



# selling australia

## A STUDY GUIDE

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Selling Australia is a four part series which explores the relationship between Australia's self-identity and the promotion of Australia's image overseas. It is an excellent resource, suited to the needs of high school students at middle and senior levels and also appropriate for tertiary students enrolled in programmes such as tourism and hospitality, international studies, politics, marketing, public relations, communications and Australian studies. The series travels around the 'Golden Triangle' of Austral-

ian tourism (Sydney, the Barrier Reef and the Rock), as well as giving an insight into 'Brand Australia'—the way in which Australia is communicated to prospective international visitors.

### Episode 1: 'The Games'

Focusing on the 2000 Sydney Olympics, this episode's narrative follows the coverage of the Olympics as the world's major sporting event through the eyes of international media representatives. It examines what a range of journalists expected to find when they travelled to Australia and considers whether their experiences were consistent with these expectations

and how their changing views influenced media coverage of the event overall. The episode also investigates whether the Olympics rank as a defining moment of self-identity for Australia and for Australians.

The main theme concerns the ways in which a country communicates an image of itself to the rest of the world and how this is based on a self-image influenced by the structure and methods of the international media.

'The Games' provides a thought-provoking perspective on identity which will be of interest to younger viewers who are confronted with a view of their own country through the lens

of experienced and sometimes cynical foreign journalists. In placing the issue of Australian identity within a global context, the episode will be of particular interest to the thousands of tertiary students enrolled in TAFE or University tourism and media communications courses. It will also appeal to students overseas with an interest in Australian Studies.

### Journalists and the Formation of the Australian Image

Observations by journalists play an important part in determining the image of a tourist destination. Journalists frequently visit an unfamiliar place with preconceived ideas of how they will proceed to report their visit, often relying on the use of stereotypes or attempting to uncover evidence of conflict. This episode depicts the process of preparing and delivering a story, from a variety of points of view. The reporter from the UK-based Observer newspaper, for instance, consciously seeks out Aboriginal activists in protest camps and in demonstrations and appears disappointed at the absence of the type of violent conflict prevalent in other countries such as the UK.

'The Games' highlights the symbolism of the Olympic opening ceremony. The lighting of the Olympic cauldron in particular is noted as a national 'turning point'. One of the most vivid images jumps from the final of the 400 metres race involving Cathy Freeman to Australian viewers in domestic and public settings awaiting the race with anxious anticipation. The camera switches between Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers, as they gaze admiringly at the runner, positioning her as the embodiment of national spirit and aspiration. The episode is certainly not arguing that the Olympic

images are tangible evidence of happy and untroubled race relations--the coverage of the protest camps and demonstrations shows that injustice remains



very much a part of the Australian social and political landscape. However, the anticipated story of conflict with the Indigenous community does not materialise and fails to secure front page coverage. Near the end of the episode, The Observer reporter who was deliberately seeking images of conflict is depicted lying on the beach, expressing the view that Australia is a country very much at ease with itself. His desire to stay in the country is a metaphor for the seductive allure and spell that Australia casts over ill-prepared critics.

In contrast to the UK and European reporters, the journalist from the tabloid USA Today searches for the whimsical side of Australia and the Australian character. The role and status of Vegemite and the barbeque in Australian life are investigated in a playful manner. The USA Today journalist then decides to take a quirkier view of Australia by studying the

drag queens of Kings Cross. The reporter assumes that there is an edginess to this aspect of Australian masculinity. However, given that the movie *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* has been hugely successful in North America and worldwide, this portrayal would now appear to be quite widely accepted as mainstream. The tabloids are once again falling for stereotypes or are at least choosing to reproduce them.

'The Games' highlights the difficulty that overseas visitors have in developing a genuine understanding of Australia that extends beyond the superficial. The point is made eloquently by a Sydney Morning Herald journalist who examines the coverage of the Olympic Games in the foreign media. This, along with some commentary by Professor Graeme Turner, provides an Australian perspective on the international view.

