Overnight camps

Aboriginal people have traditionally travelled around their own country. They had to travel to special sacred places where sometimes the men or women, and sometimes both men and women, had to carry out religious ceremonies. They often travelled to places to care for the country by burning off any dead branches, leaves and grass that had accumulated there. This allowed new growth to spring up after the rains. This in turn attracted animals to feed on the new grass and tender leaves. During different seasons, Aborigines travelled to places where plentiful supplies of a particular food could be found. They also visited favourite places where they liked to holiday at special times of the year.

Because Aboriginal people needed to travel great distances around their countries, they used different kinds of housing according to the length of time they intended to stay in a place and the weather conditions they might experience at the time. If they were just staying overnight beside a watering hole or near a stream, and the night was mild with no wind, they simply cooked and slept by a fire.
Even in overnight camps, there were rules about how people arranged their fires in relation to other people’s fires. In times when there was plenty of food and water, people travelled in large groups, which included a number of families. At other times, single family groups of parents and children travelled alone. Whenever there was a large group of people, they would place their camp fires next to those of the families most closely related to them. For example, young married men would build their fires around the fire of their father. Any young unmarried men had to go off and build their fires at a distance from the family groups.

Each family cluster of camp fires was placed in those parts of the camp nearest to their own clan lands, so that the position of their fires reflected the geographical relationship between the separate clans and their lands. This method of arranging family camping sites on an overnight trip was found wherever separate families and clan groups lived together for any period of time.

In addition to arranging where each family should camp, the space around each family’s fire or dwelling was just as carefully arranged. There were special places for food preparation, for children to play, a baby to lie, or for visitors to sit, and so on. If any visitors approached the fire, they would stand near, but outside the family space and then wait until a senior member of the family group invited them in. This was especially necessary if the visitors were strangers. They were sometimes left to sit outside for some time before a senior man would ask what they wanted.
So you can see that, for Aboriginal people, a home was not just a building of some kind. It was the space around the house, as well as the house itself, that provided them with their home.

If the weather was bad during an overnight camp they would erect windbreaks to stop the wind blowing hot ashes and sparks over the family members sleeping between fires. If it rained, a bark or bough shelter was built to keep off the worst of the rain and protect the fire.

In those parts of Australia where monsoon rains fall regularly at the same time each year, people settled into caves and rock-shelters or built rain-proof houses to live in through the rainy season.
More permanent dwellings

The Aborigines sometimes built more permanent dwellings which included large semi-circular houses. These were made using a frame of branches over which stringy strips of bark, grass and branches were interwoven and tied. Fires were set at both ends of these houses. The families slept inside with the father in the middle and his wife or wives alongside him. Their children slept beside them with the young sons at either end of the house. Alternatively, the father would sleep at one end of the house and the boys at the other with the women and girls in between.
This house which features a platform was built as a shelter from wet weather.

Other houses had peaked or flat roofs. Peaked-roofed structures were built from slabs of bark laid on an angle against a ridge pole which was supported at either end by forked poles. The ends of these poles were sharpened and embedded in the ground. Another peak-roofed type was built over a platform suspended above the ground on upright poles. This type was built where mosquitoes swarmed. A fire could be laid in the open space below the platform and the rising smoke drove the mosquitoes out of the house.
Flat-roofed houses were square or rectangular in shape with the flat roof suspended on upright forked poles at each corner. The roof and the sides were closed in with tied sheets of bark and in some a small back door was included in one side. As always a small fire was laid near the door. In a more elaborate version of these flat-roofed houses, a large peaked roof shade was built to cover the house which provided a shaded activity area around it.

A flat-roofed house and a shade house.
The size of all these different kinds of houses varied according to the number of people who lived in them. Each family had its own house and single men lived together in their own houses. Inside they had to be high enough for people to walk around in and wide enough for them to stretch out while they slept. For the most part, they were used as a place for storing things and sleeping in during cold or wet weather. In good weather people preferred to live and work in the open spaces around their homes or under bough shades.
Housing styles varied across the country, depending on the climate and building materials available. There was little need for large houses in the dry Australian interior. The main types of dwelling structures in this area served mainly to shelter people from the intense heat of the sun, the occasional rain-storm and the frosts and cold winds of winter. The Pitjantjatjara people in southern central Australia made small dwellings which they called wiltjas. They were shaped like bee hives and were large enough for one or two people only to sit or sleep in. They were made by weaving brush and spinifex around short, strong tree branches. Brush and spinifex were piled thickly on the top and two of the sides to create the bee-hive shape. Nowadays tarpaulins may be spread over the whole structure to provide better protection from the weather.
A more elaborate bee-hive shaped house was made by Aboriginal people in south-west Tasmania. They used curved poles which were fastened into the ground and then tied together at the top, forming a round, conical-shaped structure. These were then thatched with grass and tied with bark. There was a small opening on one side which served both as an entrance and as a chimney for the smoke from fires in the hut. Robinson, the man who persuaded the surviving Aboriginal groups on the west coast of Tasmania to leave their homelands to be settled on Flinders Island, described one of these houses. It featured a framework of wattle and a thatch of reeds built up in tiers from the ground. He thought the hut would hold from twenty to twenty-five people.