

Weekender

A quick trip up the road to see Tom and Nic

Jaded traveller
Grant Jones finds
the perfect tonic.

THERE comes a point when you get over going away for a weekend. Hard to believe, perhaps, but trust me for a moment.

Packing up the gear (well not me, but my understanding partner) before dashing off on a Saturday night for a 2½ drive and trying to get in as much in an overnight stay as is humanly possible.

Drinks, dinner, more drinks, guided tour, massage (oh, woe is me), lunch, then drive back home before said partner goes back to work. On this occasion, work means a five-hour plane trip to Perth.

Honestly, I didn't want to go. All too hard.

Jaded by B&Bs, country drives and wombats, I presumed the Hunter Valley held no more inducement.

One can be so wrong.

Meet Tom and Nic. No, not that Tom and Nic, the other ones. Tom and Nic Stanford of To-Nic. Geddit? Good.

Spot me as an urban dweller, but as soon as I saw the front gate – Porter's-paint purple, trendy lettering, spiky succulent – I was apprehensive.

To put me at ease, Tom flagged me down with a torch, ciggie in hand, on the gravel driveway and insisted we have a drink in the communal room.

Don't go if you don't want to, but I suggest you do. They are an interesting couple and great company. The former city slickers were sick of not seeing their visitors so started up a Saturday night drinks party, the idea being to drop in for a glass of the local, say hello then head



HUNTER HEAVEN: The owners have created a tasteful getaway where guests join them for Saturday night drinks. Pictures: GRANT JONES

out to dinner. After one or two from Tom's cellar, it was like you were at a long-lost rello's place.

So, grudgingly we head off to dinner at Mojo's in nearby Wilderness Road (phone 4930 7244). By all accounts, this is a popular restaurant run by two fine

chefs. Perhaps we had an off night, foodwise. Nonetheless, the staff could not have been more cheerful and the service was impeccable.

Oh, OK, back to drinks with Nic and Tom then. Poor us.

After getting hammered – by the Poms and Kiwis – we head back to

our nearby room. Decor? Furniture and fittings you'd love to buy (and you can), scented candles, electric blanket, top-line Sealy beds, fluffy slippers and dressing gowns . . .

Sorry, is it morning already?

Treading warily into the en suite bathroom, we were pleased to

discover a heated floor in a huge room that also boasts Aesop soaps and shampoos.

Tom has promised me a guided tour and chat about the boy stuff – shed, tractor, power tools, water recycling, trench-digging – so I get up early and open the fridge, stuffed full of (pay for) booze and (free) breakfast.

"Perhaps we have too much," says Nic later. Nudie juices, fresh coffee, homemade porridge, fruit salad and ricotta and cinnamon yoghurt, croissants, jams or our option: scrambled eggs, marinated mixed mushrooms and chorizo.

Straightforward instructions make this an idiot-free kitchenette.

The blinds open to the duck-filled dam, cud-chewing cattle, distant Brokenback Ranges and no other guests. Each of the seven rooms (including one double) faces 10-15 degrees west, so the warmth is collected in winter without losing the sunset in summer and each does not intrude on the other. They also have a lap pool just in case it gets too hot.

This was a paddock 18 months ago and, with Tom's boy toys and Nic's nous, they have created a great little getaway they are justly proud of.

They also stole Vicki, too; her hands work wonders. Vicki was employed by Nic in the city before they both pulled the pin and headed to the Hunter. Vicki, fully qualified, now runs Valley Therapies (0415 371 020), a massage service.

After that, time for a quick lunch before a mad dash to Sydney Airport? "No problem," says our man at Leaves and Fishes (737 Lovedale Road, phone 4930 7400). A dozen oysters, a bucket of prawns and a glass of wine later, we are out of there in a flash.

The writer was a guest of Tonic Hotel.

TRIP NOTES

Address: 251 Talga Road, Hunter Valley.
Bookings: 4930 9999.
Website: www.tonichotel.com.au.
Rates: \$395 per room per night with a minimum two-night stay. Twin bedroom and lounge \$850 per night.

