

You're planning a trip to Oz? BRILLIANT. We want to have a great time!!

However, there are a few things that we Aussies learn as little kids to help us keep safe in our environment. No doubt there are some of those things in your environment too. So here's the inside info for visitors.

BEFORE YOU GO

- Make sure your tetanus vaccine is up to date.
- Get travel insurance from your travel agent just in case
- Pack a hat and sunglasses (or sunnies as we call sunglasses in Oz)

ON ARRIVAL

Buy some sunscreen - at least 15+ ! In Oz we have some of the cheapest and best sunscreen in the world – don't use that old stuff from home – sunscreen goes 'off' – in fact Australia was the first country to put expiry dates on sunscreen.

SUN PROTECTION

This may be called a sunburnt country but we see a lot of sunburnt tourists – it's a miserable business being sunburnt. Many tourists feel the need to discover this fact for themselves but the wise ones take precautions so they never find out.

Australia's sun protection catch phrase is SLIP SLOP SLAP!

- SLIP on a shirt: Ordinary T-shirts let a lot of the sun's burning rays through. While you are here, you can get great Sunshirts made of extra sun repelling fabric. For swimming get a sun protection shirt or 'Rashy' - made of lycra so you can stay out swimming longer without getting burnt. There are Cancer Council shops in a lot of major shopping centres which have really great stuff for sun protection.
- SLOP on sunscreen: The strongest you can get – at least 15+. Anything less is a bit of a waste of your money if you want some serious sun. Sunscreen doesn't completely stop you getting sunburnt, skin cancers, wrinkles etc but it slows the whole business down. There's nothing like having a close friend get a melanoma (potentially fatal skin cancer) in their 20's to make you take sun protection seriously – Just one bad sunburn could trigger a cancer down the track.
- SLAP on a broad brimmed hat: kids can get special legionnaires hats which cover the back of the neck and ears for about \$5-10 (see photo)

SUNGLASSES: Its cool and its comfortable to wear sunnies – glare on the beach and even while driving, can be pretty uncomfortable without them

STAY OUT OF THE SUN BETWEEN 10 am and 2pm. Personally I don't let my kids out in the sun between 10 and 2pm in the summer as the heat and sun is FIERCE.

SAFE SURFING

Bathe between the flags!!!! You will see signs to this effect, but please do as they say. Swimming in the surf is UTTERLY different to swimming in a pool. The waves are GREAT FUN but they can be tricky, and occasionally dangerous.

Last summer (97/98) was one of the worst on record for drownings on Australian beaches. 64 PERSONS DROWNED. Many of them were visitors to the areas - tourists who thought they knew better than those surf lifesavers.

It is a serious worry for Australians – we don't like hearing stories of tourists drowning but we read it in the paper quite frequently. Lifesavers fear this season is headed the same way, despite their best efforts at educating the public about Safe Surfing.

Bathe between the flags because there are nasty little things called RIPS, which can suck you out, suck you under and you cannot get out. The lifesavers check the beach to make sure there are none of these before they put up their flags. No RIPS in swimming pools so most visitors really don't seem to believe in them.

Lifesavers say they have heard about every excuse in the book

- The flagged areas are too crowded
- It's too far to walk to them
- I like to sunbathe and swim in private
- There's no patrolled beach close to where I'm staying
- You can't tell me where to swim
- I'm a good swimmer and nothing will happen to me

Last year in Queensland there were 13 deaths and 12 of them occurred in unsupervised locations

Putting your toes and ankles in the surf and if you are VERY daring up to your knees in unpatrolled beaches is about as far as you can safely go.

DRIVING IN AUSTRALIA

The risk of a road crash is an unfortunate fact of life for road users. AUSTRALIA is not that different to any other country. In fact most of our roads are really great. Driving in an unfamiliar environment however, means you should to be a bit more careful.

