First Australians
The Story of Indigenous Australia

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The First Australians

About 700 Aboriginal nations—each of which had their own Dreaming songs, laws, customs and beliefs and spoke one of 250 or so languages—existed by the time Europeans began to explore Australia in the 1600s. At the time, Indigenous people inhabited much of the coastline and had done for at least 40,000 years, if not longer, which makes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures the oldest continuing human cultures on the earth.

There is a lot we still do not know about the origins of Indigenous Australians, and political and cultural sensitivities may mean science is unable to ever answer all of the questions about how Aboriginal people came to exist on this continent. However, we do know that ancient Indigenous Australians were very resilient. They were skilled trackers, able to survive in arid or snowy regions, and they were used to adapting to changes in their environment. The ancestors of today’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people even lived during the Ice Age, about 8000 years ago.

They were also very creative and highly spiritual people—their cave art and rock painting is among the world’s earliest—and by 20,000 years ago they were crafting stone tools as advanced, or more sophisticated, as tools anywhere else in the world at the time. They also traded tools or other objects among different clans. We know this because a type of glass-like rock known as Darwin Glass, which is found in a meteor crater in the Northern Territory, has been found as far away as Tasmania. The bodies of Mungo Woman and Mungo Man, found at Willandra Lakes World Heritage Site in 1968 and 1975, also indicate they conducted ritual cremations and burials, which suggests the First Australians had a belief in a spiritual afterlife at the time. Archaeologists discovered this by examining bodies, utensils, tools and remains of foodstuffs buried around ancient Aboriginal campsites.

Did you know?
The word Aborigine comes from the Latin ab origine, which means ‘from the beginning’. However, at the time of European occupation, First Australians lived in distinct kinship groups or ‘nations’ and had no need to refer to themselves as a unified group. Some Aboriginal people consider the word ‘Aborigine’ offensive and prefer to be known by their language group.