

EXPLORE

THE LIFE AQUATIC

Bathing in the waters at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa in Fingal on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula. Opposite: The lounge at Alba's tranquil day spa.



HOT SPRINGS ETERNAL

The restorative power of bathing in geothermal waters is being harnessed across Victoria in an extensive trail connecting hot springs along the southern coastline. *Travel + Luxury* soaks up two of the newest thermal springs to open on the Gippsland Lakes and the Mornington Peninsula.

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EXPLORE



I'm sitting in a wine barrel surrounded by fizz. Not the quaffable kind, mind you, but thousands of tiny, transparent and effervescent bubbles formed by the warm, mineral-rich geothermal water tapped from 500 metres below ground. As the last of the sun's rays drip like honey onto neighbouring trees, ducks skim across the freshwater lagoon, and voices from bathers on the nearby hilltop escarpment float down to the balcony of my glamping pavilion at Metung Hot Springs on the Gippsland Lakes. Four hours east of Melbourne, the picturesque village of Metung – almost completely surrounded by the glittering waters of Lake King and Bancroft Bay – is home to the latest hot springs to emerge in Victoria.

For thousands of years, people have been drawn to water heated by the Earth's core as it surfaced through cracks, bubbled up into creeks and rivers, and pooled into natural hot springs. From Iceland's milky blue waters edged by black volcanic boulders at the Blue Lagoon to Pamukkale in Turkey where Cleopatra was said to have taken to the turquoise waters, balneotherapy – the practice of bathing in mineral-rich water – has been intertwined with myriad cultures through the ages.

On the western edge of the Simpson Desert the tree-fringed oasis of Witjira-Dalhousie Springs has been a sacred site for the Lower Southern Arrernte and Wangkangurru people for generations. In Greece, the palace of Knossos has remains of lustral basins dating back to 1700BC, while the first-century historian Flavius Josephus noted that King Herod soaked his aching body in hot springs near the Dead Sea. Across the Roman Empire, public baths were built for the masses, and in Japan the healing waters of onsens played an important role in Shinto purifying rituals before becoming an integral part of Japanese culture.

It was during a visit to Kusatsu hot springs in Japan in 1992 that Charles Davidson had an epiphany. Surrounded by snowfall and watching mist rise from geothermal pools, Davidson wondered why Australians, with their love of water and relaxation, didn't have a hot springs bathing culture despite deep wellsprings like The Great Artesian and Otway basins. "Australia is very multicultural, but there aren't many places where everyone can commune," he says. "There are sporting matches, the beach or public gardens, but hot springs have added health benefits and the chance to be immersed in nature."

Enveloping people in nature lies at the heart of Davidson's award-winning Peninsula Hot Springs in Fingal on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula where meandering paths lead guests to more than 50 mineral-water baths, massage showers, plunge pools, saunas and plush cabanas, tucked among coastal tea trees and lush gullies. In Metung, Davidson has partnered with East Gippsland tourism

BARRELL OF BATHS
Above: Bathing barrels and mineral pools at the adults-only hilltop escarpment at Metung Hot Springs.
Below: One of Metung's glamping tents.



operators Rachel and Adrian Bromage to reignite hot-springs bathing on the traditional lands of the Gunaikurnai people after public geothermal pools closed in the mid-1990s. Where Peninsula Hot Springs has a capacity of around a thousand people per day, Metung will accommodate about 150 by Easter. "We really want it to feel like a haven," says Adrian. "Part of that is allowing people the space to connect with themselves, each other and the landscape."

Metung is the easternmost point of the Great Victorian Bathing Trail, an emerging wellness route linking new and existing hot springs, mineral springs and sea baths from Gippsland in the south-east to Warrnambool in the state's south-west. The two newest additions to the trail are Metung Hot Springs and Alba Thermal Springs, with hot springs at Phillip Island to open this year and 12 Apostles Hot Springs and Resort expected to be completed in 2024-2025.

On my visit, the first stage of Metung Hot Springs is nearly complete. Ten glamping pavilions, thermal bathing pools, sauna, plunge pool, day lounges and walking trails are dotted around a freshwater lagoon. A reflexology walk through shallow water gently massages my feet before I drop my robe and slink into the ecliptic baths set in the hillside. Rugged banksias curve over and around the pools, adding to the feeling of seclusion and discovery. The pools are chlorine-free and the earthy mineral scent amplifies the connection to the ancient aquifer below. Trace elements such as boron, magnesium, potassium, sodium and calcium in the water work like a wellness cocktail for my skin, which feels instantly softer and smoother.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHARYN CAIRNS (METUNG)

TAKING THE WATERS

The Luna pool at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa.





FAR PAVILIONS
 Left: The glamping village at Metung Hot Springs overlooking a freshwater lagoon. Right: Alba's restaurant, Thyme, and its lunch dish of burrata, heirloom tomato, melon, burnt-honey balsamic, marjoram and scorched hazelnuts.



from the gleaming white sculptural staircase that sweeps you away from the semi-subterranean reception to the sinuous exterior walls that weave through the landscape, creating sunken courtyards.

