
A SHORT GUIDE FOR VISITORS TO REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Australia's Indigenous peoples are proud of their unique heritage and living cultures. This guide may help you to learn about the meanings which they attribute to the Australian landscape and to respect their practices, beliefs and values. Hopefully, it will enrich your experience of Indigenous Australia.



Aboriginal Tourism Australia

Australia's Indigenous population includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Aboriginal belief system stems from a period widely referred to as the Dreamtime.

The Dreamtime is the past, present and future, it reaches back to the deeds of creative ancestors, whose actions at various places filled the earth with the life forms we see today. They created languages and ceremonies, taught Aboriginal peoples the proper way to live with kin and attributed ongoing custodianship of the land to local groups sometimes called 'tribes' or 'nations'. They also left rich traditions of ritual, dance, music, art and stories which continue to inform contemporary Indigenous expression in the visual and performing arts.

Torres Strait Islanders are indigenous to some of the 100 islands in the Torres Strait, between the northern tip of Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea. The beliefs and custodial ties to the land and seas of Torres Strait Islanders are also based in myths and legends of ancient, heroic figures, such as those relating to the Stars of Tangai, and live on, in what is today referred to as 'Ailan Kastom'.

While there is a common theme in creation beliefs, dreamings and lifestyles, skin colours and cultural practices vary enormously across Australia whether Indigenous peoples live in remote Indigenous controlled communities or in urban settings. Around 300 Indigenous languages and over 700 dialects have been recorded, although some may no longer be spoken. Indigenous Australians have also experienced colonisation at different times and in different ways, giving rise to a range of influences which has shaped their lives.

Expressions of Indigenous identity are not only to be found in the hunter-gatherer lifestyles of the past. They are also to be found in contemporary evolving forms in the day-to-day lives of modern Indigenous Australians as they participate in all aspects of Australian society.

Preparation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have established peak bodies and community representative organisations to advocate and manage community affairs for Indigenous people and communities. These are good places to start when looking for information about Indigenous communities.

- * Visit the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) website on www.atsic.gov.au
 - * Contact relevant bodies such as the Australian offices and local shires.
 - * For information on Indigenous tourism operations, visit the Aboriginal Tourism Australia website on www.ataust.org.au
 - * Many Indigenous community organisations operate Cultural Centres which are open to the public, for the names of local community organisations contact ATSIC state offices.
 - * Always check for and respect local customs. On arrival seek local information and protocols from Indigenous community organisations.
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* Visitor permits are required to enter some Aboriginal owned land, predominately those in northern and central Australia and some parts of South Australia and Western Australia.

* Permits are issued through Land Councils who act on behalf of traditional owners.

* The permit system is designed to help protect the privacy of Aboriginal communities, preserve and promote visitor safety. Intending visitors should submit applications for permits to the relevant Land Council well in advance.

* Be aware that in many Indigenous communities the consumption or possession of alcohol is banned. This rule is enforced and must be observed.

Communication

Complex kinship structures exist in traditional Aboriginal society. People belong to extended family clan groups which gives them responsibilities in addition to those of the nuclear family. Communities operate as a group rather than being individually oriented. In many areas there are customary ways of treating certain matters, for example some cultural lifestyles don't allow men and women to mix freely.

* Be aware that Indigenous people communicate differently to non-Indigenous people. Their verbal and such as 'hello' and 'goodbye' may not be used. You need to be prepared to wait until people want to speak to you. Understand that such behaviour is culturally influenced and is not intended to be impolite.

* Take your cues from Indigenous people, allow them to set the pace, let your presence be noticed before engaging in conversation.

* Be aware that access to Dreaming stories, ritual and cultural practices may be restricted to specific individuals or groups. Asking people about such things may cause offence.

* It is customary that images of recently deceased people are not displayed and that the name of the deceased person is not spoken.

* Be aware that many Indigenous people in remote communities speak English as a second language and

* Be aware that the concept of time is different. In traditional society Indigenous people's concept of time is not linear and time constraints are traditionally perceived differently.

Privacy

Visitors are asked to respect the privacy of the people living in the communities they travel through. Be conscious of Indigenous peoples wishes about their land.

* Always ask before photographing a person, group or residence or culturally significant places, practices, images and ceremonies - and other apparently less significant subjects. Offer to return copies of photographs, if requested.

* In some communities there may be areas you will be asked to avoid. Please observe community requests to avoid those areas.

* In traditional communities mortuary rites, often referred to as 'sorry business', are an obligation for the entire community. On the death of a senior person access to an area may be closed for a period of time. Please respect the communities' privacy in these matters.

Caring for country

Some land is more significant than other land usually because of its mythological significance, use as a burial ground or ceremonial site. These special places are often referred to as 'sacred sites'. Access to these sites is generally restricted.

* When visiting the wide variety of Indigenous cultural and heritage sites, including those of the more recent past, always ask about appropriate behaviour. Read signage carefully, keep to dedicated camping areas, stay on tracks and boardwalks, and comply with other requests; the significance of a site may not always be apparent.

* While many Aboriginal sites have been recorded and are protected under heritage legislation, many more are not recorded. Some sites of significance may have no apparent geographical features of importance, nevertheless they are of importance to local communities. Respect the local community's story associated with a particular site.

* Many sites may be accessed readily but there may be areas you will be asked to avoid, depending upon the nature of their significance, whether you are male or female, whether the influence of a site is considered to be dangerous or whether activities such as ceremonies are taking place. At some sites, it may be sufficient to observe respectful, quiet behaviour. At others there may be specific rules relating to the surrounding environment. Never remove materials from a site for souvenirs

* Indigenous rock art and engravings are manifestations of belief. Be mindful that large numbers of visitors place enormous pressure on sites. Never interfere with rock surfaces and cultural artefacts. And be aware that by the touching of artworks and motifs, the skin's natural oils can cause considerable deterioration. Dust is damaging, so move thoughtfully at rock art sites and leave your vehicle some distance away.

* Many sites will already have been photographed by professionals, so think about buying postcards instead.

Cultural heritage and intellectual property

Indigenous cultural and intellectual property refers to the expressions, products, knowledge and practices that make up the collective heritage and culture of Indigenous people.

* The activities of ancestral heroes and creator figures prescribe the peoples' rights to and responsibilities for their lands and inform their rich traditions of ritual, dance, music, art and stories. A great wealth of Indigenous knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation and individuals or groups have authority over the ownership of such knowledge. Strict protocols usually determine who may narrate or paint particular stories or use associated designs.

* Copyright, patent and intellectual property laws apply throughout Australia, and it may be unlawful to copy, publish, sell or otherwise use Indigenous designs and images, languages, photographs, artefacts, crafts, general artworks, music, songs, dances, stories, interpretations, performances and presentations. Indigenous protocol suggests that such intellectual and cultural property should not be copied for private purposes either.

* When buying souvenirs look for Aboriginal authenticity labels rather than 'Indigenous inspired'. In this way you will support Indigenous Australians in their efforts to preserve and protect their heritage.

CONTACT LIST

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www.atsic.gov.au

TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY

Tel.: (07) 4069 1247

www.tsra.gov.au

ABORIGINAL TOURISM AUSTRALIA

Tel.: (03) 9620 4533

www.ataust.org.au

AUSTRALIAN TOURIST COMMISSION

Tel.: (02) 9360 1111

www.atc.net.au

NORTHERN LAND COUNCIL

Tel.: (08) 8920 5178

www.nlc.org.au

CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

Tel.: (08) 8951 6211

www.clc.org.au

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