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For *Capital*

## **The Best Summer Holiday**

**By Don Aitkin**

Where do I start? Summer holidays as a child have a quite different feel to them. I have nothing but the fondest memories of six weeks under canvas at Narooma's camping ground near Glasshouse Rocks. I was 11, and my parents played golf every day, while my brothers and I played on the beach and in the lagoon. We could only enter the surf when Dad was there. We ate fish, and crabs, and prawns. It was magic.

Later there was an early summer holiday at Heron Island, where I explored coral reefs, another lagoon, ate lots of prawns and red emperor, met a beautiful girl and fell in love for the first time. I was 16.

A couple of years later my summer holiday was spent under canvas again, but this time I was in the army: 13<sup>th</sup> National Service Training Battalion, at Ingleburn. None of us really liked it at the time, but many now remember it with affection and respect. Why? We were 18, and had to learn some discipline, which was good for us.

I acquired a useful skill as well, since I elected to learn cooking, and was trained as a chef. Trained well, too, by people who had won prizes for their own efforts at the Royal Easter Show. I still make pastry by hand, both because I was taught to do it that way and because doing so is a pleasant effort, as kneading bread dough also is.

Ten years later, I am 28, exploring Europe by motor caravan. I learn something really new — driving on the wrong side of the road and surviving — but also seeing, listening, eating, drinking, in countries where they don't speak English. I return to my country now much more aware of what it means to be an Australian; I want to help shape our country to become better at things other than sport.

Ten years later still, I am on another motor caravanning holiday in Europe, much of it in Scandinavia. We camp by a lake in Norway fed by glaciers above us. Our lake issues into another lake over a natural slippery dip that drops about three metres. We throw sticks in and they don't disappear. Then of us tries it, and survives. We spend the rest of the

day doing it. The water is the coldest I have ever ventured into, but the experience is exhilarating.

Press the Forward button again. This one has to be the best. I marry A Wonderful Person, and just before Christmas, too. So our honeymoon is our summer holiday. It starts at Barrington House, now alas destroyed by fire. It was a traditional Aussie place, with beetroot in the salad, barn dances in the evening and great good humour.

It was also at the foot of the Barrington National Park, with the Williams River right there, real cedar trees, magnificent eucalypts, the cleanest water you would ever see — a great place to walk, to read, just to be together. At the end we were taken by bus to the other side of the Park, and walked back over the top of the range and down the escarpment back to Barrington House. About 30 kilometres, in one day — and everyone did it, the old as well as the young.

We finish this holiday in another magical place, a rammed-earth house owned by friends in the Gippsland forest, with the Nicholson River in good flow. Here there are lyrebirds, kangaroos, and birds of all kinds. Great food, great company, great stillness, great peace of mind.

Sea, sky, forest and thou: they are the stuff of great Australian summer holidays.