Alba has both private and social bathing on offer and the 31 pools in hidden gardens and regenerated tertiary dunes are enchanting series of tableaux. There are forest pools fringed by moonah woodland, a labyrinthine pool that spirals down to a deep, still centre, geothermal pools wreathed by verdant lawn, refreshingly icy plunge pools, rooftop salt baths and a shallow circular pool sitting atop a crest for dazzling sunset views. When I visit, the herb-infused botanical pools, the rain pool and private salt cabins are yet to open, but with a limit of 400 guests, there's an unhurried tranquillity and sense of space. Adding to the serenity is the encouragement that bathers leave their phones in the lockers. "We want people to connect to the environment and each other," says general manager Craig Dodd. "It's hard to do that if you're looking at a screen."

On the adults-only hilltop escarpment, I luxuriate in the deep, oversized spotted-gum barrel, gazing out at Lake King. A staff member tells me that the previous day two pods of dolphins were frolicking around the lake's shoreline, captivating bathers on the ridge. At the spa dome I choose a "kodo" (meaning melody) massage inspired by an ancient Aboriginal healing technique. Using Larn'wa products developed by local elder Anne Warren, the wild-harvested native botanicals imbue the room with serenity. After the rhythmic and deeply intuitive treatment, I float back to my luxurious pavilion where, after bathing in the balcony barrel and spotting long-necked turtles in the lagoon, I fall into one of the deepest sleeps I've ever had.

Now well and truly convinced of the pleasures of an aquatic lifestyle, when morning comes I'm ready to travel to the Mornington Peninsula to slip into the soothing waters at its latest thermal springs. But before I do, a hearty breakfast of silky scrambled eggs, garlic mushrooms, roasted tomatoes and beetroot fritters awaits. It's served at Metung's Clubhouse restaurant at the Metung Country Club, where recycled water from the springs irrigates the lush nine-hole golf course, just a short trip by car or in a supplied golf cart from the hot springs. As I depart, I promise I'll be back – future stages will include more accommodation, a clay ritual, lagoon pools, a floating sauna, a wellness centre and even a marina.

Where Metung embraces organic forms of nature, at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa I feel as though I've entered another dimension. Set in Fingal, on the traditional lands of the Bunurong-Boon Wurrung community, about 90 minutes' drive from Melbourne, the carbon-neutral wellness retreat is cradled halfway between the wild salt winds of Bass Strait and the more subdued shallow waters of Port Phillip Bay. Surrounded by rolling pastures and coastal heathland, Alba's striking brutalist façade with its smooth concrete, bronze glass and metallic finishes initially exudes an air of impermeability. But inside it's like a sanctuary where the restorative properties of water and light are reflected throughout.

The interiors by architectural firm Hayball seamlessly unite the inspirational with the functional through ocular skylights, which transform the spaces into solar observatories where concealed heating in concrete seats and the floor echo the warmth of the sun. Judicious curves invite you deeper into the complex –



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHARYN CAIRNS (METUNG)



My favourite pools are those that emphasise the interplay and connection between compression and release, skilfully created through apertures in the concrete. The Hemisphere Cave is a mesmerising neo-Roman study of shape-shifting light that dances on the walls, while the roofless, silo-esque Shell, with its slim opening and submerged bench, holds you in the smooth embrace of a skylight chamber. The backdrop of running water, flashes of fairy wrens and warblers as they flit between the trees and the wind rustling through the long grass all make me want to linger longer.

But the thermal baths are just part of the Alba experience. On the upper level is an opulent spa with 22 treatment rooms, including a dry sauna, steam room and Vichy shower. The subtle colour palette, restrained décor and plush daybeds of the relaxation lounge are instantly calming, and after a heavenly hot-stone massage that leaves me languidly supple, I head to Alba's Thyme restaurant for lunch. Overlooking a sun-soaked terrace, native gardens and a gently flowing cascade, it's here that guests come to refuel. The menu, created by Karen Martini and executed by head chef Mario Di Natale, has a distinctly European feel, albeit with Asian flourishes. Local producers and artisans feature prominently, with eggs from nearby regenerative-farming cooperative Lil's Yolky Dokey, bread from the socially conscious Miller's Bread Kitchen in Dromana, and organic vegetables from Five Tales Farm. Skull Island prawn toast and the towering fried-fish sandwich on plump white bread with crunchy iceberg lettuce are just two standouts.

A small number of polished villas are scheduled to open in 2023, but for now I adjourn to the sunny terrace where, wrapped in my marshmallow-soft robe, I watch fellow bathers emerge from the thermal pools looking utterly content. Nursing a cup of Alba's signature tea, a sunset-hued herbal infusion with lemon myrtle and native plum, I decide I'm a total convert to the restorative power of hot springs. I've felt myself unfurl and soften, with a new appreciation of these natural wonders that run beneath this vast country. In a world where relaxation is usually delivered by an app or in a class, being outside and slipping into warm water is the perfect way to unyoke and regain a sense of deep calm and stillness. ▀

The writer was a guest of Metung Hot Springs, Alba Thermal Springs & Spa, and Visit Gippsland.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHARYN CAIRNS (METUNG)



HOT PROPERTY

Above: Thermal rain showers at Metung Hot Springs. Right: Smooth concrete is a feature of Alba's exterior spaces. Opposite: The sculptural staircase that sweeps up from Alba's reception.

