

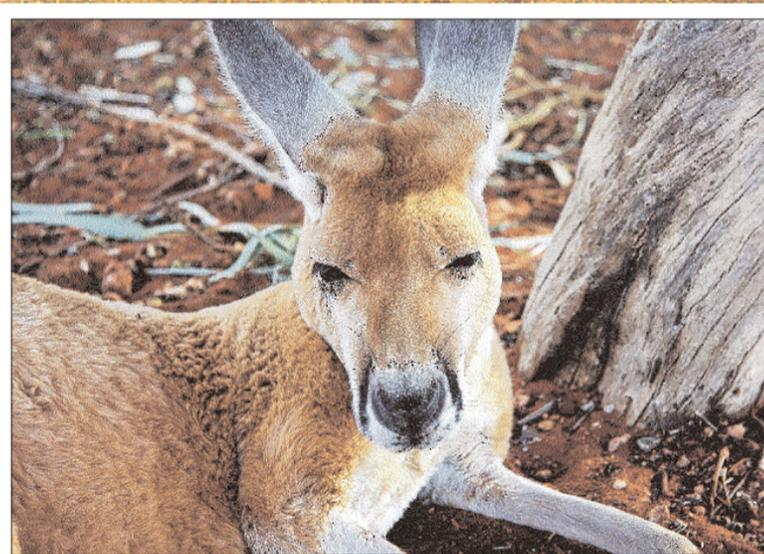
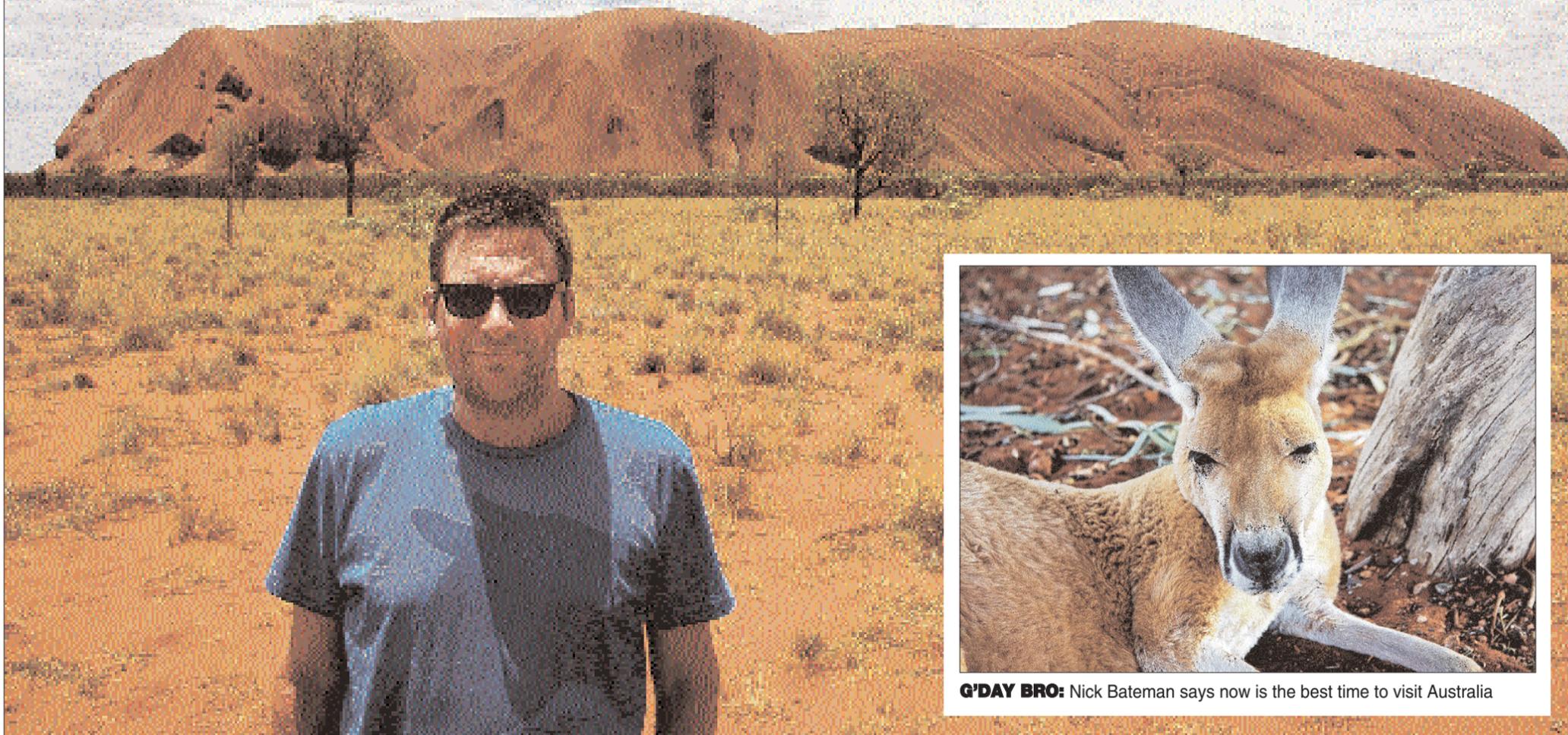
getaway



Making the most of your time off

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The wonderful world of Oz



G'DAY BRO: Nick Bateman says now is the best time to visit Australia

LAST May I decided to plan a trip to Australia for Christmas and booked all the flights, hotels and tours. As you know, by booking early online you can get the best deals.

