

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Australia

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering the best lodgings, dining, and attractions
 - ▶ Experiencing the best of Aboriginal culture
 - ▶ Viewing the best Australian flora and fauna
 - ▶ Kicking back on the best beaches and hiking the best trails
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Best means different things to different people. So the best we can do is share with you our personal favorites. Australia's scenery, wildlife, culture, beaches, lodgings, food, and weather can all — in various guises — lay claim to being world-class. The landscape, in places, is almost unbelievable, all bathed in a special light that's found nowhere else in the world.

There are, of course, the “big three” — Sydney, the Great Barrier Reef, and the magnificent monolith Uluru, known affectionately as “the Rock.” These *should* be on your list, but don't forget that Australia has so much more to offer: charming country towns, isolated and pristine beaches, rustic sheep stations, rain forest villages, and mountain lodges. To find out what you'll be missing if you don't — even occasionally — take the road less traveled, check out this chapter, in which we try to narrow our personal choices in the “Best of” stakes.

The Best Luxury Hotels

The big cities offer the high-end chains as well as boutique hotels. The resorts on the Great Barrier Reef, both onshore and on their own islands, are gorgeous and loaded with amenities as well as natural beauty.

- ✔ **Park Hyatt Sydney** (Sydney, New South Wales): This artistically curving property on The Rocks foreshore is the best-positioned hotel in town. It's right on the water, and some rooms have views

across the harbor to the Sydney Opera House. The building is a pleasure to look at, and from a ferry on the harbor, it looks like a wonderful addition to the toy-town landscape of The Rocks. Each of the 33 executive suites has two balconies equipped with a telescope. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ **Sebel Reef House** (Cairns, Queensland): Drop-dead gorgeous — that’s the only way to describe this period piece from the colonial era. This is one of the most romantic hotels in Australia. The white walls are swathed in bougainvillea, and the beds with mosquito netting. Airy interiors feature rustic handmade artifacts and white wicker furniture. The Verandah Spa rooms, which have Jacuzzis on the balconies within earshot of the ocean, overlook the pool, waterfalls, and lush gardens. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Longitude 131** (Uluru/Ayers Rock, Red Centre): You can find this African-style luxury safari camp, with perfect views of Uluru, in the sand dunes a mile or two from the main complex. It offers 15 top-class air-conditioned tents, each with a private bathroom and a balcony overlooking the Rock. The resort is promoting them as “six star.” A central facility, **Dune House**, holds a restaurant (with superb food), bar, library, and shop. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Hayman Island Resort** (Whitsunday Islands, Queensland): This is the most luxurious and glamorous resort in Australia. Check-in is done over a glass of bubbly aboard the resort’s sleek launch as you travel from Hamilton Island Airport. You soon find your way through the open-air sandstone lanais, cascading ponds, and tropical foliage to the fabulous hexagonal complex of swimming pools by the sea. Dress is beachwear by day, smart casual at night. Every room, suite, villa, and penthouse has a balcony or terrace, bathrobes, and valet service (and butler service in the penthouses). See Chapter 17.

The Best Moderate and Alternative Accommodations

With a decent exchange rate and a good supply of moderately priced places to stay, you can find both comfort and bargains throughout Australia. We also include some unique places to stay.

- ✔ **North Adelaide Heritage Group** (Adelaide, South Australia): It’s worth coming to Adelaide just for the experience of staying in one of these out-of-this-world apartments, cottages, or suites. Each of the 21 properties is fabulous. We particularly recommend the former Friendly Meeting Chapel Hall, once the headquarters of the “Albert Lodge No. 6 of the Independent Order of Oddfellows, Manchester Unity Friendly Society, and the Court Huntsman’s Pride No. 2478 of the Ancient Order of Foresters Friendly Society.” See Chapter 20.

