

Podcast 75 – Australia's Hat – The Akubra

Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia,
with Rob McCormack

Podcast Number 75 – Australia's Hat – The Akubra

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Hi,

In an earlier podcast (number 11), I talked about Australia having the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. That's because we have a lot of sun here in Australia and it can be harsh and damaging. That's why wearing a hat in Australia has always been important. If you want a hat which gives you real shade and which is seen as typically Australian, then a wide brimmed Akubra hat is the one to get. It's the Australian hat which has a great heritage and history and is the one which most Australians working on the land choose for everyday wear, along with many city people as well, me included. In this podcast I would like to tell you a little about this iconic Australian brand of hat made here in Australia from rabbit's fur.



Akubra hats are made in Kempsey, a town of around 28,000 people, in northern New South Wales. The company is family owned and currently employs around 85 people. It has always been a family owned company since it was founded in the late 1870s by a British immigrant named Benjamin Dunkerley, who migrated to Tasmania from England. He was a hat maker and also an inventor. He invented a machine to cut rabbit fur so it could be used in hat making, which up until that time had been a difficult and highly manual task. His machine was a great success and it allowed his hat making business to thrive. In the early 1900s he moved his business to Sydney. In 1904 Stephen Keir, also a hat maker from England, joined the company. He married the daughter of Benjamin Dunkerley and hence became part of the family. Subsequent to that, members of the Keir family have owned and managed the company right up to the current day. The current managing director is Stephen Keir IV.

The name Akubra was first used by the company in 1912 and today is one of Australia's best known brand names. It is

believed that the word Akubra comes from an aboriginal word meaning head covering. The company made slouch hats for the Australian Army in the first and second world wars which helped make them popular. Because it is a family company which tries to look after its employees, they were able to get through the depression years of the 1930s without sacking their workers. Akubra managed to survive while many other companies went broke. In 1974 the company moved from Sydney to its current site in Kempsey. There have been some rough times along the way, but things are going well for the company of late, with a new contract to supply the Australian Defence Force signed in 2012. Total output is now around 200,000 hats a year. Akubra is now exporting its high quality hats to several overseas countries, earning around 15% of its income from overseas sales. In particular, its hats are now selling in the United States, Canada, several countries in Europe including Germany, England and France, in South Africa and in China. In 2015, 5% of all hats produced were exported to China.

Akubra make a number of different styles of hat, most with a typically Australian name. Some examples are Snowy River, Cattleman, Riverina, The Croc, Outback, Territory – just to name a few. My current Akubra hat is called Snowy River. It is named after a famous river which flows through the Australian Alps. I really like the shape of the hat and I love the colourful bird's feather which is stuck into the leather band which goes around the hat. As soon as I put the hat on, it makes me feel a little like I am in the outback. It's wide and it feels solid on your head. I like that. It's also comfortable and it gives me excellent protection from the sun.



I bought my first Akubra in my mid 30s when our boys were little. I used to wear it when I was outside playing cricket with them, or having a barbeque. I can still remember my disappointment when I lost it on holiday in a coastal town in New South Wales. We went to the beach and I somehow left it there by mistake on the sand when we left. I went back only 10 minutes later to collect it but it was already gone. Somebody got a nice hat that day. I hope they enjoyed it as much as I did.

Akubras have been worn by many famous Australians. Our prime ministers like to wear them when they are visiting the regional and rural areas of Australia. Australian actors wear them, like Hugh Jackman and famous Australian film characters wear them, like Crocodile Dundee.

Buying a new Akubra in Australia today will cost you around \$140, which is not cheap. However the high quality, the iconic name and that great Australian outback look make it a worthwhile purchase.



If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

Podcast 75 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

Start quiz

Vocabulary

aboriginal = the first Australians, who were in Australia before Europeans came

Australian Defence Force = the Australian Army, Air Force and Navy

barbeque = when you cook your meat outside

brand names = the name given to your product

by mistake = when you do something which you did not mean to do, an error

contract = an agreement

currently = now, today

damaging = when something can hurt or break other things

depression years = during the 1930s, when many people lost their jobs

disappointment = the feeling you have when something goes wrong or does not work out

employees = the people who work for a company

employs = when a company has workers who work for it

everyday = each and every day

exporting = to send the things you make overseas

family owned company = a company which is owned by a single family

film character = a made up person in a film or book or play

founded = started

harsh = when something is very unkind or very unfriendly

hence = therefore

heritage = is important in the history of your people

iconic = when something is much loved and respected

immigrant = a person who goes to live in another country

included = when someone or something is put together with others

income = the money that you or a company earns

inventor = someone who thinks up ideas for new machines

leather = the skin of an animal used to make shoes or a belt or clothes

managing director = the boss of a company

manual task = a job you have to do with your hands, without machines to help

migrated = when a person has gone to live in another country

of late = lately, recently

outback = that part of Australia which is a long way from the cities and towns

output = things which are made

prime ministers = the politician who leads the Australian government

protection = when you keep something safe

rabbit's fur = the hair on the body of a rabbit

regional and rural areas = places away from the big cities

sacking = when you are told that you no longer have a job

shade = when you stop the sun from shining on you

site = place

skin cancer = a bad disease of the skin

slouch hats = a hat which has one side turned up – used by the Australian Army

subsequent = after, following

supply = to give

thrive = being successful, doing well

typically = when something is seen many times, when it represents something

wide brimmed = a wide hat which has a large area to stop the sun

went broke = when a company fails and goes out of business

working on the land = farmers or others who have a job outside