Australia is a great destination in itself, but it is also a good place to stop during visits to the Asia-Pacific region. If you are coming to this part of the world, a round-the-world flight is worth considering. It costs little more than a round trip from NY, London or Paris. So consider making a real trip of it. If you can spend two to three weeks in Australia, you’ll have a great time. If you can in addition spend a week elsewhere on your way here and back, you’ll have the trip of a lifetime.

If you fly from Europe via the east, you have not only the possibility of making stops in the “Middle East,” but also stops in the “Far East.” Most airlines stop at Hong Kong, Singapore or Bangkok, each of which offers you wonderful touring right there and flights to other countries, such as mainland China, Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia. If you continue on from Australia to LA or NY, you have the Pacific Islands and New Zealand on the way. And, more obviously, Americans can stop in Europe, and Europeans can stop in the US.

In Australia, distances are great. Unless you have much time, you will probably want to fly, though train buffs should consider the Indian Pacific (Sydney-Adelaide-Perth) and the Ghan (Adelaide-Alice Springs). Both these journeys cover vast expanses of uniquely Australian desert landscape. Domestic flights are inexpensive if combined with your international ticket and virtually free if you build them into your international ticket. Alternatively, you can purchase tickets in Australia at substantial discounts by showing your international ticket and passport. You will want to make plans and book your international flight at least 3-6 months before coming.

Consider how you want to arrive in Australia. It is very easy to fly into Brisbane direct, and leave the country from another city. If that city is, say, Perth, you can visit a number of places along the way. The greatest numbers of flights from North America and Asian capitals go direct to Sydney, but quite a few fly non-stop to Melbourne and Brisbane. If you want to do extensive touring, you may prefer to enter at Perth or Darwin. Both have some direct international flights. You should remember that the routes to and from Australia are subject to managed competition which ensures that planes fly very full. So book well in advance.

If you start at Perth, you can visit some great sights. Around Perth there is the largely intact Victorian port of Fremantle, beautifully restored for the America’s Cup. Rottnest Island, a car-free holiday spot, is an hour by ferry from Fremantle. It has fine beaches and fishing. You’ll enjoy the native quokkas (not) to feed. South of Perth it’s an easy drive to the picturesque Margaret River wine district, the spectacular coast and, near Albany, the chance to swim with seals. North of Perth by plane or three-day drive, you have the Kimberleys, which many people find deeply spiritual. You have the town of Broome, known for its aboriginal cultural activities (the home of aboriginal theatre) and pearl-diving.

From Perth you can take the Indian Pacific train across the desert to Adelaide or Sydney. If you fly, you can go to Adelaide, or of course directly to Sydney or Melbourne. Most of the population of
Australia is concentrated on the south-eastern coast, along a crescent running from Adelaide through Melbourne and Sydney up to Brisbane.

Adelaide is a charming city of about 500,000, beautifully planned, which will reward two or three days’ stay. From Adelaide, one can rent a car and visit the Barossa, Clare and Eden Valleys for wonderful one- or two-day wine trips. From Adelaide to Melbourne is an eight- to ten-hour drive or train trip. If you do the Barossa, you can drive on to Melbourne by the Great Ocean Road, a scenic wonder not to be missed (also available by day touring buses from Melbourne or, preferably, a two-day trip in a rented car).

Adelaide is the capital city nearest Alice Springs. The train and many flights to Alice Springs go from Adelaide. Depending on your travel plans, you may want to go north at this point. An eight-hour train trip or drive will take you to Alice Springs, to see Uluru (Ayers Rock), the Olgas and other spectacular natural sights. From there you could fly to Darwin, to do a three-or four-day expedition in the Kakadu National Park. If you’re flying around, as most do, you may prefer to go to Darwin directly from Perth or Brisbane.

Melbourne is a large city of about 3.4 million people, notable for its intact Victorian streets and fine parks and gardens, thriving restaurant and coffee culture, as well as theatre, museums, galleries, shopping, and other pleasures usually associated with major cities. Most Australians consider Melbourne to be Australia’s gastronomic capital. Foodies will also enjoy the Queen Victoria Market, probably the world’s largest covered market. The Melbourne Zoo is one of the great zoos and the Healesville Sanctuary (an hour by train from Melbourne) is the best place in Australia to see Australian animals. Melbourne’s tram network offers visitors congenial mobility.

From Melbourne, you can take day trips by train or rented car to the beautifully intact Victorian provincial cities of Ballarat and Bendigo. Each will repay a two-day stay. Consider the splendid high Victorian Craig Royal Hotel in Ballarat and the Shamrock in Bendigo. If you can manage either an organised day-trip or a two- or three-day car trip along the Great Ocean Road, then go at least as far as Port Campbell, so as to see not only the Twelve Apostles and Loch Ard Gorge, but the many other beautiful sites in the Port Campbell National Park.