- Be conscious of driving on the LEFT hand side of the road
- Wear a seatbelt and for children, use child restraints. This is required by law in the all parts of the country.
- Don't drink alcohol and drive (Legal blood alcohol limit in Australia is .05). We have random breath testing with heavy penalties for those found drinking under the influence of alcohol. Alcohol bottles (wine beer, spirits) have a note on the label telling you how many standard drinks is in the bottle. Approximately one standard drink per hour is OK for most people
- Be aware of local speed limits, which are signposted in kilometres per hour. The highway is usually 100km per hour, and around town 40-60km per hour depending on the local area. Its better to be late than dead on time.
- Don't drive if tired, and take regular rest breaks every few hours. A quick cup of coffee and a choccie (chocolate bar) can do wonders. There is a campaign slogan STOP, REVIVE, SURVIVE. The distances in Australia are a real shock to many visitors. People really DO just fall asleep at the wheel of the car, and get themselves killed (or get others killed). Some parts of the country have audible lines on the side of the road so if you fall asleep and cross the lines you will thoretically wake up, but you probably don't want to stake your life on it. If possible drive in the daytime too. Plan your trip so you don't have to drive the first day if you are likely to be feeling a bit jet lagged.

Studies have shown that international drivers are more likely than Australian drivers to overturn their vehicles, to not wear seat belts and to be involved in fatigue related crashes.

DRIVING ON THE BEACH

There are some places in Australia where you can drive on the beach. You usually need a permit. Remember the beach is not a highway and so drive SLOWLY, especially drive very slowly past any people especially children. Check with the locals to get tips about the local area. Always carry a tide book so you can drive most comfortably on the low tide when the beach is harder. Watch out for wildlife, rocks and waves. Recently a group of tourists hired a 4 wheel drive and drove on Fraser island in Queensland – they were unfamiliar with beach driving and the car got hit by a wave, rolled over and injured all the occupants. Don't ride on the outside of the vehicle or ride on the tailgate.

DRIVING IN THE OUTBACK

Get information locally. The distances are vast. Be prepared in case you get bogged and so you must carry food, water and a medical kit in the vehicle. Never leave the vehicle in search of help. A sad story illustrates this point. In December 98 the local Australian papers reported a 'very fit' Austrian tourist who tried to walk 70 kilometres in the desert to get help after their vehicle got bogged near Lake Eyre in South Australia. She was found dead 40 km from the vehicle with the word 'HELP' scrawled in the sand near her body. She had a bottle three quarters full of water and a backpack with some food. Her travelling partner stayed with the vehicle and survived.

Overall it's a great country and you'll have a great time, if you just take a few simple precautions. Ask the locals if you need some help with something – most aussies are delighted for the opportunity to help.

HEALTH HAZARDS FOR TRAVELLERS TO AUSTRALIA

1. Introduction

Tourism in Australia has increased enormously over the last 10 years, and the increase is expected to continue in light of the coming Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Concomitant with this increase has been the rise in the number of backpackers and budget travellers who visit remote regions.

Travelling in Australia is as safe as it is in any developed country. Despite the long list of possible problems which may be encountered while visiting Australia, it is still considered a safe destination. No specific vaccinations are required although the traveller would be advised to have up-to-date tetanus cover. Hepatitis A and B could be considered.

Emergency care is offered free at public hospitals to holders of passports from U.K., Italy, Malta, Sweden, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Finland through Australia's health system, Medicare. Further information can be obtained for the cost of a local call on 132011 from anywhere in Australia. However, personal medical insurance is highly recommended.

2. Geography

Most Australians live in coastal temperate regions and enjoy sophisticated medical services with good communications. Tropical Australia, lying north of the tropic of Capricorn (latitude 23.5°S), is sparsely populated.

Central and tropical Australia cover vast distances and travel routes often pass through relatively inhospitable country. In the wet, roads become impassable within hours of the onset of the rains. Visitors who are not medically fit should exercise caution or travel only with recognised tour groups. The environment is unique, and there are diseases here not found in the rest of the country. Medical services are basic in the outback, but Australia's unique 'Flying Doctor Air Service' operates for emergency medical care in all outback and isolated areas on mainland Australia.

