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 MTWTF--

It was like wading into a black pit. Never mind that it's one of shiny Brisbane's newest treats - my paranoia is racing to *Pulp Fiction's* gimpy cellar, not Brisvegas' slinkiest steam room at the Sofitel hotel.

It doesn't help that under my shag-pile bathrobe I am starkers; not the best outfit in which to make an urgent bid for freedom.

Two blocks from Queen St shopping nirvana, a handful of tea lights hints at the shape of the chamber. It is too dark to see the back wall.

Dismissing my unease about the door closing behind me, I tune into the beautician's modulated patter.

I figure if she takes me prisoner it's going to be bad for business.

She is lithe and tunked, and says something like: "You will be daubed in mercurachrome and gaffer-taped to a boom gate." I just nod and smile.

What, in fact, our spa fembot tells my steam-clean pal (we'll call him Mr Mud) and I is to paint each other head-to-toe with muck-toned beauty goo. Then she glides out like an extra from *Goldfinger*.

Yes, it is weird. At first.

Once our pupils dilate into wells, the grotto emerges as Oz-meets-Morocco. It is how you imagine a Moonsh bathhouse to be, but cleaner.

Bronze and peacock blue mosaic tiles slither down the walls over a bench seat and hidden steam jets.

If Cleopatra had hired *I Dream of Jeannie's* Jeannie to design her ensuite, this would be it.

Soon though, I am slapping beauty masque on like a bad audition for *Domestic Blitz* and Mr Mud has to yank the brush from me as the steam cuts visibility to 10cm.

Two minutes later we are flaked out like overfed seal pups, grunting the odd word of contentment.

Hamming it up never felt so good.

Minor hallucinations take over, telling me I am aboard a tropical cruiser, gazing at the star-effect lights overhead through a coastal fog.

Like I say, it is weird. To emerge back into daylight at Stephanie's Spa Retreat, you need maximum firepower on your credit card.

Its flattering lights, hushed corridors and gentle caresses will set you back \$139 for a one-hour facial.

Hyperventilating? So am I, and the trip to her Opal Rasul Temple steamroom is just the cure - at \$278 for a couple for an hour.

Mr Mud is so spaced out he wants to walk back to the Sofitel's hipper younger sister, the Urban Brisbane, for an hour or three's nap.

Opened in September after a \$10 million renovation, it is breezy and low-key with views over the Brisbane River.

The four-star Urban is striking distance on foot to the city's shopping heart in and around the Queen St Mall.

Summer weekends are low on car traffic, but full of folk deep in retail therapy.

Stride out and you'll reach South Bank's weekend markets, art galleries and fancy Ferris Wheel.



QUEENSLAND IN SUMMER ... WTF?

No, it's not as nuts as it sounds. Staying south is the key. While box jellyfish and cyclone season make relaxation an extreme sport in FNQ, it's a different story swaying in the balmy twilights of Brisbane.

There's no need for a machete to cut through the humidity and city life puts aircon only steps away.

The mean summer temperature is 25C, with typical minimums about 20C.

"Mild" is usually an insult, but not when it means perfect al fresco dining weather and a river breeze that whispers "vodka tonic".

INGA GILCHRIST heads north for a bit of luxurious mud-slinging in Brisbane

A dirty weekend



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