

# DIDGERIDOO GO TO AUSTRALIA

**Nick Webster** discovers an odd language, romance, ethical farming, iconic sights and finally the elusive 'roo

**T**here was movement, but it was more ambling than bouncing. Certainly no jumping. Plus, I'm fairly sure kangaroos don't come in black and white.

Pandas, zebras and, ah yes, cows come in that colour scheme, and since there was a herd of whatever we were looking at as small as farmyard toys below us, it was soon clear the only roo we'd yet seen was on a plate. More of that later...

We were up in the air over the rolling green hills and low cotton wool clouds of New South Wales. My first ever balloon flight – it was the highlight of the trip, and a good place to start because this was a proper flying visit to Australia.

A full 24-hour day to get here, a full day back, and five days to get a taste of a country where it sounds like they're speaking English but go sun-baking instead of sunbathing, and thongs go on your feet instead of, well, you get the idea.

We'd taken off from a macadamia plantation just after dawn, with



**ON A HIGH Nick Down Under**

Byron Bay Ballooning, not far from the slightly hipster coastal town after which the company is named.

In a basket big enough for a dozen people, and piloted by former Australian hot air ballooning champ Thomas Dattler, our party was joined by a family celebrating Granny's 80th birthday.

It was a little chilly thousands of feet up in what the Australians call winter, and the views were spectacular, but the best word to describe the whole trip was gentle – a gently tense take-off, gentle floating flight and an unexpectedly gentle touchdown in a random farmer's field.

Apparently, very often the mood which pervades the flights is romance, with many a brave boyfriend popping the question.

Hard to get down on one knee in a basket, the words of the proposal are sometimes laid out on the ground below for the chosen lady to read. But pilot Thomas told us a story – from another firm, he



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insisted – where a balloon flew over the words “Will you marry me?” to the delight of a girlfriend who flung her arms around her man with a “yes”. Except the question had come from the boyfriend of the other couple in the basket to HIS girl... from then on, the name of the bride-to-be was always added to the words on the ground.

The next name on everyone’s lips was Braveheart, again a cow, not black and white this time but rather a red and hairy Highland, at The Farm.

A very ordinary name but this is no ordinary farm, with a motto “Grow, feed, educate”. With pigs, those cows and independent veggie farmers, it’s ethical, responsible farming on just a few acres. General manager Johnson “Johnno” Hunter was positively evangelical about it, preaching its values which are opposed to the evils of the supermarket giants with such enthusiasm that if he was on TV he’d surely convert half the nation.

Take Braveheart with him – the cow abandoned by his mother which Johnno saved from certain death by taking him home and personally nursing him back to health – and he’d convert the other half too.

Braveheart may no longer be a cute furry calf but he is a real heartbreaker and still small enough to wrestle with his beloved Johnno.

The affection between the pair is clear. And when Johnno’s not around, Braveheart’s best pal and protector is Silence the Sheep. Formerly, of course, Silence the Lamb.

Lunch was in a restaurant at The *They don’t sunbathe there... they sunbake*

Farm. The Three Ducks made the best, meatiest shepherd’s pie I’ve ever tasted.

It wasn’t our only wonderful meal in the area. On the drive up from Ballina Airport – to where we’d flown in just over an hour from Sydney – we had lunch at the Harvest Cafe in Newrybar, another place where a prosaic name hides the very opposite. This is where one of the dishes was kangaroo, which tasted rich and a bit beefy, with plum and sweet potato.

The hot air balloon wasn’t our only “romantic” early start in Byron Bay, where we stayed in the luxury villas of Elements of Byron hotel, which thanks to the way it’s been designed to fit into the existing bush and landscape, looks anything but the newcomer it is.

Up at stupid o’clock, the next day we headed for Cape Byron Lighthouse, the most easterly point of mainland Australia, to watch the sun rise over the South Pacific Ocean. And we did it in style with the Toast The Sun Experience, again popular for proposals,



#### **NEWCOMER Elements of Byron Bay resort**

and a gourmet picnic breakfast.

Our whale watching trip had sadly been cancelled due to rough seas, but just as we were walking along the cliff side staring out at the ocean, one of the huge creatures briefly breached and gave us an unforgettable glimpse of what we'd missed. Every winter Byron Bay witnesses the incredible migration of thousands of whales – mainly humpback and southern right whales.