From Melbourne, you may wish to take a quick flight or eight-hour ferry to Tasmania. If you are interested in the outdoors in a setting that resembles northern hemisphere mountain forests more than the continental Australian outback, Tasmania is a must-see. There are fine walks through the Freycinet National Park, the attractive small city of Launceston, and the lovely larger city of Hobart. The north and south west of the state are home to massive pristine national parks filled with old growth forests and giant trees. Native animal populations are thriving, and the variety of scenery ranges from snow-capped mountains and alpine lakes to lush, dense forests filled with moss, tree-ferns and other subtropical plant life. There are excellent canoeing and kayaking expeditions organised regularly on Tasmania’s rugged rivers and coast line.

Canberra is on the way to Sydney, so if you’re going there, you’ll probably do it between Melbourne and Sydney. The drive from Melbourne to Canberra and then Sydney is longer and is generally considered less interesting than that from Adelaide to Melbourne. The drive on the coast road (the Princes Highway) is more interesting, but the scenery is pleasant rather than spectacular. It takes two days and does not go via Canberra. There is much to be said for flying to Sydney or Canberra.

Canberra is a planned city which has yet to fill out fully to the population for which the plan was conceived and is affectionately referred to by many Australians as “leggo-land” due to its ordered
and block-like modern architecture. It has a number of fine museums. The Museum of Australia will give you a terrific overview of Australian history and culture. The National Gallery has a fine 20th-century collection. The “new” Parliament House is certainly worth a visit. A tour of the old Parliament House shows you how recent has been Australia’s development.

Australians are given to talking in stylised and stereotypical ways about the differences between Melbourne and Sydney. The two cities have enjoyed a strong rivalry since Melbourne sprang up unexpectedly in the 1880s and for half a century or more threatened Sydney’s preeminence. It is nonetheless clear today that Melbourne is in most respects Australia’s second city. The clichéd view is that Melbourne is more sedate and “European,” Sydney more “brash” and more like New York. You can judge for yourself.

Sydney’s population is nearly 4 million. It sits on a spectacular harbor which has concentrated population more tightly. You can easily enjoy at least four or five days in Sydney, finding similar pleasures to Melbourne’s in a very different context. With its spectacular harbor and array of attractive beaches, it offers more diversity if less architectural coherence. Sydney moves at a faster pace and, ironically, has more difficult transport, except for its fabulous ferries. The Taronga Park Zoo is on a rather constrained site but the view is so beautiful that you may want to take the ferry there as well as to Manly (that is a sine qua non). The Aquarium is better than Melbourne’s. You should spend time on Bondi Beach, where the city meets the beach in a hedonistic way Melbourne could never envisage. Look for a performance at the Opera House.

Brisbane is Australia’s third-largest city with a population of about 1.6 million. It is picturesque and cosmopolitan, with quality hotels, restaurants, cafés, night life, and museums. It is located in a tropical landscape along the undulating Brisbane River. It is close to the coast, surrounded by hills and in close proximity to stunning natural attractions, including the World Heritage sites of Fraser Island and the Lamington rainforest, the famous beaches of the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast, and the rich tropical hinterland of Mt Tambourine, Springbrook, the Glasshouse Mountains and Bunya national parks. The June-July period is generally warm, dry and sunny (day 20-25C, night 8-12C).

From Brisbane, you can fly to the Great Barrier Reef, which is one of the wonders of the world. Snorkeling on the reef can be a marvelous experience. If your time is limited, fly on to Cairns and then drive to Port Douglas, a fabulous resort town, whence you can take boats out to the reef as well as well-organised day trips into the Daintree Forest (a spectacular tropical rainforest) and other sights. If you have the time, first spend several days on a reef resort. Heron Island, run by the P&O, is both eco-sensitive and comfortable. You could go on from there to Port Douglas.

Here is a shopping tip to conclude with. Australia has a ten per cent Goods and Services Tax. To compensate, it has a generous Tax Refund Scheme open to all, including Australians, who are flying overseas. If you spend A$300 in one store, get a combined receipt/tax statement, and depart within 30 days, show the receipts and the goods to customs (after entering the gate area); they will arrange a refund of GST. The store need not be a “duty-free” store. Any store will do, provided they print a full receipt that clearly states the tax they paid and qualifies as a tax invoice.

We hope these thoughts will help you plan your trip to Australia.