

Indigenous Shelters

Australian Aborigines were nomadic people, hunting and food gathering as they travelled within their tribal boundaries. They made semi-permanent stops, camping for days or weeks in one place, depending on the availability of food and water. In the well-watered tropical north of Australia, particularly during the wet season, people often camped at one location for several months at a time.

The shelters built by Aborigines depended on how long they intended to stay at a particular location, the available resources, the weather (varying with wet or dry), and time of year (varying with summer, winter, and wet season in the north).

Aboriginal housing and shelters include:

- Sleeping beside an open fire with a **simple wind break** made from leaves and branches. (This method was common in the arid interior.)
- Sleeping **beside a rock outcrop** or at the base of cliffs where the rock provides a wind break.
- **Natural recesses and caves** in sandstone, quartzite and limestone rock formations. (These provided wet season and wet-weather shelters.)
- A **simple lean-to** consisting of leafy branches or large sheets of bark leant against a tree, rock or sapling frame.
- **Adjacent shrubs** were pulled together and their top branches intertwined, effectively tying them together, providing a leafy arch. (This method was used in the arid interior to provide temporary shade during the heat of the day.)
- Shelters made from a **framework of saplings** lashed together, and then covered with leafy branches or sheets of bark. (This method was common across northern Australia.)
- Shelters made by **bending and lashing cane** into a dome-like structure and covering with palm fronds. (This method was common in northern Queensland rainforests.)
- Shelters made by **leaning branches** against each other in dome-like fashion, then covering the lot with **spinifex grass, other vegetation, and a layer of earth and sand**. (The earth and sand formed a crust, providing a winter shelter in arid regions.)
- **Stone structures** survive from two regions of Australia, on High Cliffy Island off the Kimberley coast, and in one district of Victoria. These are stone circles about two metres across with shelter walls 1.5 metres high. Branches and vegetation were placed over each structure to form a roof.

When it came to more substantial dwellings during wet or cold periods, the type of structure people used depended on the available resources. Throughout Australia, paperbark trees (*Melaleuca* species) are common along water courses, providing large sheets of bark suitable for housing and bedding. In northern Australian woodlands, large trees have relatively soft stringy bark which can be chopped away in large sheets (using stone axes and stone choppers in past times). These are then placed over a wooden frame to provide a water-proof structure. In dense rainforests where palm fronds are numerous, these are used instead.