And by using different travel websites, like Expedia, for hotels and cross checking them on the travel reviews website TripAdvisor I was able to save thousands of pounds.

The best time to visit Australia is during their summer months that start in December.

My first stop was Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria. Melbourne is a striking and cultural city that sits by the Yarra River.

I had already pre-booked a city tour through Gray Line that showed the city at its best. However, if tours are not your thing, hop on the free tram that circles the city.

If you're a sports, arts or shopping fan and have an historical interest in seeing one of Australia's oldest cities, Melbourne ticks the boxes.

The next day I took a guided coach journey to Phillip Island, to watch the 'Penguin Parade'. Every evening at dusk the little penguins come home from the sea – they pop out of the water, first only a couple and then literally hundreds. They then make their walk up the beach (waddling past us tourists, who have to sit quietly on benches) to their nests – an amazing natural sight.

Next stop was flying to Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. If

Big Brother's 'NASTY' NICK BATEMAN is back from his Australian adventure. He gives his tips on what's hot on the other side of the world...

you fly internally around Australia I suggest you fly Qantas, as they don't charge for using the entertainment systems, food or drinks. I found Alice Springs, as a town, depressing, with some locals just sitting under trees all day and loads of backpackers, so not ideal.

I went on an Alice Highlights tour, which included a guided walk to the Standley Chasm, a striking deep red cleft between rocks that changes colours with the light, a walk into Simpsons Gap, magnificent rocks that have arisen from the sandy creek beds, and views towards the MacDonnell Ranges. We saw rock wallabies as well as kangaroos.

The next morning was an early start for the six-hour coach trip to Ayers Rock.

After 90km we stopped for breakfast at a roadhouse and met – wait for it – Dinky the Singing Dingo. He jumps on a piano and howls basically. To be honest I was not

really looking forward to seeing the Rock because, after all, it is just a Rock that I have seen countless pictures of. I could not have been more wrong as it is just huge (9km around the base) and magnificent, and as the sun goes down the rock goes red. I thoroughly recommend going there.

After Alice I went on a 90-minute flight to Darwin, also in the Northern Territory. Darwin for tourists is another gateway city. I had two trips – one to the Kakadu National Park and the other to Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park. Both are like a film set for *The Land that Time*

Forgot.
Timeless rock formations, monsoon forests, flood

plains, billabongs, crocodile-infested rivers, creeks, magnificent sounding and looking birds, Aboriginal rock art work – it had everything. Even a gift shop, although sadly some of the gifts said 'made in China'.

By this time I was getting 'toured out', but a visit to the Katherine Gorge, has to be on the list for its natural beauty, as does Edith Falls where you can swim beneath a waterfall.

I was sad to leave the dry heat of the Northern Territories for the wetter and very humid heat of North Queensland. I flew into Cairns, but headed straight up to the more tranquil and cool boutique-style town of Port Douglas. I have always wanted to dive or snorkel on the Great Barrier Reef, so after asking the locals for the best dive boat, I

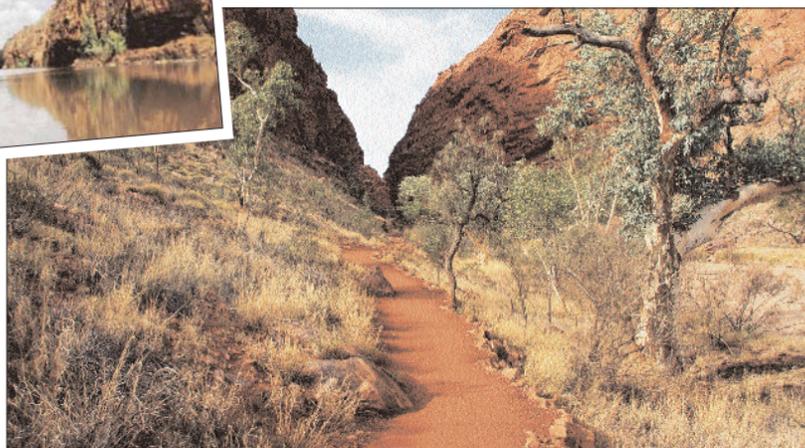
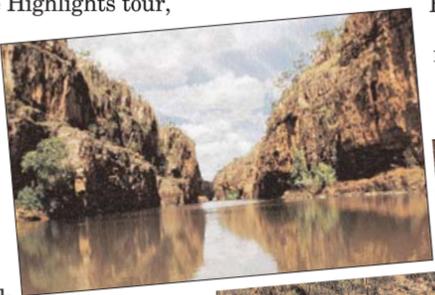
booked with Poseidon – a friendly and smaller operation than others. The Reef is amazing, with its rainbow colours, bizarre fish and scary looking baby sharks worth every cent.

My final trip was Tony's Tropical Rainforest Tours. Again I went with local recommendations, and it was a full day of Tony himself passing on his detailed knowledge about all the local flora and fauna. We went to Mossman Gorge, took a Daintree River cruise and swam at the private Noah Valley Creek.

I finally arrived in Sydney a day before New Year's Eve. My top tip is to buy a weekly pass that includes the ferries, buses and trains.

Take time to just spend a whole day on the harbour taking various ferries. For the best views take the ferry to Manly.

New Year's Eve is huge in Sydney, and if you have the patience for crowds head down to The Rocks area and watch the fireworks sizzle over Sydney Harbour Bridge and beyond.



FACTFILE

■ For coach tours information visit www.grayline.com.au. Internal flights can be booked at www.qantas.com.au, Great Barrier Reef tours from www.poseidon-cruises.com.au and rainforest tours at www.tropicaltours.com.au