- ✔ **Underground Motel** (Broken Hill, New South Wales): Making the trip out to White Cliffs is worth the effort, just to stay here for the night. All but two of the rooms are underground; they're reached by a maze of spacious tunnels dug out of the rock and sealed with epoxy resin. The temperature below ground is a constant 72°F (22°C), which is decidedly cooler than a summer day outside. Rooms are comfortable though basic, with shared toilets and showers. Turn the light off, and it's dark as a cave. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Freycinet Lodge** (Freycinet National Park, Tasmania): We can't praise this ecofriendly lodge enough. Comfortable one- and two-room cabins spread unobtrusively through the bush, connected by raised walking tracks. The main part of the lodge houses a lounge room and an excellent restaurant that sweeps out onto a veranda overlooking the limpid green waters of Great Oyster Bay. The lodge is right next to the white sands of Hazards Beach, and from here it's an easy stroll to the start of the Wineglass Bay walk. See Chapter 23.
- ✔ **Reef Retreat** (Cairns, Queensland): A low-rise collection of contemporary studios and suites built around a saltwater swimming pool in a peaceful grove of palms and silver Paperbarks, Reef Retreat has 36 units, including studios (which are much larger than the average hotel room and offer terrific value). See Chapter 17.

The Best Dining Experiences

From gloriously fresh seafood to traditional Australian “bush tucker,” you'll find Australia's culinary offerings are as diverse as the landscape. Waves of immigration have brought tastes from around the world into the native cuisine, and you'll find ethnic restaurants all over. Don't forget to try the world-class wines, and hoist a brew or two!

- ✔ **Spirit House** (Yandina, Queensland): Walk along the jungle paths to the hidden building and you'll start to get an idea of what's in store at this amazing restaurant on the Sunshine Coast. Tables are set around a lagoon and among the trees, with massive statues and other artworks scattered throughout. The flavors that come out of this kitchen are mainly Thai but with other Asian influences. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Tetsuya's** (Sydney, New South Wales): Tetsuya's was named the fifth best restaurant in the world in *Restaurant Magazine's* annual list of the world's 50 best eateries in 2007. So what makes Tetsuya's so good? On a recent visit, we secured a table next to the ceiling-to-floor windows and had an intimate view across a Japanese-inspired courtyard with maples and waterfall. The service is impeccable; the food, truly inspired. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **e'cco bistro** (Brisbane, Queensland): Simple food, done exceptionally well and with passion. That's the winning philosophy behind

the food at e'cco, one of Australia's top restaurants. Housed in a former tea warehouse on the city fringe, the bistro has large windows, bold colors, and modern furniture. Dishes include such delights as duck breast with Peking duck consommé, wombok, broccolini, chilli, and ginger; or grilled white fish with a cassoulet of white beans, clams, mussels, parsley, and peppers. See Chapter 16.

- ✓ **Mures Upper Deck** (Hobart, Tasmania): This large and bustling waterfront restaurant offers great views of bobbing yachts as well as very fine seafood caught on the owner's own fishing boats. I recommend starting with a bowl of the signature Mures Smokey Chowder or some local oysters. A real treat is the seafood platter. The best summer dessert is the restaurant's famous summer pudding, which almost bursts with berries. See Chapter 22.

The Best Museums

Australia charts its tumultuous history in some fine museums; here are a few of the ones we find most interesting:

- ✓ **National Museum of Australia** (Acton, Australian Capital Territory): Using state-of-the-art technology and hands-on exhibits, the museum concentrates on three themes: Australian society and its history since 1788; the interaction of people with the Australian environment; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories. It relies more on images and sound than on historical objects to tell the stories. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **The Australian Aviation Heritage Centre** (Darwin, Northern Territory): This museum has a B-52 bomber as its most prized exhibit but also boasts a B-25 Mitchell bomber, Mirage and Sabre jet fighters, and rare Japanese Zero fighter wreckage. Even if you aren't a military or aircraft buff, you may enjoy the funny, sad, heartwarming, and sometimes heart-wrenching displays on World War II and Vietnam. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **The National Gallery of Victoria** (Melbourne, Victoria): The international branch of the National Gallery (in St. Kilda), and its Ian Potter Centre, off Federation Square, combine to offer a collection of international art, including works by Gainsborough, Constable, Bonnard, Delacroix, Van Dyck, El Greco, Monet, Manet, Magritte, and Rembrandt, and more than 20 rooms dedicated to Australian art. See Chapter 13.

The Best of Aboriginal Culture

Australia has many places in which you can learn more about the culture of the indigenous people who have lived on this land for millennia. The best places are in the Red Centre, at Alice Springs and Uluru-Kata

Tjuta, and in the Northern Territory. Some take the form of tours, others are cultural centers. Aboriginal art can also make a unique souvenir.

