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# TRAVELLER

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ON SUNDAY



## STATE OF RELAXATION

Arise Victoria, Australia's capital of wellness

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ALOHA | Hollywood's Hawaiian backlot  
ON THE ROAD AGAIN | Memoirs of a reformed backpacker





COVER STORY

# Soothe operators

Taking the waters has always been a fashionable activity for Victorians – either the Victorians of the 19th century, or those living in the state of Victoria for the past thousands of years.

And Victorians' love of balneotherapy – to give mineral-water bathing its scientific name – shows no signs of drying up. Indeed, run your finger along a map of Victoria's coast, and you'll find aquifers aplenty, bubbling to the surface. And, with the state's at times, cooler temperatures encouraging a soak in hot water, two ambitious new experiences have opened in the state's regions in the past six months alone.

Along with these healing water destinations, relative proximity to Melbourne, making them easier to reach for Melburnians and interstate visitors alike, it all adds up to Victoria being Australia's hot spot for spas.

"We're following a tradition here in Victoria, where First Nations people have connected with our waterways for millennia, the European Victorians have brought their perspective of bathing, including a legacy of bathing boxes around Port Phillip Bay," says Matt Sykes, author of the *Great Victorian Bathing Trail* (see [bathing.org](http://bathing.org)).

The Great Victorian Bathing Trail is a concept he and industry leaders are developing to link the geothermal and mineral water hotspots throughout the state.

This is no fad either. Geothermal and mineral water bathing is known to relax and detoxify the body and mind, and is part of a greater, global movement of integrating wellness into our lifestyles. Add to the bubbling mix a host of nature-based tourism ventures such as forest bathing, riding our rail trails, taking Indigenous cultural walks and stargazing, and you've got a host of



Victoria, the nation's spa capital, is up to its neck in hot water - and loving it, writes Belinda Jackson.

holistic health treats and retreats. "What's important for the culture of bathing in Victoria is its diversity," says Sykes. "As it grows, bathing is not going to be all premium, luxury experiences. It's going to become more accessible over time, and you can see that normalisation of hot-springs bathing in such countries as Iceland, Japan and China. Regardless of culture, generation or background, water connects us all."

Victoria's bellwethers are Peninsula Hot Springs and Hepburn Springs, which have encouraged a brace of newcomers, including the sparkling, new Alba on the Mornington Peninsula and Metung Hot Springs in East Gippsland. In the pipeline is the Phillip Island Hot Springs, developed in conjunction with Peninsula Hot Springs and due to open in late 2023, with a host of other projects bubbling beneath the surface.

In the meantime, go ahead and immerse yourself fully in Traveller's essential guide to Victoria's Steamy Seven.

## Metung Hot Springs, East Gippsland

**The lowdown** Victoria's newest hot springs resort opened in November in Metung, Gippsland's most chi-chi coastal town. To date, seven pools and seven barrels are hidden in a bushland setting, fed by 10,000-year-old, mineral-rich water.

The hero site is a spectacular adults-only Hillside Escarpment, with the glorious Gippsland Lakes at its feet, and winter will see the addition of a floating, wood-fired sauna. Developed with the Peninsula Hot Springs, owner-operators Rachel and Adrian Bromage run Australia's first hot springs-golf resort, with a nine-hole championship course beside the springs: the clubhouse, open to all, offers a small, delicious menu.

### Go well

With the property still in its infancy, there is currently only one spa dome with twin beds, though the ambitious plans will soon increase that number dramatically. The spa treatments use Larn'wa products, which are locally made and Indigenous inspired, using Australian botanics.

### Spend the night

Ten canvas tents look down on a bird-filled billabong: each tent has two wine barrels perched on its deck, waiting to be filled with steaming hot, mineral waters, for a steamy sunset soak, sans bathers, watching geese, long-necked turtles, ducks and superb fairy wrens. Stock up on local red wine and charcuterie so you don't have to leave; for over-18s only.

### Don't miss

The Gippsland Lakes are integral to the hot springs. