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DECEMBER 10-11, 2022

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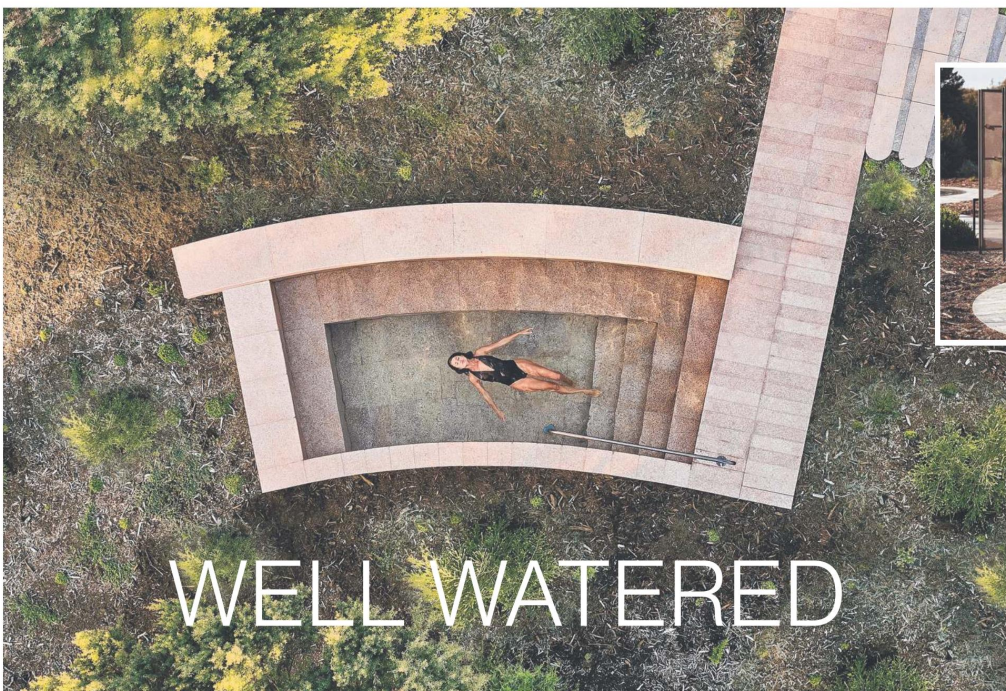
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Taking the waters at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa, main; The Wave pool, above; staircase inside the complex and the spa lounge, below left; signature tuna dish at Thyme, inset

Victoria's newest spa destination is designed to please

KENDALL HILL

White-robed worshippers file towards a modernist temple in the heathlands above Port Phillip Bay and Bass Strait. They look like they're gathering for afternoon prayers but this is not a cathedral. It's a spa-theatral, where salvation lies in a deep-tissue massage, a Karen Martini menu and perhaps a cheeky Aperol spritz.

It's lunchtime at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa, the latest decadent address on Melbourne's favourite coastal playground, the Mornington Peninsula. Hence the procession of robed and swim-suited sybarites heading to Thyme restaurant to sample Martini's menu.

Guests take their places at grainy timber tables and tobacco leather dining chairs (designed by Melbourne firm Zuster) in a sinuous concrete mess hall with glass walls looking on to a sunny terrace and snaking man-made cascade.

Spartans can order fruit smoothies and crudités with pistachio sauce (\$30), or the signature red rice bowl with cured tuna, soft boiled egg and roasted sesame mayo (\$45). But Thyme's offerings also extend to gastronomic treats such as prawn toast, a refined remix of the Cantonese original featuring a whole Skull Island prawn crusted in sesame with avocado mousse, green chilli mayo and finger lime pearls (\$36). Martini's name is on the menu but it's head chef Mario Di Natale, ex-Grossi Grill and Garum in Perth, who mans the pans.

There's also a terrific list of mainly peninsula-made drinks, including local strong suits such as pinots gris, chardonnays and pinots noir plus beers and spirits and separate sections for martinis and spritzers.

Alba's marketing director Kadi Morrison suggests I try a lemon myrtle vodka from Penni Ave Distillery down the road at Rye but I remind her it's lunchtime and I'm at a health retreat. Instead I have a responsible glass of Rare Hare fume blanc from the Willow Creek Winery at Jackalope Hotel (with whom Alba collaborates on indulgent day-trips).

Thyme is open daily from 7am – breakfast plates range from yoghurt panna cotta with local honeycomb and granola, to poppy seed bagels stuffed with ocean-trout gravlax, egg and cress – until 10pm. Last orders at 8.30.

