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RHIAN DEUTROM

Semi-trailers were parked across Sydney's busiest pedestrian mall and police were out in force in Melbourne to protect Boxing Day shoppers from vehicle attacks.

The trucks and concrete bollards ringed the Pitt Street Mall in Sydney with police saying the measures were to protect shoppers.

"This will be a one-day police operation and while there is no specific threat, police continue to urge the public to be vigilant and report anything that doesn't look

There was a highly visible police presence monitoring crowds exceeding 92,000 people in Melbourne's CBD just days after 32-year-old Afghan-born Saeed Noori allegedly ploughed his car into 18 pedestrians in busy Flinders Street.

As well as an increased police presence over the holiday season, the Victorian government will install a loudspeaker alert system in the Bourke Street Mall, Federation Square and the Flinders Street station in the Melbourne CBD this week to warn people

The increased security did little to dissuade consumers from indulging in some holiday retail therapy, with thousands lining the footpaths overnight to nab a bargain.

The Australian Retailers Association forecast the total national spend would reach almost \$2.4 billion on Boxing Day.

The sales also attracted large groups of Chinese shoppers, including some known as Daigou who shop on behalf of friends and relatives back home.

Shoppers queued outside luxury stores such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton overnight, even though

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# A sight for saurian eyes: four 'owners' claim Christmas croc

RICHARD FERGUSON

A custody dispute has broken out over a lost crocodile after four different people yesterday claimed ownership of the reptile found wandering Melbourne's suburban streets on Christmas Day.

The 1m-long freshwater crocodile was captured by snake hunter Mark Pelley in Heidelberg Heights at 9:20pm on Christmas Day at the request of Victoria Police, and he still had possession of the animal yesterday.

It is suspected the crocodile is a Christmas present from last year with farms across the country breeding the prehistoric predators with a festive season target market in mind.

Mr Pelley told *The Australian* that the call to come get the Christmas Day crocodile was "the call I've been waiting all my life for ... my Christmas present". "Even though I'm a snake catcher, I do have some experience with these creatures as I have a pet baby crocodile at home" he said.

The newly elevated crocodile hunter was sent to catch the Heidelberg Heights monster that was being kept under watch by five police officers, who had originally expected to see a large lizard when they arrived on the scene.

Mr Pelley said it was difficult catching the crocodile; it was very quick and it was pitch black on Christmas night but "I caught the right end, which is the tail."

Freshwater crocodiles are mainly found in the Northern Territory, Queensland and the



AARON FRANCIS

Snake catcher Mark Pelley with the rescued crocodile

top of Western Australia and Mr Pelley said the crocodile travelling all the way to metropolitan Victoria could not be ruled out.

**'Animals escape, they get lost ... the most important thing is nobody got hurt'**

MARK PELLEY  
SNAKE HUNTER

But it is most likely the crocodile is someone's (legal or illegal) pet and Mr Pelley was inundated with calls from prospective owners. "I'll be calling the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning tomorrow and they'll take everyone's claims ... after four calls from different owners, I'm a little suspicious," he said.

Salt and freshwater crocodiles have become popular pets in re-

cent years, with one Northern Territory farm reported to have sold more than 100 crocodiles as Christmas presents this year.

Crocodile owners are required to have an advanced animal-owning licence and Northern Territory croc-lovers can keep their pets only until they grow to 60cm.

In all other states and territories, owners require only the licence and a suitable pool.

Mr Pelley said a legal owner should not lose their licence for losing track of the pet now residing at his home in Doreen.

"Animals escape, they get lost ... the most important thing is nobody got hurt," he said.

Victoria Police told *The Australian* the crocodile's welfare was no longer a police matter and all claims should be directed to Mr Pelley or Victoria's Environment Department. *The Australian* could not confirm whether the crocodile was found in a no-leash zone.

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