- ✔ You'll taste bush food, throw boomerangs, and learn about Aboriginal family values during a half-day tour of the Aborigine-owned **Aboriginal Art & Culture Centre** in Alice Springs. **Anangu Tours** run a series of walks around and near Uluru (Ayers Rock). The Anangu are the traditional owners of Uluru. Join them for walks around the Rock as you learn about the "snake men" who fought battles here, pick bush food off trees, throw spears, visit rock paintings, and watch the sun set. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Manyallaluk, The Dreaming Place**, is an Aboriginal community near Katherine, in the Northern Territory, which welcomes visitors and teaches them to paint, weave, throw boomerangs, and perform other tasks of daily life. It's a low-key day and the chance to chat one-on-one with Aboriginal people in their home. Mike Keighley of **Far Out Adventures** takes tours to Eley Station (a ranch) near Katherine, where you can visit with the children of the Mangarrayi people, sample bush tucker, learn a little bush medicine, and swim in a natural "spa pool" in the Roper River. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park**, in Cairns, is a multimillion-dollar center showcasing the history of the Tjapukai people — their Dreamtime creation history and their often-harrowing experiences since the white man arrived — using a film, superb theatrical work, and a dance performance. Its Aboriginal arts-and-crafts gift shop is one of the country's best, and there is also an outdoor "corroboree" experience at night. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute** in the South Australian capital, Adelaide, is a good place to find out more about Aboriginal culture. At the Institute, they offer boomerang- and spear-throwing instruction, painting with natural ochers, discussions on Aboriginal culture, and guided walking tours. See Chapter 20.

The Best Natural Scenery

Australia offers some of the most diverse landscapes in the world. From long sweeps of pristine beach to the red dust of the Outback, the lush green rain forests of the Tropics, and rugged mountain ranges, somewhere you'll find a landscape to tear at your heart.

- ✔ The 74 islands of the **Whitsundays** are best seen from the deck of your own private yacht. Bareboat sailing (or skipper-yourself) is one of the most popular pastimes here, and it's easy to see why as you explore the deserted bays, snorkel over dazzling reefs, fish for coral trout, and feel the wind in your sails. It's on the same latitude as Tahiti, and on the same level of beauty. See Chapter 17.

- ✔ **Kata Tjuta** (the Olgas) and **Uluru** (Ayers Rock) are mysterious and magnetic. Uluru has an impact that's hard to describe — and even the photos you'll see won't prepare you for it. Just as awesome are the red domes of Kata Tjuta, just 50km (31 miles) from the Rock. These are even more significant to Aboriginal people than Uluru, and more intriguing to many visitors. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ Vast fields of **wildflowers** — pink, mauve, red, white, yellow, and blue — cover much of Western Australia every spring, from around August through October. Join the Australians who flock here for the spectacle, but make sure you book ahead. See Chapter 21.

The Best Places to Snorkel and Dive

It goes without saying that the best places to snorkel and dive in Australia are on the Great Barrier Reef, right? Well, not quite. It's true, but the important thing is to realize that Australia offers divers and snorkelers many other options, depending on which part of the country you're visiting. Second only to the Reef is the lesser-known Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia, so put that on your list, too.

- ✔ **Heron Island** is the top snorkel and dive site in Australia. If you stayed in the water for a week, you couldn't snorkel all the acres of coral stretching from shore. Take your pick of around 20 dive sites, about half of them within a 15-minute boat ride from the island's jetty: the Coral Cascades, with football trout and anemones; the Blue Pools, favored by octopus, turtles, and sharks; Heron Bommie, with its rays, eels, and more. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ Off **Cairns**, the gateway to the **Great Barrier Reef** for most people, are Moore, Norman, Hardy, Saxon, and Arlington reefs and Michaelmas and Upolu cays — all about 90 minutes by boat. You can explore them on a day trip from Cairns or join a live-aboard boat. Among the fabulous dive sites off **Port Douglas**, north of Cairns, are Split-Bommie, with its fan corals and schools of fusiliers; Barracuda Pass, with its coral gardens and giant clams; and the swim-through coral spires of the Cathedrals. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Lady Elliot Island**, off the Queensland coast near Bundaberg, is a coral cay island with gorgeous coral lagoons, perfect for snorkeling. Boats take you farther out to snorkel above manta rays, plate coral, and big fish. Divers can swim through the blowhole, 16m (52 ft.) down, and see gorgonian fans, soft and hard corals, sharks, barracudas, and reef fish. See Chapter 17.

