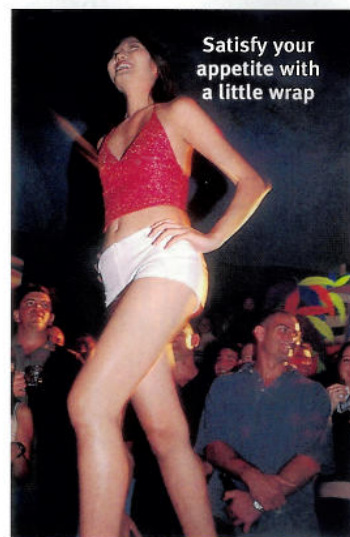




Musical chairs was unsuccessful without, um, chairs



Satisfy your appetite with a little wrap

mid-30s looks to be lining up another Neil Diamond crowd-pleaser, so I escape to the beer garden.

Rachel, 22, slumps in a chair, drinking water. "I'm dehydrated from the sun and the heat," she says. "And too much alcohol. I'm radiating heat."

We're interrupted by locals Ben and Sam. Both are in jeans and T-shirts; both talk a constant stream of crap. Here is a sample: "What do I like about Darwin? Nothin'! There are no women! There's no quality music. What the f-k is this, S Club 7? Come to Darwin and learn to masturbate..."

Their friend Cassie, a cute blonde, sits at a nearby table. I ask her if they're like this when they're sober.

"They are sober," she says.

12.50pm

The Pub Bar, Rydges Plaza Darwin Hotel, 32 Mitchell St

THE Pub Bar advertises "good times" and mudslides at \$6 a go. Inside it's lit like a hospital, only not as nice, and there are two pool tables covered with jarring red Jim Beam covers. The only girl in the place is Sonia, the barmaid. A bloke with an absolutely top-of-the-range mullet sits alone at a table. A live guitar/sax combo is overlaying a "Mambo No 5" karaoke track. There is an air of despair.

12.52pm

Blue Heeler Bar, cnr Herbert and Mitchell Sts

THE Blue Heeler is practically empty. There is an old Aboriginal woman in a bad Hawaiian shirt on the dance floor, and a band on the stage.

A couple of people sit at one of the big old wooden tables. Strange things hang from the ceiling. Renee and Donna are two of the very few women in sight. Why are they here?

"Because our husbands play in the band," says Renee.

If they weren't, would you be here?

"No."

Why not?

"It's a cowboy pub. If you're a girl in here, they think you're easy prey."

1am

Kitty O'Shea's Irish Bar and Café, cnr Herbert and Mitchell Sts

THIS Irish theme pub smells like a urinal, much like a real Irish pub. It's big and empty. I hit reverse, quickly.

1.10am

Victoria Hotel, 27 Smith St

I'VE nearly run out of places to go, so I go back to the Vic, to see what's going on. The manager tells me I've just missed backpackers dancing on tables, which gets me annoyed again.

This is yet another place where wood is the main feature. There are

THE MANAGER TELLS ME I'VE JUST MISSED BACKPACKERS DANCING ON TABLES, WHICH GETS ME ANNOYED

even split logs nailed to the ceiling, and more corrugated iron. I realise by now that this is probably not a theme - this is the real thing.

Three cute girls are dancing near the small stage, where a band is getting ready for another set. As ever, the girls are surrounded by a large number of blokes. Claire, a tall Pommy girl in a tight T-shirt, tells me she is a "champagne" backpacker. "I don't like living rough. I've been in Darwin a week, and I haven't met any Aussie men at all. I come here because they've got a really good cover band."

On cue, the band starts playing something by silverchair, only better than silverchair. The dance floor is swamped. Claire suddenly takes my tape recorder, tells me she's going to "do an interview" and goes over to

three guys at a table. I give up and head for the bar.

Playing the tape back later, I hear Claire say she works for "the Darwin newspaper" and call one of the blokes "honey". Very unprofessional.

1.50am

The Vic, upstairs

THE upstairs of the downstairs is a big old room fitted out to make travellers feel at home. There's email available, and an enormous sign over the dance floor advertises "Adventure tours". Underneath it, a buxom girl, all in black, dances all on her own, in a world of her own. I try to talk to her, but she can only focus about 2m behind me. There are few other people here. The atmosphere vanishes into the high ceiling.

I'm shocked to find a bald bloke standing about 7cm behind me. He introduces himself as the DJ, Iceman, so called "because I'm cool and play good tunes".

In the booth, Iceman cranks up the sounds a bit, and people hanging around in the poolroom at the back get up on the stage for a dance. I sit at a [wooden] table with a beer and wonder where to go next. I've reached the end of town. I've got to go back to the front. Again.

Humanahumana... It was probably a girl.