Looking out to sea was one of the few moments when the roo hunt was relaxed. Ever since we'd landed at Sydney, I'd been hoping to spot a kangaroo or koala in the wild. Both, I'm told, were possible – and on the trip to the macadamia plantation for our balloon take-off, the driver told us he'd woken to find a koala in the tree just outside his house.

But a kangaroo was the more likely of the two, even if it was as roadkill. So our eyes stayed on stalks looking hopefully for both marsupials.

When we'd first arrived in Sydney, we checked into the stylish boutique

Old Clare Hotel in Chippendale, the city's "hippest up and coming suburb" where we received a warm welcome, before heading for the most famous beach in the world – Bondi.

Just down from (probably one of) Hugh Jackman's house, we had lunch at North Bondi Fish where I discovered fish tacos are right up there with fish and chips as food of the gods. Neptune and Poseidon, presumably.

We walked it all off with a wander along the iconic Bondi-to-Bronte clifftop coastal walk, watching the surfers in their own slightly chilly paradise.

We were back on clifftops the next day, this time on two wheels for a bike tour of Manly, looking out to sea from near Q Station – Sydney's former Quarantine Station at North Head.

Across the bay we could spy Sydney, and I felt I'd never seen so clearly before. Everything was just a little bit bigger, somehow more vital – even the planes taking off from the airport miles away. Confused, I was told it was all because of a lack of pollution in the Australian air.

We'd come through the bay that morning on the Manly Ferry from Circular Quay, the insider's tip on the best way to see Sydney's most famous sights – the iconic Bridge and Opera House. Gazing at them was the first time I convinced myself I really was in Australia, so far from home. For otherwise, the country is incredibly familiar, and for an Englishman in many ways less foreign than, say, Scotland. The

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only oddity was that the two barmen I spoke to were an American and a New Zealander... presumably because all the Aussies are serving behind London's bars.

After a sumptuous lunch – oysters, buckets of huge prawns – at Boat-house Shelly Beach, it was time to visit the seafood in their natural element with a bit of snorkelling. Now I know the people of Sydney don't really know what winter is, but it wasn't warm, so Eco Treasures boss Damien McClellan decked us out in wetsuits while giving us a fascinating rundown of the underwater wonders to expect.

But strewth, it was still cold – my advice, keep moving. However, it was worth it just to see an alien-like 2ft-long, colour-changing cuttlefish in Cabbage Tree Bay.

That's a creature I never dreamt I'd see close up... but still the marsupials evaded us.

It wasn't until the eve of departure that we finally met eastern grey roos and koalas – albeit in enclosures – at Macadamia Castle on the road south out of Byron Bay.

Then we were told there are only 1,500 koalas in the whole of New South Wales, so all that staring at every tree till I went cross-eyed was probably a little pointless.

But Macadamia Castle – however bizarre-looking it is with its Disney-like crenellations, served a double purpose, with one of the best gift shops of any attraction I've ever visited.

Hey, these things are important. Just ask my four very happy nieces and nephews about their chocolate roo droppings.

*Strewth!  
It might  
be Oz but  
winter in  
Sydney  
can be a  
bit chilly*



**FURRY FRIENDS**  
**Braveheart and his protector Silence**

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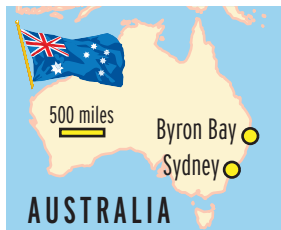
**TASTY**  
**Prawns for lunchtime feast**

**NEWCOMER** Elements of Byron Bay resort

and a gourmet picnic breakfast.

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**Get there**



- Qantas flies daily from Heathrow to Sydney via Dubai with return fares starting at £714 (qantas.com). Flights from Sydney to Ballina, near Byron Bay, start at £65 return with Jetstar (jetstar.com) and £130 with Virgin Australia (virginaustralia.com).
- Rooms at the Old Clare Hotel in Sydney cost from £177pn. theoldclarehotel.com.au
- Rooms at the Establishment hotel in Sydney cost from £207pn. merivale.com.au
- Villas at the Elements of Byron

resort in Byron Bay start at £194pn including daily yoga class, wi-fi and unlimited in-house movies. elementsbyron.com.au  
 ■ Tourist info: visitnsw.com sydney.com

**TIME ZONE** +10hrs

**CURRENCY** Australian \$  
 £1 = 1.64

**BEST TIME TO GO** A Down  
 Wonder any time of year

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