

## **A Land of Contrasts and Extremes**

Australia is a land of contrasts and extremes. It is a land of great antiquity but a very young country; the smallest continent and the largest island in the world; the flattest continent and the most sparsely populated for its size. Its climate encompasses a range of weather patterns from tropical to temperate and in some southern mountain regions, sub-Antarctic. It can go from hot to cold, dry to wet forming vast areas from desolate terrain to beautiful rainforests; it's a land of debilitating drought and flooding rains. Australia is the creation of nature's mightiest forces working in a variety of ways. The great ocean currents, sun, winds and rains that have etched out the land making it the driest continent on earth, as well as its isolated position, have combined to make Australia unique among the countries of the world and given it a character of its own found nowhere else.

Despite Australia's large size its people live mainly in the fertile coastal belt because nearly one third of the continent is desolate terrain and arid desert, unable to support large populations. Usually we think of the "The Red Centre", as it is fondly called, as a landscape of sand, stunted trees and rocky outcrops with occasional areas of green where there is a protected water source. Its colours are browns and greys with granite reds and ochre yellows, forming strong contrasts. The biggest contrast, however, comes with the northern rains. When they come, they begin during the tropical "rainy season" and move south over thousands of kilometres through an immense river system, transforming the arid desert to a carpet of many shades of green topped with the multi-colours of a plethora of beautiful desert flowers. Life in its many forms returns to show the Centre is never really "dead". Birds in their millions come to the rivers and lakes that overflow their banks and animals, reptiles and insects appear, seemingly from nowhere. For a while the land produces food in abundance, then as the rains stop and the relentless sun dries the landscape once more, water stops running and slowly evaporates from the creeks and rivers. The waterways become muddy holes and the birds and animals, the grass and flowers disappear and the land returns again to the harsh beauty of its arid deserts and mountain ranges.

### **Rich and Diverse Flora**

The flora of Australia is rich and diverse in native plants that have developed in isolation from the rest of the world. There are those that have adapted to heat and drought and to the soils which, in many parts on such an old continent ravaged by the elements, are thin and nutrient deficient. They include the Bottlebrush and Kangaroo Paw. Another distinct element of flora is to be found in the rainforests of the northern areas of Australia. These include a wide range of ferns and palms, orchids such as the Cooktown orchid and the Illawarra flame-tree. The third type of flora to be found in Australia is that found in the southern mountain areas of New South Wales and Victoria; tall trees such as Snow Gums and Mountain Ash and small flowers like the snow daisies.

The dominant Australian trees are eucalypts of which there are about 500 species and varieties. They grow almost everywhere on the continent from the wet coastal wetlands and the arid interior to above the snowline of the mountain areas. They dominate almost

90 percent of Australia's forests and they are the tallest hardwood trees in the world, some growing to more than 200 feet. The Acacias are also widespread and some are used for cabinet timber. The most well-known of these is the wattle, a tree that has been celebrated in poetry and books because of its unique feathery leaves and gorgeous round bright yellow fluffy flowers which herald in spring. It even has a special day – wattle day is the 1<sup>st</sup> September. Other wonderful and distinctive native plants include waratahs, banksias, hakeas and spider flowers as well as heaths and boronias.

### **Remarkable and Distinctive Fauna**

Many of Australia's animals can be found nowhere else on earth, survivors from remote antiquity. It is the home of some of the world's most ancient surviving types of mammals, for example, and some of the strangest are the platypus and the echidna. They both have hair and they produce milk for their young; they are also the world's only two egg-laying mammals. Other unique mammals include Australia's wild dog, called the dingo and the dugong found in Australia's northern waters and often affectionately known as the sea-cow.

Australia is also the world's main habitat for marsupials which is a mammal that gives birth to its young in a very immature state, then carries and suckles it in a pouch. These include kangaroos, wallabies and potoroos. The Red Kangaroo, which grows to over two metres (7 feet) in height, is the largest marsupial. Of the other marsupials, the most well-known and best loved is the Koala, often wrongly called a Koala Bear – it is *not* a bear. Other marsupials include native cats such as the Tasmanian devil as well as the bandicoot, possums and wombats.