

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY (ACT)

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Introduction

The Australian Government took possession of 2 357km² of land from New South Wales (NSW) in 1911 to form the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) as the site for the Australian national capital. That capital, Canberra, lies between Sydney, 307km north-east, and Melbourne 655km south-west. The total ACT population is around 300,000. The majority live and work in Canberra.

A second territory, at Jervis Bay, was acquired from NSW in 1915. This transfer was in accordance with the Seat of Government Acceptance Act 1908 which stated that the seat of government (ACT) should have access to the sea. The Jervis Bay territory was to be that access.

Jervis Bay is administered by the Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories on behalf of the Australian Government. It has been used for defence activities, grazing, forestry, water catchment purposes, conservation and recreation. Its total area is 7360ha.

Topography

The ACT has three contrasting landforms. In the north, where urban development has taken place, it is a lowland of undulating hills including the floodplains of the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo Rivers, mostly below 600m. Beyond this are forested mountain slopes rising to 1200m divided by numerous tributaries of the Murrumbidgee. In the south and extreme west is an upland of steep ridges and mountain peaks rising above 1800m.

Climate

The lowland, including the city of Canberra, has an average annual rainfall of 630mm, unevenly distributed throughout the year. In most years there are light snowfalls in winter. Strong winds are frequent, mainly from the west and north-west. The mean maximum temperature in Canberra is 19.70C, with the highest on record 42.20C. The mean minimum is 6.90C, with the lowest on record, -100C.

On the mountain slopes the rainfall is higher but very uneven, due to variations of aspect.

The mountain ridges have an even higher rainfall which may reach 1500mm annually. During much of the winter the ground temperature is near or below freezing point. Snow falls frequently and may persist for some months.

Flora and fauna

In the lowlands, extensive natural grass country has been covered by urban development, crops and introduced pasture grasses. Much of the plain is grassy woodland where eucalyptus trees dominate, but acacias (wattles) are common and casuarinas grow along the water courses. The largest hills are covered with dry sclerophyll forest of eucalyptus, and casuarinas. However, some of the natural forest has been replaced with plantations of exotic pines.

Animal life in the ACT is varied and interesting. The only egg-laying mammals in the world, the platypus and echidna, are locally common. Numerous species of marsupials, including possums, wombats and four species of kanga-

roos and wallabies can be seen. Significant reptile and amphibian fauna live in the region. No fewer than 263 species of birds have been recorded in the district, nearly a third of the total for Australia.

Reserves

The Namadgi National Park covers about 40 per cent of the ACT. It reaches to the border of the NSW Kosciusko National Park, and together with parks in Victoria, is part of a series of reserves which protect most of Australia's alpine and sub-alpine areas.

The Namadgi National Park incorporates the Gudgenby Nature Reserve and a substantial part of the Cotter River Valley. The Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, where many Australian animals and birds have been reintroduced, adjoins the Namadgi National Park.

The Australian National Botanic Gardens, on the slopes of Canberra's Black Mountain, are planted entirely with native trees and plants. An area of rainforest also has been developed.

Government

Until 1989, the ACT was administered by the federal Government, with the federal Minister for Territories making all decisions relating to the ACT. However, in the late 1980s, the federal Government made the decision that the ACT should be granted self-government. The federal Parliament passed the Australian Capital Territory (Self Government) Act in 1988, along with other related legislation which established self-government in the ACT. The first

ACT election was held on 4 March 1989 and the ACT Legislative Assembly held its inaugural sitting on 11 May 1989.

The ACT has a unicameral, or one house, form of parliament. The ACT Legislative Assembly consists of 17 members, referred to as MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly). All members vote to elect a Chief Minister, who then in turn selects a further three ministers to form a cabinet.

The ACT is also represented in the federal Parliament by two Senators and two Members of the House of Representatives.

Education

The combined total of primary, high schools and secondary colleges including non-government schools is around 138, with more than 61,000 students.

The Australian National University is comprised of the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS), six faculties and the Schools of Art and Music. The six faculties are Arts, Asian Studies, Economics and Commerce, Law, Engineering and Information Technology, and Science. Around 10,000 students are enrolled at the university.

The University of Canberra has more than 9300 students studying in its six faculties - Applied Science, Communication, Education, Environmental Design, Information Sciences and Engineering, and Management. The university also offers professional education as well as seven research centres.

The Canberra Institute of Technology is a multi-disciplinary, multi-campus tertiary education institution. It provides vocational education and training for

the ACT and its region with an increasing national and international market.

Transport

Canberra is served by the major domestic airlines and feeder services from nearby provincial cities. Long-distance buses and modern express trains run daily services to Sydney and Melbourne.

Canberra's internal transport system is based on a network of commuter buses. However, many residents prefer to travel by private cars, using the city's well developed wide roads and freeways.

Employment and industry

Although Canberra is Australia's national capital, the private sector accounts for 52 per cent of the workforce in the territory.

Industries such as hospitality and tourism and advanced technology- including computing, electronics and communication - are having strong growth. Research and development activities are strongly represented, reflecting the solid research base provided by the various institutions in the ACT.

Tourism

Tourism is Canberra's major growth industry with more than 1.25 million visitors a year, staying more than one night in the national capital.

In order of popularity, the most visited attractions are Parliament House, the

War Memorial, the National Gallery, Telecom Tower, and the Science and Technology Museum. Parliament House alone receives more than 1.25 million visitors annually and the Old Parliament House, re-opened at the beginning of 1993 is also a very popular attraction.

Tourist accommodation varies from international standard hotels, serviced apartments and units to budget accommodation such as youth hostels, caravan parks and camping grounds.

Source: DFAT