

Written by Christine Thompson For BCAA Travel

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Nature lures tourists down under

Try hiking, snorkeling, surfing, and throw in a show at the Sydney Opera House.

“Fair Dinkum” is Aussie slang for “true blue” or the genuine article. And it’s exactly the type of experience I yearned for when I headed down under, pre-Olympics in year 2000. No thronging crowds, no global hype for me. Just a tie-me-kangaroo-down, throw-anything-on-the-barbie kinda feel.

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So what to see, what to do? The Opera House? An aboriginal corroboree? An outback trek? Let’s do it all... I had five months.

Sixteen-thousand kilometres of travel later, I could safely say I’d had a fair dinkum time, but the real highlights? Well, judge for yourself.

The Great Barrier Reef. Snorkel, scuba dive, glass bottom boat... doesn’t matter how, just see it. Brain coral, giant clams, reef sharks and Moray eels are just a few of the exquisite creatures here. NOTE: Australia has two seasons: the wet and the dry. Wet season (December – March) means cyclone activity with high (and I mean REALLY HIGH) rainfall. Do the reef during the dry.

Ayers Rock. Climb it, hike the base, photograph it, or do all three. Uluru is the aboriginal name for the world’s largest monolith that rises 318 metres from a desolate landscape and is 8 kms around. Stunningly ethereal at sunset and sunrise, the sandstone structure flatters even the most amateur photographer. Smack in the middle of the country it’s an Aussie icon and spiritual oasis for Aboriginals.

Attend a Pro Surf Championship. With more than 36,000 kilometres of coastline, it’s no wonder surfing is Australia’s national pastime. Chilling on a beach watching the pros in action is to glimpse the very core of tenacious Australian spirit.

Have a meat pie and a Toohey’s or two. No matter the town, you’ll find a pub, maybe two— possibly five or 15. Ask for a sleeve or perhaps a middie (quantity terminology differs from state to state) and use it to wash down a greasy-but-oh-so-satisfying meat pie.

Take a safari in Kakadu.

Kakadu National Park is Crocodile Dundee country, and the brass button of the Northern Territory.

It’s a 650-square-km area resplendent with wildlife, Aboriginal rock art and expansive landscape. Cavorting in a waterfall-fed pool after trekking around in dusty 30-degree heat is pure contentment. And spotting a 15-foot crocodile mud-sliding down the banks of a billabong (no swimming allowed there) is impressive, if not reminiscent of Jurassic Park.

Yet how could I fail to mention sailing the Whitsundays, going two kms underground in Mt. Isa, swimming with placid Whale Sharks (world's largest fish) or fossicking for opals in Coober Pedy? Australia's wonders are as vast as the landscape.

BCAA Travel can help you plan and book all your down under vacation plans, whether it's a two-week jaunt, a month on the Gold Coast, or a once-in-a-lifetime extended tour of the South Pacific. Call BCAA Travel at 390-3533 or visit us online at www.bcaa.com for more information.