In setting the scene for the next episode in the series, 'The Brand', a range of striking visual images are featured, such as the Coca-Cola sign on a red Rock (Uluru) and a blimp floating over Sydney Harbour displaying the slogan 'G'day'. Behind these images are vast amounts of Games-related sponsorship. This is a major issue for the Australian Tourist Commission (ATC), as it considers whether to co-brand the destination with large international logos such as Visa and American Express, or whether to exert tight public control (the ATC is largely Government funded) over 'Brand Australia'. One memorable image is a huge, striking and brightly illuminated depiction of Cathy Freeman with the Nike 'Just Do It' slogan adorning the side of a prominent Sydney tower block. Viewers are transported from this spectacle to images of Freeman's race.

The episode focuses primarily on the media, rather than on

the attempts to commercialise and arguably distort and control these images through advertising and sponsorship. This focus on the reporters is likely to be of particular interest to journalism students.

The staging of the Sydney 2000 Olympics may be judged a success based on a number of criteria. The absence of terrorist attacks, for example, was greeted with relief and was welcomed as evidence of Australia's continuing innocence. 'The Games' shows a group of journalists being gently persuaded by Australia's capacity to overcome its own self-doubt and to avoid violent conflict. Controversy had surrounded the lead up to the Olympics, with corruption within the International Olympic Committee and mismanagement on the part of the Sydney Olympics Committee. These incidents led to widespread disillusionment and

low expectations in advance of the Games. The event emerged as a turning point for Australia's self-identity, testimony to the fact that many of these negative issues were successfully overcome.

Cathy Freeman is shown running with the Australian and Aboriginal flags intertwined. This was enormously symbolic and is described as an element of the 'Mighty Narrative' of reconciliation. Only a few years earlier at the Commonwealth Games, the same runner had been castigated by the Secretary of Australia's Commonwealth Games Committee, Arthur Tunstall, for brandishing the Aboriginal flag following a victorious run. Clearly a major transformation of opinion and attitudes has taken place.

#### And Now To Our Sponsors ...

Apart from the Vegemite, the barbecues and the protest

camps, the official sporting aspect of the Olympics is the element which obviously receives most coverage. One significant take on the Olympics that is not mentioned here is Roy Slaven and H.G. Nelson's *The Dream*, a television programme featuring 'fringe' interpretation and Games commentary. Such a blatant display of irreverence for official Olympic symbols such as mascots, which were supported by major commercial sponsorship, would amaze American viewers. They would be surprised that such images would be shown on prime time television as a significant adjunct to the Games themselves. In North America, the sponsors would always prevail and such light-hearted disrespect would not be tolerated.

The Sydney 2000 Olympics undoubtedly marked a turning point in national identity. In selecting this media event to set the tone



for what follows, the series is clearly looking to the future and should consequently have a long shelf-life. 'The Games' has a fresh, exploratory feel, examining a quirky aspect of Australia and probing beneath the surface. In common with subsequent episodes in the series, viewers are taken on an interesting exploration of both the superficial and the more significant aspects of national identity. In starting with a discussion of how Australia is viewed through the international media, 'The Games' sets the scene for the other episodes and helps the viewer to move from a global perspec-

ers an insight into the mechanics of preparing a television commercial, revealing aspects of the corporate management of Australia's image. The interview with Paul Hogan, who makes a cameo appearance in the commercial, provides a glimpse into the paradoxes of image and reality. The narrator questions whether tourist expectations should drive a country's image, and more importantly its self-image, particularly when there is a recurring tendency to resort to stereotypes which are based on nostalgia.

'The Brand' explores the issue of whether images of the outback are an accurate reflection

important and a tendency to fall back on nostalgic and simplistic stereotypical slogans and images. Episode 2 does not dwell on this issue, but provides useful insights into the way in which the tourism marketing machine plays a part in formulating the brand. The opening of the episode depicts buyers and sellers of 'tourism products' at the Australian Tourism Exchange, with Australian Tourism Commission Managing Director John Morse communicating his vision of Brand Australia. Whilst student viewers would need to read more widely to gain a thorough understanding of the process of branding, the episode provides a range of insights



tive to the challenges faced by Australia as it attempts to communicate a package consistent with its self-image.