3. Possible health concerns in Australia

The risks of traveller's diarrhoea, viral respiratory illness, food poisoning and common community illnesses are similar to those in developed countries in other parts of the world. Outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis, hepatitis A and salmonellosis occur from time to time although urban water supplies are usually safe.

Blood supplies are tested for HIV, hepatitis B and C viruses.

3.1 Physical

3.1.1 Heat and Sunburn

The summer sun in temperate Australia can be intense, even in Tasmania, and precautions should be taken to prevent sunburn. (Australia has the unenviable highest rate of skin cancer in the world). Summer time is nominally from December through to March but summer conditions can continue well into April.

Temperatures in central Australia can fluctuate from searing heat to freezing. Drinking water can be scarce. Heat exhaustion can develop rapidly. Prompt medical care may be unavailable in remote areas. Sunburn prevention measures are essential.

3.1.2 Motor car

Visitors should be aware that the wearing of seat belts whether driver or passenger of a car is compulsory. The wearing of helmets is compulsory for both motor bike riders and push bike riders. Road rules are uniform throughout Australia. Like UK, in Australia, we drive on the left-hand side of the road. Royal Automobile Clubs operate in each state and can supply road maps and road rules.

3.2 Envenomations and Bites:

3.2.1 Crocodiles

Crocodiles are found in most of the rivers and estuaries in northern Australia. Crocodiles move incredibly fast both on land and in water and great caution should be exercised if the visitor is contemplating swimming or walking in known crocodile-infested areas, eg along the Daintree River banks in North Queensland. Warning signs should not be ignored.

3.2.2 Sandflies

Sandfly bites cause local irritation and may become secondarily infected.

3.2.3 Sea Creatures:

Sting Rays and sharks are both present in Australian waters, particularly in summer, but the numbers of attacks are small. Most popular beaches are patrolled by lifeguards and warning sirens sound if the presence of sharks in-shore is suspected.

The blue-ringed octopus, found in coastal waters, tidal pools and shallow reefs all round Australia, should never be handled. It is smaller than a tennis ball and therefore tempting and attractive to children. When handled, the blue rings become more obvious and at this point, it can inflict a venomous bite. The bite may appear trivial but within ten minutes, symptoms can begin. These include paresthesias, muscular weakness, vomiting and respiratory arrest.

Jellyfish: The box jellyfish is the most lethal. Swimmers and/or waders may encounter box jellyfish in shallow water from October to May. Severe local pain, followed by apnoea and cardiac arrest may occur. Prompt first aid, followed by medical help and antivenom may be required. The blue bottle jellyfish and the Portuguese man-o-war can inflict painful stings. Visitors wishing to wade or swim among rock pools in the presence of jellyfish could consider wearing pantyhose which offer some protection.

Stone fish, cone shells and other spiny reef creatures can cause injury. Protective footwear is recommended.

3.2.4 Snakes

Australia is host to a variety of extremely venomous snakes. The Taipan of tropical Australia is one of the world's most venomous. However, the most commonly encountered species are timid and not aggressive unless surprised or pursued. Travellers, especially those going to rural or wilderness areas, should treat all snakes with great respect, use appropriate footwear and have some knowledge about first aid measures for snakebite, including the principle of immobilising a bitten limb. Appropriate antivenom is generally available at regional hospitals.

Sea snakes are common in the tropical waters of Australia. Their bite is venomous but rarely fatal.

3.2.5 Spiders

There are several venomous spiders in Australia. The Redback spider is common but the bite is rarely fatal. The Funnel-web, found around Sydney, is rare but can inflict a fatal bite. The white-tailed spider is common in many households and gardens. Its bite causes local skin necrosis without generalised symptoms. It is recommended that visitors participating in gardening wear protective gloves.

3.2.6 Ticks

In addition to tick-borne infection, human tick paralysis due to *Ixodes holocyclus* is occasionally reported, especially along the east coast of Australia. Tasmania and the islands of Bass Strait also have ticks.

3.2.7 Leeches

Relatively common in bush areas and river banks.