The Best Wildlife Viewing

Australia's wildlife is unique. Isolation has given the continent some of the world's most unusual animals — the kangaroo, the platypus, and the koala to name just three. Add to that abundant birdlife, reptiles, and marine life and you've got more than enough to keep the most avid wildlife watchers happy.

- ✔ You'll see more native animals on South Australia's **Kangaroo Island** — including koalas, wallabies, birds, echidnas, reptiles, seals, and sea lions — than anywhere else in the country, apart from a wildlife park. And the distances between major points of interest are not great, so you won't spend half the day just getting from place to place. See Chapter 20.
- ✔ If cuddling a koala is high on your list, head to Brisbane's **Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary**. This is the world's first and largest koala sanctuary. Along with 130 koalas, lots of other Aussie wildlife — including wombats, Tasmanian devils, 'roos (which you can hand-feed), and colorful parakeets — are on show. You can even have your photo taken with a koala in your arms. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Kakadu National Park** in the Northern Territory is home to one-third of Australia's bird species. It's also the favored habitat of lots of **saltwater crocodiles**, which you can see on a cruise on the Yellow Water Billabong. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ Head into Queensland's World Heritage-listed **Wet Tropics Rainforest** behind Cairns or Port Douglas with **Wait-a-While Rainforest Tours** to spotlight possums, lizards, pythons, or even the shy and elusive **platypus**. Groups regularly spot the rare, bizarre Lumholtz's tree kangaroo. See Chapter 17.

The Best Beaches

Australia is blessed with thousands of beaches, some deserted and some more popular. So bring your *cozzie* (Australian for "swimsuit") and take the plunge!

- ✔ The sea is turquoise, the sun is warm, the palms sway, and the low-rise hotels beside **Four Mile Beach** can't spoil the feeling that it is a million miles from anywhere. But isn't there always a serpent in paradise? In this case, the "serpents" are North Queensland's

seasonal, potentially deadly marine stingers. Come from June through September to avoid them. See Chapter 17.

- ✓ Azure water, islands dotting the horizon, and white sand edged by vine forests make **Mission Beach** a real winner. The bonus is that hardly anyone comes here. Cassowaries (giant emulike birds) hide in the rain forest, and the tiny town of Mission Beach makes itself invisible behind the leaves. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ Perth has 19 great beaches, but the petite crescent of **Cottesloe Beach** is the prettiest. After you've checked out the scene, join the fashionable set for brunch in the Indiana Tea House, a mock-Edwardian bathhouse fronting the sea. See Chapter 21.

The Best Places for a Bushwalk

- ✓ Many bushwalks in the **Blue Mountains National Park** offer awe-inspiring views of valleys, waterfalls, cliffs, and forest. You get to walk beneath dripping tree ferns, underneath pounding cascades, and through areas skirted by wilderness. All are easy to reach from Sydney. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ You can start from Alice Springs and walk the 250km (155-mile) semi-desert **Larapinta Trail**, which winds through the stark crimson McDonnell Ranges. You don't have to walk the entire length — plenty of day-length and multiday sections are possible. This one's for the cooler months only (Apr–Oct). See Chapter 18.
- ✓ Whether a wetlands stroll or an overnight hike in virgin bushland, you can find it in the World Heritage-listed **Kakadu National Park**. You'll see red cliffs, cycads, waterfalls, lagoons hiding man-eating crocodiles, what sometimes looks like Australia's entire bird population, and Aboriginal rock art. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ The 80km (50-mile) Overland Track between **Cradle Mountain & Lake St. Clair National Park** is arguably the best hike in Australia. The trek, from Cradle Mountain to Lake St. Clair, takes five to ten days, depending on your fitness level. Shorter walks, some lasting just half an hour, are also accessible. See Chapter 23.