VERDICT

A weekender that's up there with the best. **Why you'd go:** Slick surrounds, great hosts and clever use of space. **Why you wouldn't:** You don't have the time – or the money.

FIND TIME TO

- Walk off lunch around the 10.2-hectare property.
- Play a round at Greg Norman's The Vintage (or Tom's two-hole pitch and putt – when he finishes it).
- Count the mob of roos in the top paddock – seriously.
- Have a chat to fellow guests – a good mix.
- Do not buy wine!

DARWIN

on SALE!

DARWIN SUNSEEKER - 4 DAYS from

\$499*

- Includes
- ✓ Return airfares to Darwin
 - ✓ 3 nights accommodation Darwin
 - ✓ Darwin city sights tour

SAVE \$119*

Ex Sydney

Code: TDTNT1

TOP END CAREFREE CRUZIN' - 7 DAYS from

\$659*

- Includes
- ✓ Return airfares to Darwin
 - ✓ 2 nights accommodation Darwin
 - ✓ 5 days campervan hire inc. unlimited kilometres
 - ✓ Freedom to explore

Receive a FREE TANK of fuel

Ex Sydney

Code: TDTNT2

GONE BUSH - 5 DAYS from

\$769*#

- Includes
- ✓ Return airfares to Darwin
 - ✓ 4 days car hire (compact manual hatch)
 - ✓ 2 nights accommodation Darwin
 - ✓ 1 night accommodation Mary River Park
 - ✓ 1 night accommodation Kakadu
 - ✓ Crocodile cruise
 - ✓ Wildlife and wetland safari

SAVE \$137**

Ex Sydney

Code: TDTNT3

TROPIC GETAWAY - 5 DAYS from

\$795*

- Includes
- ✓ Return airfares to Darwin
 - ✓ 4 nights 4.5 star accommodation Darwin
 - ✓ Coral Reef By Night Tour & Seafood Dinner
 - ✓ Litchfield National Park Tour
 - ✓ Jumping Crocodile Cruise
 - ✓ Darwin City Sights Tour
 - ✓ Territory Wildlife Park Tour

SAVE \$125*

Ex Sydney

Code: TDTNT4

TOP END BREAKAWAY - 5 DAYS from

\$899*~

- Includes
- ✓ Return airfares to Darwin
 - ✓ 2 nights accommodation Darwin
 - ✓ 3 day Kakadu & Katherine tour including all meals, 2 nights camping accommodation, guided touring – Touring highlights include crocodile cruise, Aboriginal rock art, swimming at Edith falls & Katherine Gorge cruise

SAVE \$159*

Ex Sydney

Code: TDTNT5

TOP END SIGHTS - 6 DAYS from

\$999*

- Includes
- ✓ Return airfares to Darwin
 - ✓ 4 nights 4.5 star accommodation Darwin
 - ✓ 2 day Kakadu Tour including 2 nights budget accommodation, expert guided touring, luxury coach travel
 - ✓ Litchfield National Park Tour
 - ✓ Jumping Crocodile Cruise
 - ✓ Darwin City Sights Tour

SAVE \$169*

Ex Sydney

Code: TDTNT6

THE GHAN - 8 DAYS from

\$1779^

- Includes
- ✓ Flights Sydney to Adelaide and Darwin to Sydney
 - ✓ Gold Kangaroo Service including all meals on The Ghan Adelaide to Darwin
 - ✓ 5 nights accommodation
 - ✓ Litchfield & Crocodiles Tour
 - ✓ City Sights & Wildlife Park Tours
 - ✓ Sunset Sailing Cruise

SAVE \$237^

Ex Sydney

Code: TDTNT7

TOP END STYLE SEEKER - 5 DAYS from

\$1875*

- Includes
- ✓ Return airfares to Darwin
 - ✓ 2 nights 4.5 star accommodation Darwin
 - ✓ Darwin Sunset Sailing Cruise
 - ✓ 3 day luxury Kakadu Tour with 2 nights accommodation, small group luxury guided touring, 2 cruises & exclusive sights

SAVE \$145*

Ex Sydney

Code: TDTNT8

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