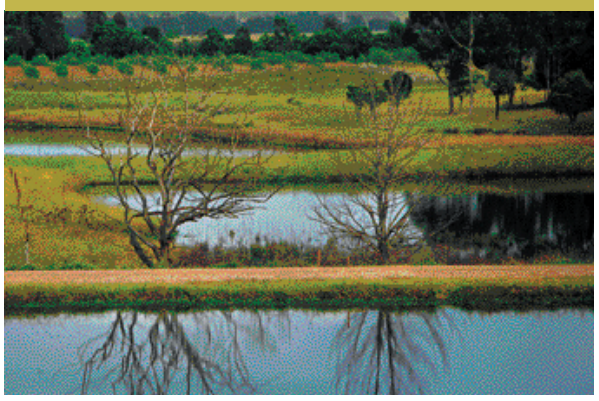
huntervalley



Lauren Quaintance visits a rural retreat in wine country where, if you like your room enough, you can take it home with you.

Say "Hunter Valley" and it's not usually shopping that comes to mind. Unless, of course, your hotel room doubles as a shop. At tonic, in Talga Road, Lovedale, almost every item in your room is for sale.

Built by former Mosman couple Nici and Tom Stanford, tonic had been open for less than two months when we arrived with a quiet weekend in the country in mind. Made from corrugated iron, glass and steel in the style of an outback shed, each of the eight unique rooms is a strictly chintz-free zone. Designer furniture has been matched with finds from antique stores, such as a rusting Coca-Cola sign or an old cloth runner from a Sydney tram stop.

The fridge in our room was packed with ingredients for a do-it-yourself breakfast of porridge, creamy yoghurts, Nudie juices, salmon scrambled eggs and fresh breads. While breakfast was complimentary, the mini-bar also boasted a selection of local wine, beer and French champagne – as well as chocolate-dipped strawberries and a cheese platter – that could be purchased if the need arose.

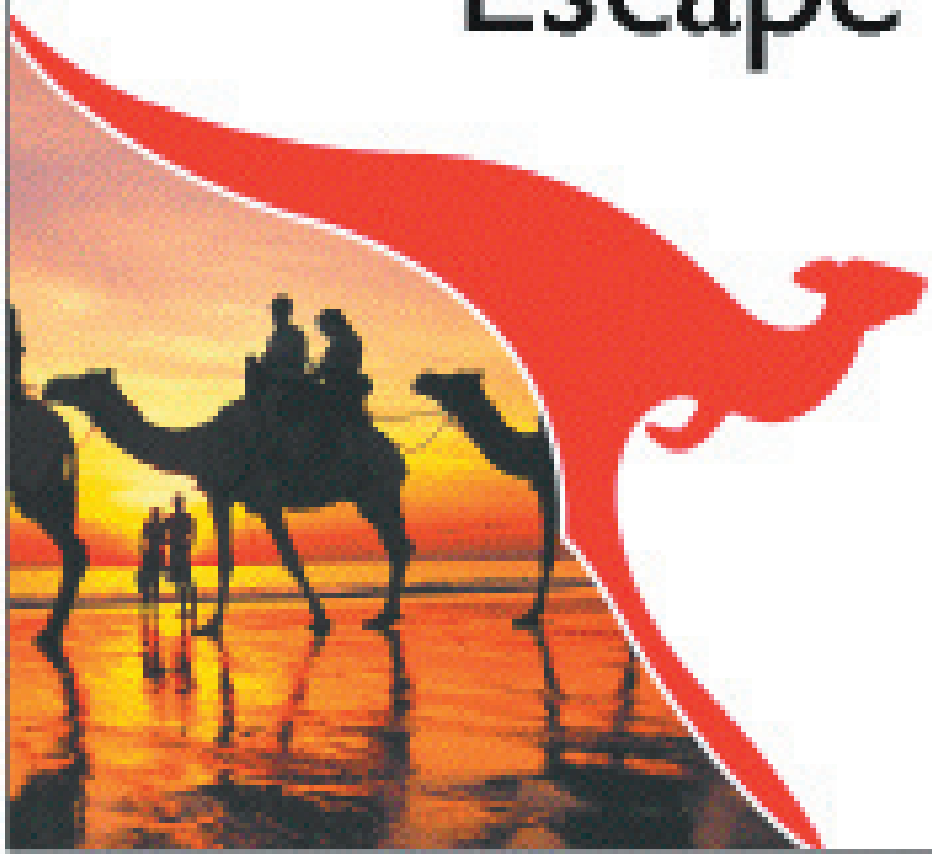
While it was tempting to spend the weekend with glass in hand on our balcony watching black swans glide across the dam, Tom had organised a round of golf for my partner at the Cypress Lakes course, so I staggered down a country lane for a run, scanning the adjacent fields for kangaroos. (I didn't see any but the next day we spotted dozens hopping across the road.) We recovered from this exertion with a dreamy one-hour massage at the hotel.

Although the lion's share of the slick wineries are in Pokolbin (about 15 minutes' drive from tonic), I preferred the quieter Lovedale area, where competent kitchens and good vineyards operate from modest premises. The only cellar door we visited was at the back of someone's house, and we bought a chardonnay reputed to be the best in the valley.

Tonic has a "no check-in/no check-out" policy, so we didn't have to be cordial after a tiring drive from Sydney and got into our room with a pin code. There was no pressure to leave by 11am on Sunday (or even by 3pm) and when we were ready to depart we just raided the room, packed the car and left. We consulted the price list and took a furry throw ($140) and an egg-shaped candleholder ($60), both of which were charged to my credit card. We'd managed to have a perfectly therapeutic weekend in the country – and to fit in some retail therapy as well.

Where to eat
Leaves and Fishes, 737 Lovedale Road, Lovedale. Phone: 4930 7400. Mojo's, 84 Wilderness Road, Lovedale. Phone: 4930 7244.
Where to drive
Wilderness Road, Lovedale.
Things to do
Play at Cypress Lakes Resort golf course, corner of McDonalds and Thompsons roads, Pokolbin. Phone: 4993 1800. Try Evans Antiques in Broke Road, Pokolbin. Phone: 4998 7237. Visit Peterson's Champagne House, corner of Broke and Branxton roads, Pokolbin. Phone: 4998 7881.
Why we'd go back
To see what's new in the rooms.
Any reservations?
Concrete floors in winter.
Bookings
tonic, 251 Talga Road, Lovedale. Phone: 4930 9999. www.tonichotel.com.au. Doubles $395 a night; apartment (sleeps four) $850 a night. Both include breakfast.

Escape to Broome



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