#### Episode 2: 'The Brand'

This episode examines three of Australia's international tourism icons—Paul Hogan as Crocodile Dundee, the koala (cute and distinctly Australian) and the beach. As part of its 'Brand Australia' campaign, the Australian Tourist Commission commissioned a photo-shoot which brought the three together in a whimsical encounter. Consistent with the behind-the-scenes style of the series, this episode gives view-

ers an insight into the mechanics of preparing a television commercial, revealing aspects of the corporate management of Australia's image. The interest level is maintained for viewers by the repeated focus on tourists taking part in actual tours and experiencing 'products' which claim to provide an insight into the 'real' Australia.

There is considerable debate amongst tourism and marketing commentators about whether it is appropriate and/or effective to treat a destination, possibly a whole country, as a 'brand'. Some critics argue that too much emphasis on branding may lead to a distortion of what those who live in a destination regard as most

important and a tendency to fall back on nostalgic and simplistic stereotypical slogans and images. This episode is likely to be of particular interest for marketing and communication students interested in the interplay between sponsorship, image and brand.

#### Episode 3: 'Tourist Town'

The focus on Cairns as the setting for this episode is astute. More than any city in Australia, with the possible exception of Sydney, Cairns has been confronted with a vast influx of international visitors. In a way that has not occurred in larger cities, tourism has transformed Cairns so that the town's identity is increasingly



seen through the eyes of tourists and through settings which are designed with a view to replicating the images featured in the brochures. The creation of an artificial sandy beach on the mudflats along the Cairns foreshore is part of an attempt to recreate the sun, sea and sand expected by visitors. It appears that in Far North Queensland, the interests of developers reign supreme. With strong council backing, little genuine interest in allowing dissenting voices to influence the inevitable outcome, and without reference to community and small business interests, trucks trundle their way through Cairns' major thoroughfares. It is clear that a sizeable element within the local community is opposed to the 'beach' construction. However construction proceeds because without such development, it is argued, Cairns would become uncompetitive as a destination for international tourists. This is graphic evidence of the process of transforming places to meet the tastes of tourists.

Particular emphasis is placed on Japanese visitors participating in whirlwind tours such as 'All in a Day'. Their impressions are of necessity superficial and their experiences are often artificial. For many Japanese couples, traditional 'rainforest weddings' are a case of second time around, since most are already married. In another segment of the episode, Japanese tour participants are shown sleeping, as their coach whisks them through the North Queensland countryside. This may prompt viewers to wonder how much of the experience they are absorbing. The presence of large concentrations of Asian visitors is particularly prominent in Cairns. Being located closer to key Asian markets than the southern states,

Cairns functions as a part of Japan's 'pleasure periphery', where tourists seek a relaxing and tropical holiday experience. The episode shows that 'relaxation' is a relative term when visitors may be spending as little as thirty-six hours in-country. Such fleeting impressions, it is implied, may not necessarily enhance Australia's image as a country to be taken seriously. This said, the Japanese visitors who are interviewed have only praise for the quality of their experience. Ironically, they came across as oblivious to the superficiality of what they have just experienced.

to do so anyway. The tourism industry machine is happy to provide tourists with what they expect, and climbing the Rock is clearly an expectation for many, if not most.

The dilemma of access was highlighted recently when the Aboriginal landowning group at Uluru pronounced the Park temporarily closed due to the death and subsequent funeral of a prominent community elder. The closure prompted local tourism industry representatives to claim that visitors would be deterred and that significant financial losses would be incurred. This perceived conflict between what one might call traditional values



#### Episode 4: 'The Red Heart'—Uluru and the 'Mighty Narrative' Revisited

In the final episode, the role of reconciliation in national identity, first introduced in 'The Games', is revisited. Uluru is shown through different eyes—from a group of thirty-eight Americans on a luxury whirlwind tour to a small group of mainly Australian tourists who immerse themselves in Aboriginal culture by participating in the inma. This episode explores one of the many dilemmas raised by tourism: most of the local Indigenous population do not want tourists to climb the Rock, but most tourists proceed

and the demands of tourism as a business activity highlights what can occur when a locality becomes highly dependent on income from tourism.