Of course, Thyme is only part of the Alba story. The obvious drawbacks here are the



mineral springs, 31 in total, and a 22-room spa that occupies the entire top floor of this monumental sanctuary. The 15ha site is relatively quiet on a midweek visit so I take my time testing the waters, Goldilocks-style, of the 22 public pools plumbed into a dune-shaped hillside. Bathers don't interrupt each other; if there are towels and robes hooked outside a pool, you just move on until you find a vacancy. It's all very civilised.

For those after guaranteed privacy there are nine private, bookable pools, including salt-float cabins, on top of the complex, with views over the neighbouring Moonah Links golf course.

Alba's setting in rural Fingal, about 90 minutes' drive south from central Melbourne, is fringed with coastal heathland and landscaped lavishly with native wildflowers. Superb fairy wrens flit between the tea trees, and blackbirds sing as I take my first dips in The Forest, a trio of pools bordered by bushland. Below lies Luna, a circular pool ringed by a turf labyrinth and lawned ledges equipped with super-sized sun lounges and market umbrellas.

Luna feels hotter than The Forest – pools are naturally heated to between 37C and 43C by the thermal waters of the Selwyn Fault,



which anchors the peninsula; the humid air has a faint whiff of the mineral cocktail within (sulphur, calcium, magnesium, potassium).

How do I feel? Super relaxed. Partly because of the soak but also because of the setting. Alba's natural soundscape of birdsong, running water and gentle breezes is incredibly soothing.

Most pools have a distinct character or vibe. The Wave is a whirlpool that spins me clockwise around a stone bath. It's quite fun.

Opposite is Eve, a shallow, tranquil pond positioned on the crest for best sunset views. The Shell sits within a high roofless tank with a side opening where guests enter and take their seats on a submerged bench. It reminds me of a James

Turrell installation in the way the walls frame the sky above, and in the way light reflected off the water dances over the concrete.

Frequent signs advise patrons against the use of mobile phones. "Before bathing take a moment to switch off your phone," suggests a prominent change-room notice. "Please leave your phone in the locker and enjoy the tranquillity." No one takes any notice. I watch people taking selfies and reels at every pool, busily social-posting to prove to the world



they're early adopters at the peninsula's poshest new address.

Elsewhere at Alba there are deep plunge pools filled with cooled mineral water, a large main pool and the Hemisphere Cave, a shadowy refuge with communal bench and ethereal light like an al fresco Roman bathhouse. Next door is the sauna and steam section but it's temporarily out of order, staff apologise. The complex itself is not quite finished or fully functional when I visit. Three botanically scented pools, The Falls rain pool and the Dead Sea-inspired private salt cabins should all be open this month.

After lunch I head upstairs to the spa where I'm served tea in the relaxation area, a theatrical space of soaring ceilings and large bolstered booths. Oversized daybeds overlook a freshly landscaped garden. A tray near the entrance offers reading glasses for the visually challenged.

The tea, Alba's house blend of Davidson plum, strawberry gum, lemongrass and cardamom, is surprisingly delicious.

I'm booked in for a 90-minute time-capsule facial. "Can I specify what age I'd like to go back to?" I ask therapist Leah, who kindly smiles at my dad joke. The treatment rooms are austere but dramatic, with 4m ceilings and textured floors and walls. There are also two steam rooms for hammam-inspired treatments, including vigorous rub-downs with Turkish mitts and DIY group facials (as seen at a recent buck's party).

The next 90 minutes pass in a pleasant haze as Leah fixes my face with cleanser, alpha hydroxy acid serum and two types of mask, including a "super-hydrating" coconut membrane that she works into my skin with a micro-vibration wand. While waiting for the moisturisers to work their magic, she massages my arms, shoulders and legs, oils my scalp and then applies a collagen serum, a "lifting" serum, two eye creams (one is hardly enough these days) and a lip balm. All of which – the bathing, the facial, the pleasure of a day in the country – leaves me literally glowing for days.

Despite the huge sums the owners must have spent on creating this architecturally extravagant resort, they seem determined to keep the experience pleasurable. For me that's the big appeal of Alba.

Visitor numbers are limited while the site settles in but, with a daily capacity of 400 bathers, it will always be more exclusive than neighbouring Peninsula Hot Springs with its 700-plus punters and overflowing carparks.

Of course guests will have to pay a premium to access Alba but the pay-off is in the privacy, the quiet contemplation, and the cheerful songs of pebblebonk frogs enjoying the peninsula's newest wetlands.

Kendall Hill was a guest of Alba Thermal Springs.

IN THE KNOW

Alba Thermal Springs is open every day 7am-10pm; spa hours are 10am-7pm. Entry to the springs costs \$110 (\$75 if you arrive before 8.30am). Bookings preferred.
albathermalsprings.com.au