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City profile

Perth, Western Australia

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Perth, the capital of Western Australia, despite its apparent remoteness, is now widely regarded as being one of the world's most attractive cities. Set between ocean and hills, its convivial Mediterranean climate, low-density development and casual, laid-back style, have proved appealing to successive waves of migrants and today attract increasing numbers of short term visitors and tourists. However, growing affluence, continued population growth and areal expansion, coupled with real and predicted climate change, have alerted planners and policy makers to the prospect of an uncertain future. Perth is now trying to reimage itself along more sustainable lines, conserving the best of the city while at the same time exorcising the demons of its earlier profligacy.

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Introduction

Perth, the state capital of Western Australia, is the fourth largest Australian city, after Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. The only capital city on the west coast of the continent and closer to Jakarta than to Australia's national capital Canberra, Perth has had a longstanding claim to be 'the most isolated capital city in the world' (Figure 1).

More recently, a further dubious attribute was given to the city when the distinguished scientist and 2007 Australian of the Year, Dr. Tim Flannery, predicted that, within the next 50 years, Perth could become the 21st century's first 'ghost metropolis' (Ayre, 2007). For, over the last 30 years, substantial urban growth has been coincident with a period of much reduced rainfall and questions regarding the city's continuing sustainability now increasingly occupy the attention of both public policy makers and the community at large. Despite Western Australia's enormity, encapsulating two and a half million square

kilometres, or approximately one third of the continent, Perth's urban primacy has been unabated and three quarters of the state's population now live, somewhat tenuously within a metropolis that occupies less than 1% of its total area.

Previously regarded as the 'Cinderella State', Western Australia has since the 1960s witnessed a prolonged period of economic growth fuelled by the continued discovery and exploitation of mineral resources, found principally in the state's north-west. The growth of Perth has reflected the strength of the state's economy and high levels of in-migration have been coincident with the city's role as a 'gateway' to both Southeast Asia and developing Indian Ocean states. During this period Perth has outperformed most of the other state capitals in terms of sustained population growth and consistent economic development, and the city has leapfrogged Adelaide in the national urban hierarchy. The city's attraction is enhanced by a superb physical setting along the Swan River and beside the Indian Ocean, a convivial 'mediterranean' climate of 'hot dry summers, warm wet winters' (23.3 °C mean maximum temperature, 13.3 °C mean minimum temperature) and

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Figure 1 Location of Perth within Australia and the region.

high levels of daily sunshine, both in summer and winter. The low altitude Darling Ranges offer lifestyle alternatives for those who wish to live in a bushland setting and there are ample facilities for outdoor recreational pursuits. The latest census figures, released in July 2007, recorded a population increase of 8.3% over the period 2001–2006, making Perth the second fastest growing capital behind Brisbane (see Table 1). At the same time, rap-

idly increasing real estate prices and an overheated rental market have reduced the relative cost-of-living advantage that Perth used to have over its eastern states rivals.

Historical origins and development

Perth’s urban origins have been outlined in a previous city profile (Houghton, 1990). The city dates from 1829 when the British government established at Swan River the first non-convict colony in Australia under the Lieutenant – Governorship of Captain James Stirling. While both Dutch and French navigators had previously explored the WA coast from the late-17th century onwards, they had considered the land largely uninhabitable, despite the obvious presence of its indigenous inhabitants. The British, who had occupied Botany Bay in 1788 and then Van Diemen’s Land (later Tasmania) in 1804, sought to extend their control over the western part of the continent in order to pre-empt possible French incursions, and today the French connection may still be traced through the many coastal placenames still evident in the south west of the state (Marchant, 2004). Perth, the capital of the colony, was one of three initial settlements established

Table 1 Population Growth 2001–2006

	2001b Estimated resident population	2006 Estimated resident population	Growth (%)
Australia	19,535,100	20,701,500	5.6
Capital city:			
Perth	1,393,002	1,519,510	8.3
Brisbane	1,629,625	1,820,400	10.5
Sydney	4,128,272	4,284,379	3.6
Melbourne	3,471,625	3,744,373	7.3
Adelaide	1,107,986	1,146,119	3.3
Canberra	318,939	333,940	4.5
Hobart	197,282	205,566	4
Darwin	106,842	114,368	6.6

Source: ABS 2007.

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