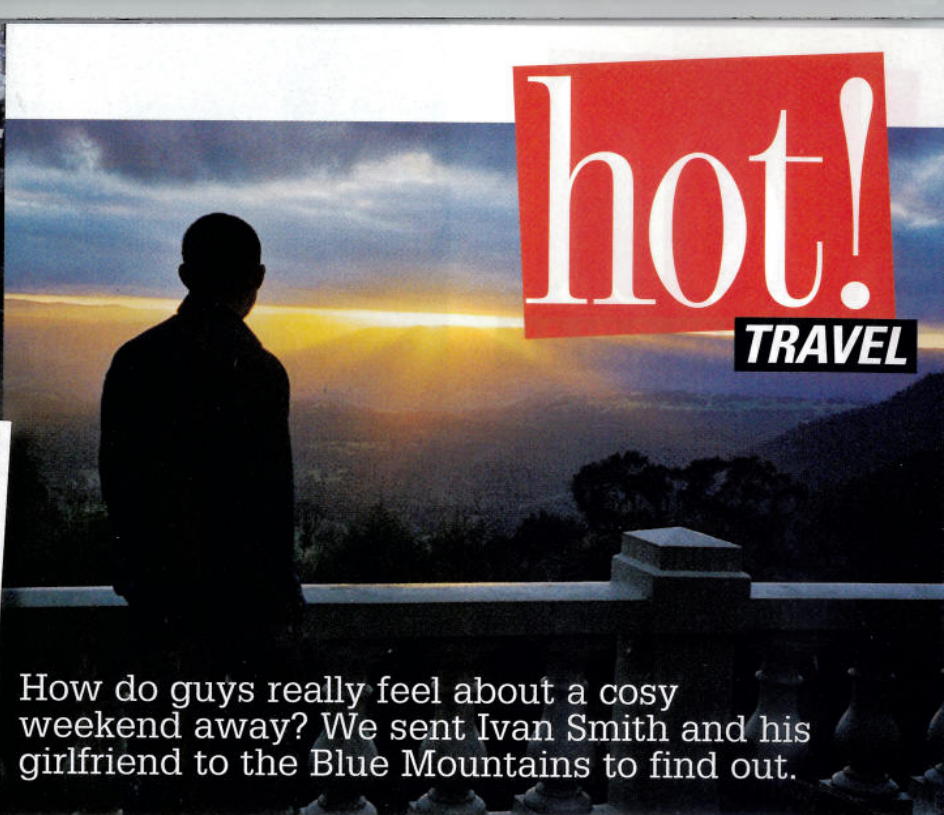




Collette wonders where Ivan will sleep.



hot!

TRAVEL

How do guys really feel about a cosy weekend away? We sent Ivan Smith and his girlfriend to the Blue Mountains to find out.

“Isn't this romantic?”

OK, listen,” says B. “We’re sending you away for the weekend. You’re getting a car, a room and dinner. Any questions?”

“Yes,” I say. “Can I take my girlfriend?” “That is the point,” says the voice on the phone, sweetly. “It’s not for you, it’s for her.” I call my girlfriend.

“OK, listen,” I say masterfully. “Tomorrow we’re going to pick up a new Proton Satria XLS and I will drive you to the Blue Mountains where we shall book ourselves into a five-star hotel.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I convince her I’m not crazy and hang up. A strange feeling has come over me; like when I gave change to the bloke in the train station who can’t play the recorder. Only better. I am doing A Good Thing. This is going to get me so many brownie points I’ll be up all night counting them.

I feel less good next morning, when I find a parking ticket on the Proton. We haven’t even left and I’m already minus \$68.

Oh well, it doesn’t matter: today, I am in charge. Everything is taken care of, for once. When I arrive at the hotel, someone will say, “Of course, sir, that’s all taken care of.”

This early in the morning, the journey is painless. We whisk along almost-empty roads, like they do in car-advert fantasies.

My girlfriend pats my knee. “Look at us, doing things together,” she says, smiling.

Weekends away are pretty much a female thing. Men file them in the same category as flowers, chocolates and films starring Susan Sarandon; things that can’t fail to please. I should have done this months ago.

The Hydro Majestic Hotel is a big old place six kilometres down the road from the town of Katoomba, NSW. It’s over a hundred years old and fixed precariously to the edge of a cliff. With its isolation and slightly spooky atmosphere, it reminds me of that place in the film *The Shining*, only without all the blood and the shouting.

The woman at reception says everything’s taken care of. I sense an admiring glance from next to me, although it could have been a surprised one.

Our snug room is the inverse of whatever a Novotel room is. “Ooh, look at the bed look at the view, look – chocolates,” says a delighted girlfriend without punctuation. Out the window, the Megalong valley yawns silently below us. The phone rings.

“Do you have the chocolates?”

Yes, thank you.

“Good. We’ll send the champagne up.”

Blimey. I’m James Bond, apparently. The champagne arrives in a silver bucket surrounded by strawberries – dipped in chocolate, of course.

All this is going to take a bit of organising: we have a massage booked at two. “Why don’t we keep the champagne on ice and get the massage first? Later we can go for a swim and try out the gym.”

I look at her. “OK, we may not make it to the gym,” she acknowledges.

She is right. An aromatherapy massage followed by an afternoon of boozing is followed by no exercise whatsoever.

We arrive for pre-dinner drinks in what may be described as A Good

Mood. In the lounge-bar a vast fire eats slowly through a huge log. Beyond the balcony, empty but for the two of us, the sun slides spectacularly below the horizon. It is very quiet. At dinner, we sit beside another enormous fire, while a waiter brings us nice things. “Do you like the hotel?” he asks, as he aims cracked pepper at my duck confit. It’s very quiet, I nod. “Yes,” he sighs. “Sometimes we hear a train.”

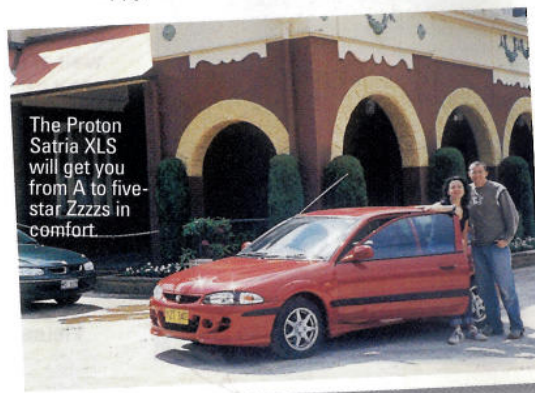
The dining room, with its soaring ceiling, is the old ballroom, built in 1904. I try to tell my girlfriend about *The Shining*, but something covered in thick chocolate sauce arrives and I lose my audience.

Afterwards she confesses the detox she’s been on is not going as well as planned.

But it was worth it, right? I ask anxiously.

“God, yes.” She snuggles her head onto my shoulder and we head, weaving slightly, up the long corridor to our room.

I’m a convert to the weekend away. I wasn’t against it before, but other stuff seemed more important. Strange really: there’s stuff here blokes like – alcohol, travel, sex and driving – plus we get to look really capable for not much effort. And, of course, it makes the ones we love really happy. ■



The Proton Satria XLS will get you from A to five-star Zzzzs in comfort.