation – and needing a referendum to grant the most basic citizenship rights to its first inhabitants. Indigenous owners now own roughly half of the Northern Territory's land, for example, and many Aboriginal communities have negotiated lucrative royalty deals with mining companies working on traditional lands. But many Aboriginal communities remain in crisis – poorly governed and beset with problems of alcohol, petrol-sniffing, high crime levels and the concomitant high levels of incarceration. But the correct balance between self-determination and government intervention is one that no one in Australian policy circles has ever quite worked out.

In the meantime, there have been moves towards greater legal recognition: in 2017 both Victoria and South Australia began formal treaty negotiations with local Indigenous communities, and there appears to be bipartisan support for a formal referendum seeking constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians as Australia's first people. But with Indigenous Australians suffering disproportionately when compared to non-Indigenous Australians – from life expectancy and key health indicators to unemployment and economic disadvantage – there remains a long way to go.

The Rise of Populism?

With the world still reeling from the rise of the UK's Brexit referendum and the election of US President Donald Trump, many Australians are wondering what their political future holds. While there appear to be no obviously Trump-like candidates with nationwide