

People Reach **Australia**



When modern humans left Africa about 100,000 years ago it is thought that their route took them through Arabia and India to South-east Asia. **Sea** levels were about 100m lower than today because a lot of the **seawater** was trapped in the big **ice** caps of the **Last Ice Age**, and so Malaysia and all the Indonesian islands were part of a large area of **land** in South-east Asia. This **land** has been called “Sunda”. You can see the **Ice Age land** in **blue** in the map above. However, south-east of the island of Timor is an area where the **ocean** is very deep, called the “Timor Trough”. This deep part of the ocean was not dry **land** during the **Ice Age**.

Between Timor and **Australia**, during the **Ice Age**, there was a stretch of about 90 km of open **sea**, which people had to cross in order to get to **Australia**. It is probable that they would have needed to use boats. At that time **Australia** and New Guinea were joined together and are known as “Sahul”. The Gulf of Carpentaria was not part of the **sea**, as it is today. Instead it was **land**, with a **lake**, known as “**Lake Carpentaria**” in the middle of what is now the Gulf of Carpentaria. You can see the outline of **Lake Carpentaria** in the map above.

Archaeological sites in **Australia** have been known to be older than the limit for



radiocarbon dating for some time now. The limit for radiocarbon dating is about 40,000 years. So we have known for some time that people have been in **Australia** for at least 40,000 years. But the big question was: How Long? Recently archaeologists have used thermoluminescence dating and have dates of 50,000 years and possibly even 60 or 70,000 years.

One of these sites is Malakunanja II, a rock shelter in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, about 50 km from the coast today. The rock shelter contains **shells**, bones (of people and **animals**), charcoal from **fireplaces** and **stone** tools. There are also rock paintings on the walls, some of which show Europeans and their guns, ships and wagons. It is likely that the rock shelter has been used from time to time ever since people arrived in **Australia**.

Nearby is the site of Nauwalabila, which has similar dates. Both sites are in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. Early dates in the north of **Australia** make sense because people would have entered **Australia** in the north. However, some other archaeological sites with early dates are further south. One of these sites is at Rottnest Island, off the Swan River, near Perth in Western **Australia**.



Rottnest Island, Western Australia. Image by Mark.

We think that people travelled along the coast at first, before moving inland later. In fact many of the earliest sites in **Australia** may be under the **sea** today, because the **sea** level has risen so much. However, people went into the interior of **Australia** quite early. The site of **Lake** Mungo in south-western New South Wales is at least 40,000 years old, possibly older.

