



From The Sunday Times

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## Just the girls to get you into a tight spot

**A valet parking service that uses glamorous babes rather than spotty youths is a big hit with Hollywood types. Now the idea is heading to Britain, reports John Harlow**

Valet parking is a staple of US motoring life, where the idea of finding your own parking space went out with black and white television.

Visit any club, bar or restaurant in one of the larger American towns, and rather than spend half an hour hunting down a space, drivers simply throw their keys to one of the uniformed adolescents.

Motorists can walk away safe in the knowledge that when they have finished their evening out the car will be delivered to them at the entrance ready to drive home.

In Britain the idea of valet parking has so far been associated only with top-end hotels, but as traffic increases and the job of finding a space becomes harder (not to mention more expensive should you overrun the meter), it is increasingly being seen as a necessity rather than a luxury.

Now an American parking company with a difference is planning to bring its valet service to London.

Valet Girls Parking takes the idea of parking a car and gives it a touch of glamour that would have the staid attendants at the Ritz blushing beneath their top hats.

The company uses girls dressed in a variety of fashionably skimpy outfits. "We're looking into coming to the UK, probably next year," says Brad Saltzman, the company founder.

"Okay, the rain might dampen play some nights, but the British appreciate a pretty girl, right? Watch out, London."

The business plan may not be particularly subtle but according to Saltzman it has already proved a huge hit in Los Angeles, where he started his company in 2005.

"Given the option of hiring acne-ridden teenage boys in red vests or beautiful sexy models and actresses trained in safety and hospitality, we're betting our success that restaurants, boutique hotels, clubs and private parties will prefer the latter."

Clients can choose the outfit they would like the valets to wear. Cowboy outfits for barbecues are popular, and two-piece bikinis and lingerie have been a hit with stag parties. Saltzman emphasises that his girls also do more haute couture outfits to suit more sombre private parties and reserved hotels and bars. "If it is legal, we will do it, but we draw the line at nudity or toplessness," he says.

In fact the most popular request is for the girls to wear traditional dark flannel trousers and starched white shirts.

The name of the company — Valet Girls — is a pun on the Californian equivalent of the Essex Girls: middle-class damsels from the San Fernando Valley (north of Los Angeles) renowned for blonde locks, broad smiles and, when clustering, outbursts of excited "ohmigods". They are also born, they will tell you, to drive Beemers, especially if they are somebody else's.

Saltzman holds extensive "casting sessions" and insists on criminal-background checks and perfect driving records. And in a town where meeting important film and music moguls is essential to career development — even fleetingly as they hand over their keys — there has been no shortage of wannabe actresses, musicians and models applying for jobs.

After all, the next person's car to be parked outside a flash Beverly Hills club might belong to a Hollywood A-lister. The girls earn about £150 a night, including tips.

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Jade Warner, a 22-year-old who is savvy beyond her years, sees it as a very LA story: on the outside it's glitzy fun, but at heart it's business. "It's all about meeting the people who may remember you for the next job," says Warner, a blonde Valley Girl Valet Girl for six months.

"Like I met [the rapper] LL Cool J and Seth Green [from Buffy the Vampire Slayer]. They were cool and sweet — most of the guys are. They are so surprised at a girl valet, but it gives us an excuse to flirt and have fun. And maybe meet up later on the Sunset Strip, if they are lucky."

So who are the favourite clients? The Valet Girls all have different ideas, but it's clear the "gentlemen" include Leonardo DiCaprio and his pals Jake Gyllenhaal and Tobey Maguire. And their least favourite? Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton, of course.

"They are rude, they cannot drive as well as they think they can, and they are always accompanied by big smelly bodyguards," says one. "No, that's their boyfriends," chokes another.

There is no ban on "accidentally" leaving a headshot photograph or script in the car, although Saltzman does draw the line at girls locking themselves in the boot of DiCaprio's Prius.

"It's not a large car and it would crumple the uniform, for a start," he laughs.

The sheer bravado novelty has ensured that Valet Girls has been an instant hit. Today it employs about 50 young women in Los Angeles, while Saltzman has plans to expand to San Francisco, Las Vegas, San Diego and Phoenix.

Earlier this year Saltzman's company took over a rival all-girl valeting service and says that he is expecting turnover of \$3m (£1.5m) this year, rising to \$14m (£7.1m) by 2010.

Jay Leno, the LA-based television talk show host and InGear columnist, rode the buzz when he recently joked: "The company has pretty girls parking cars wearing bikinis. That's if you have a nice car."

If you show up in an 89 Toyota you get a transvestite in a thong."

Drivers in London wanting the best valet girl services had better start trading in their old Celicas now.

## Take a tip: it's hard work

The job sounded glamorous at first: hang out with famous celebrities and get behind the wheels of some of their expensive and exotic cars, writes Michael Park.

As it turned out, being a valet wasn't glamorous at all. It was hard work for precious little reward, and it confirmed the maxim that the rich didn't become rich by being generous with their cash.

It's 2am and I'm outside the Mondrian hotel, one of LA's best-known celeb haunts, in the standard valet uniform of starched white shirt and black trousers. Next to the beautiful people with expensive haircuts, diamond earrings and gold necklaces, being disgorged from the six-figure motors, I feel like a peasant.

Nestor Delbon of Quality Parking is helping me through my first night on duty. He says that on an average Saturday night he will slip behind the wheel of dozens of Aston Martins, Porsches, Cadillac Escalades, Rolls-Royces and Hummers. "Ferraris and Lamborghinis are my favourite, though," he says. "Those are really nice cars. Maybe I'll own one one day."

He will have to work hard. The lot of a valet is not an easy one. They are paid the state minimum wage of \$6.75 (£3.53) an hour, relying on tips for most of their money, and despite parking the cars of some of the richest Hollywood stars their takings are meagre.

"After Las Vegas, LA is probably the biggest valet-parking city in America," says Ben Akbary, 53, owner of Quality Parking. "Everyone in this town expects their car to be valet parked, and last year we parked over 3m cars."



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The driveway to the hotel is controlled by my boss for the evening, Roma Anaya, 37. He started out as a key attendant (passing car keys to the valets) in 1994, but graduated to valet and then on to valet manager, and he has seen the changing motoring tastes of the Hollywood glitterati.

"Many of the big stars drive themselves and many are now driving hybrids," he says. "Steven Spielberg drives a Toyota Highlander Hybrid, and Leonardo DiCaprio drives a Prius. Simon Cowell, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Christina Aguilera all drive Rolls-Royce Phantoms."

So how much do the valets make in tips while servicing the A-list dream cars? Delbon fingers the folded greenbacks he has collected at the end of his eight-hour shift. "Six dollars," he shrugs, before making his way across the parking lot to his own self-parked Honda Civic. Glitterati, eh?

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