3.3 Diseases

3.3.1 Dengue

Dengue occurs in periodic outbreaks in northern Queensland and occurs in the Torres Strait; there were seven documented outbreaks between 1990 and 1998. Over 200 cases were reported during the outbreak in 1998. The main vector, *Aedes aegypti*, remains eradicated from the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Anti-mosquito measures are recommended including sleeping under nets and using skin preparations which contain DEET.

3.3.2 Japanese encephalitis

Australia was free of Japanese encephalitis till 1995 when 3 cases of the disease occurred in an island in the Torres Strait (the strait running between mainland Australia and Papua New Guinea). One single case was

reported in Cape York on the mainland in 1998. The infection has not established in the mainland, and vaccination for visitors to northern Australia is not recommended. Pigs have been infected in some of the outer islands in the Torres Strait (islands close to Papua New Guinea) where the risk season is between February and April. The occasional visitor to these islands during the risk season should be vaccinated.

3.3.3 Leptospirosis

Leptospirosis is endemic in parts of eastern rural Australia and is primarily an occupational disease associated with the dairy and beef industries. Tourists may be at risk if they spend time in dairies whilst staying on farms. The clinical pattern is that of an acute flu-like illness, often accompanied by aseptic meningitis.

3.3.4 Malaria

Australia was declared free of malaria in 1981 with the last indigenous case occurring in 1962 in the Northern Territory. A case of 'Airport' malaria presumed to have been acquired from an infected mosquito was reported in Cairns in 1996. All other cases of malaria were imported. No antimalarial prophylaxis is necessary in Australia.

3.3.5 Melioidosis:

Melioidosis is endemic to the Northern Territory, far north Queensland and far north Western Australia. It is the commonest cause of fatal community-acquired pneumonia in the tropical top end of Northern Territory. Infection has occurred in travellers, especially during the monsoon period, predominantly by percutaneous inoculation. Risk factors for severe disease include diabetes mellitus, chronic renal failure and alcoholism. (Symptoms may not occur for some years, long after the visitor has left the area).

3.3.6 Murray Valley (Australian) encephalitis

This mosquito borne disease occurs in the far north of Australia (the Kimberley region of northern Western Australia and the adjacent Northern Territory) and has caused infrequent outbreaks in southern states.

3.3.7 Rabies

Australia is free of the classic rabies virus. A new Lyssavirus, belonging to the same family, was identified in three species of bats in Australia. One woman in Queensland died of encephalitis from this virus in November 1996. Rabies vaccine and rabies immune globulin appear cross-protective. Travellers who are bitten or scratched by bats in Australia should receive post-exposure prophylaxis.

3.3.8 Rickettsial Infections

Queensland tick typhus is the most common rickettsial disease in Australia and occurs along the east coast. It is transmitted by Ixodes ticks. The disease is characterised by fever, muscle aches and a rash, not unlike a mild attack of Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Unlike RMSF, fatality is extremely rare.

Scrub typhus is particularly prevalent in the area just south of Darwin in the Northern Territory. Flinders Island tick typhus is localised to Bass Strait and causes a milder illness. Murine typhus is less common but is endemic in Western Australia.

3.3.9 Ross River Virus and Barmah Forest Virus

These two viruses cause most of the cases of epidemic polyarthritis, an acute febrile illness with a rubella-like rash followed by polyarthropathy and constitutional symptoms which may last for many months. The viruses are transmitted by mosquitoes of the Aedes and Culex species. Whilst they are more common in the tropical north, they occur throughout the country with frequent Summer outbreaks.

3.3.10 Sexually transmitted diseases

These include chlamydia, herpes simplex virus, hepatitis B. Gonorrhoea and syphilis are relatively uncommon. Penicillin-resistant N. gonorrhoeae occurs in < 5% of the isolates (higher rate in some states). Up to October, 1997, there were over 20,000 cases of HIV reported.

3.3.11 Other Infections

Q fever occurs widely in Australia. It is associated with the cattle and meat industry. Psittacosis occurs in occasional outbreaks in southern Australian states. Mycobacterial disease is uncommon and the risk to travellers is considered small. Brucellosis is confined to western Queensland and mainly occurs in people who hunt wild pigs.