

# SPRING REIGN

People have long been drawn to the waters of the Hepburn region

LINDY ALEXANDER

Are you spiritual?" The question comes at me sharply and hangs in the air. I pause, not entirely sure how to answer. After a moment, I tell the waitress that driving through Hepburn yesterday, there was something I couldn't put my finger on. "Ah, that's the energy of this place," she says with a knowing smile, placing a teapot on the table.

Hepburn and Hepburn Springs are twin towns renowned for having the highest concentration of mineral springs in Australia. On the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung, this densely forested pocket of regional Victoria has long drawn people, including those searching for gold or escaping political upheaval and persecution in the 1800s. But they have also come in search of something else – health and wellness. During the gold rush, miners discovered a rich vein of mineral springs in the area. Inspired by European communal bathing traditions of "taking the waters", Hepburn Bathhouse opened in 1895. It still exists (albeit now in a modern building), but before I dip my toe into the mineral-rich waters, I need to check in to my lodgings. As part of its spa retreat accommodation, Hepburn Bathhouse and Spa has recently rejuvenated and refreshed four luxury wellness villas.

While wellness means something different to everyone, there's a broad universality to what makes us feel nourished, cared for and healthy. And on a frigid autumn day when flame-coloured leaves are being whipped off trees by an icy wind, a warm place of refuge is the perfect start. Entering my villa, the gas fire is already lit, a calming aroma of lime, black pepper and rosemary fills the air and there's a welcome hamper on the kitchen table.

The space is a perfectly proportioned, light-filled retreat where a king bed is tucked into a cosy alcove underneath a vaulted ceiling. Gauzy drapes, stone-hued pendant lights and cushions in earthy tones anchor the sense of calm and restfulness. A generous sitting area adjoins the galley kitchen, which leads on to a balcony overlooking the grounds of the Hepburn Bathhouse and Spa across the road and to bushland beyond.

Extra wellness flourishes dotted throughout include a daily journal next to the bed to



One of the revamped wellness villas at Hepburn Springs, above left; deep tubs and spacious living areas, left

record positive intentions, movement and reflections, yoga mats and blocks with guided videos and meditations, "sleep mist" to spritz on my pillow before bed, as well as complimentary glass bottles to fill with the local natural spring water.

Wellness for me invariably comes in liquid form (no, not from the minibar), so after a hearty dinner at the nearby Frank and Connie's Kitchen, I fill the enormous marble spa bath. There is a choice of four bath salts, scrubs and tonics but they are unlabelled, so I sprinkle them in randomly. Climbing into bed an hour later, my skin is soft and rose-scented.

The next morning kookaburras are cackling through the mist as I wander past the bathhouse, the bold lines of the glass, bluestone and timber building slicing through the cold air. The old red-brick chimney, used to heat the mineral water for the original bath-

## IN THE KNOW

Hepburn Bathhouse and Spa's wellness villas from \$449 a night. Retreat villas from \$339 a night. Mineral bathing at the bathhouse from \$55 for adults. The 60-minute Tranquillity massage is \$199. [hepburnbathhouse.com](http://hepburnbathhouse.com)

house, still stands, as does the historic building itself (now the spa lounge), and both have been incorporated beautifully into the modern structure.

As I walk, I'm looking for the pumps that tap into the Soda, Locarno, Sulphur, Wyuna and Argyle springs. The winding path is dotted with stone bridges set among tall trees dripping with dew. I reach the pumps and fill my bottle with the fizzy, slightly sulphuric

water. It's definitely an acquired taste. Then, standing completely still, I hear it – the gentle sound of bubbling. It's a reminder of the raw, natural energy just below the surface.

Breakfast at the villa comes in the form of a generous hamper featuring local sourdough, fresh eggs, juice, preserves, toasted muesli, goat's milk yoghurt, falafel and fruit. The rest of the morning is spent over the road at the bathhouse. I linger in the adults-only "sanctuary", alternating between warm magnesium-rich pools, a steam room thick with aromatic mist and a walk-in cool-down pool. In the steamy Moroccan-inspired hammam, I join other bathers as we slather ourselves in mud, chuckling at our grey-streaked bodies before reclining on a heated slab, waiting for the softening minerals to soak in. My favourite spot is the open-air creekside pool, which overlooks Spring Creek. Lining the winding waterway are deciduous trees, and their burnished leaves flutter down and gently land in the pool, like little embers of gold.

With sleep tourism booming, many of the spa experiences and rituals here have been developed to encourage deep rest and relaxation. After my 90-minute bathing session, I select the Tranquillity massage, a new offering in which the therapist uses soft brushes and slow strokes intended to calm mind and body.

Later, as I get into my car, I can still feel the echoes of the massage and smell the heavenly essential oils. Driving back through the forests of Hepburn, I feel it again; the energy of the place. This time it's accompanied by another feeling – an overwhelming sense of peace and wellness.

Lindy Alexander was a guest of Hepburn Bathhouse and Spa.

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