

Italians in Australia - 1

Today, Italian restaurants and cafes are as much a part of Australian life as the beach and AFL. The number of Australians with Italian ancestry is second only to those from Britain and Ireland. So when did Italians migrate to Australia and why?

In the first half of the 19th century, while Australia was still a very young colony, Italy was not a country. Like Australia, it was a group of separate states ruled by other countries. It was a time of political instability and great economic hardship.

Some craftsmen, such as carpenters and marble sculptors, realised their skills would be very useful in the new colony, in projects such as the construction of government buildings, theatres and homes for the wealthy. So they left their homes, bound for Australia and, hopefully, a more fruitful, peaceful life.

During the gold rush years of the 1850s, another wave of Italians came to Australia. They all had the same dream: to make their fortunes and live prosperous lives.

In 1861, Italy became a nation but unlike Australia, it did not happen peacefully. Many well-educated, professional people from northern Italy feared political persecution. In Australia, they hoped to find a more peaceful life.

Italians earned a reputation for being hardworking and clean-living. They lived together in communities and believed in the importance of the church and family life. Although they still dreamed of home, they were determined to succeed in the new colony.

In 1883, an agreement was made between Britain and Italy, allowing Italians to buy land and set up businesses. The British government recognised that the Italians had the positive attitude and characteristics necessary for developing the young colony. They saved most of their earnings and lived frugally so they could afford to buy land and build their own homes.

In response to the White Australia policy, the Pacific Islanders who had been working on sugar plantations in Queensland, were



MIGRANT GROUPS

being sent back home. Unskilled Italians were prepared to take their place and work for the same low wages. This made them very unpopular with the Queenslanders who wanted the jobs but also wanted to be paid more money and to work fewer hours. In time, Italians bought a number of sugar plantations and thriving Italian communities were established.

Some Australians worried that the Italians would 'take over' the nation, especially with the introduction of 'chain migration', in which Italians living in Australia could afford to sponsor other migrants from Italy.

During World War II, because Italy was at war with Britain, Italians living in Australia were considered 'enemy aliens' and interned in camps for the duration of the war. But after the war, thousands more emigrated to Australia, eager to escape the poverty of life in postwar Italy.

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Stories of groups of people who migrated to Australia (including from ONE Asian country) and the reasons they migrated, such as World War II and Australian migration programs since the war (ACHHK115)