

First fleet voyage facts

13 May 1787

The ships sailed from Portsmouth, England. There were eleven small ships in the First Fleet: two naval ships, six convict ships and three store ships for supplies. Captain Arthur Phillip was in charge of the fleet.

On board were 1420 people: 722 convicts including 17 child convicts, the soldiers who were to guard them, soldiers' wives, sailors, and ship's officers. Although most of the convicts were English, there were also African, American and French convicts.



Keyline drawing of Governor Arthur Phillip

Conditions were crowded and cramped for the convicts, they were housed for long periods of time behind bars and often chained. Diseases such as dysentery and scurvy broke out.

About 48 people died during the voyage.

3 June 1787

They arrived at Tenerife in the Canary Islands, stayed a week and took on supplies of fresh food and water. The weather was hot and humid as the Fleet sailed through the tropics.

Rats and parasites such as bedbugs, lice, cockroaches and fleas made life very uncomfortable for everyone on board.

5 July 1787

They crossed the Equator.

7 August 1787

They arrived at Rio de Janeiro, stayed for a month repairing sails, collecting plants and seeds to be grown in New South Wales. The ships were cleaned and some of the convicts were given new clothes. The old clothes were burned to get rid of lice and fleas!

13 October 1787

The fleet reached Table Bay (now Cape Town), Cape of Good Hope after surviving tremendous storms in the Atlantic Ocean. Stayed a month, and took on livestock (horses, sheep and goats).

25 December 1787

The fleet was in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

1 January 1788

They reached Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania)

18 – 26 January 1788

The fleet arrived at Botany Bay after sailing south of Van Diemen's Land, then north to New South Wales. It was decided that Botany Bay was not a suitable site for the settlement because water supply and soils were poor. The fleet sailed on.

The members of the First Fleet went ashore at Port Jackson to start a settlement. Arthur Phillip named the place of landing Sydney Cove, after Lord Sydney, an official who had helped to organise the voyage.

The journey had lasted 252 days and sailed 24,000 kilometres. No ships were lost! Forty-eight people died on the journey.