The wider symbolism of Uluru is also investigated. The 'Red Centre' has been transformed from an image of barren emptiness to a central motif of the 'real' Australia as marketed by the tourism industry.

#### Conclusion

Selling Australia deftly weaves its way through the 'Mighty Narrative' of reconciliation and national identity, whilst providing viewers with a taste of the

diversity and wide spectrum of tourist experiences that occur along the Australian tourist circuit. Given that tourism is an industry which is particularly susceptible to hype and exaggeration, the series is valuable in adopting a critical perspective which still captures the fact that travel is an enjoyable experience. It effectively combines the genres of social commentary and travelogue, with an ironic but subtle tone. The series avoids the tendency of many to adopt the mantra of 'alternative' tourism as evangelical mission. The inma experience provides an insight into a different type of tourism, but the programme makers are realistic enough to acknowledge that such experiences will remain a minority pursuit and that the challenge is to transform the mainstream style of tourism.

#### Questions

- What is the 'golden triangle' of Australian tourism? What is its significance?

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#### Episode 1: 'The Games'

- In what way may the Sydney 2000 Olympics be regarded as a turning point in attitudes towards race relations and racial identity in Australia?
- To what extent did the foreign journalists featured in the programme express and communicate an accurate impression of Australia?

#### Episode 2: 'The Brand'

- What are the key features of 'Brand Australia' developed by the Australian Tourist Commission?
- What role does the Australian Tourist Commission play in conveying an image and brand of Australia?
- In what way are images of Australia communicated at the Australian Tourism Exchange? Are such images accurate and/or representative?
- What is the relationship between Crocodile Dundee, the koala and the beach scene in the image of Australia constructed for overseas markets?
- To what extent are the images of outback Australia promoted

overseas an accurate depiction of the nation and of the Australian population? Create a matrix of the images projected and the aspects of Australian life that are played down by advertising.

- What compromises are made by the tourism operator in packaging the 'authentic Australia' for tourists who arrive (and probably leave) with a series of pre-conceived notions?

#### Episode 3: 'Tourist Town'

- Do you agree that the customs workers and others who come into contact with the Japanese tourists should be trained in the language and traditions of Japanese culture?
- Why did Cairns City Council decide to build a sandy beach on the Cairns foreshore?
- Why did the building site become a tourist attraction in its own right?
- What aspects of the experiences of most Japanese visitors to Far North Queensland may be considered artificial and superficial?
- What sacrifices and compromises are local people required



to make to accommodate the needs of the large number of international tourists?

#### Episode 4: 'The Red Heart'

- How do the attitudes of tourists and of the local Indigenous population differ towards Uluru?
- Why is it so difficult for tourists visiting the centre of Australia to gain an authentic Aboriginal cultural experience?
- Do the American tourists who visit Uluru gain insight into the real Centre of Australia?

#### Further Reading

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C.M. Hall, *Introduction to Tourism in Australia*, 2nd edition, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1995.

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J. Morse, 'The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games: How the Australian Tourist Commission Leveraged the Games for Tourism', *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, vol.7, no.2, 2001, pp.101-107.

C. Nielsen, *Tourism and the Media*, Hospitality Press, Melbourne, 2001.

J.D. Pringle, *Australian Accent*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1958.

G. Sherington, *Inventing Australia: Images & Identity*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981.

#### Useful Web Sites

Australian Tourist Commission  
[www.australia.com/en](http://www.australia.com/en)

Australian Tourism Net  
<http://www.atn.com.au/>

Australian Travel Information Exchange  
<http://www.australia.gov.au/information-and-services/passports-and-travel/australian-travellers>

G'Day Mate  
<http://www.ozemail.com.au/~gdaymate/>

Indigenous Australia  
<http://www.indigenoustralia.gov.au>(This link includes the Olympic Snapshots Project by the National Indigenous Media Association.)

Lonely Planet On-line  
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com.au>

Northern Territory  
<http://www.nttc.com.au>

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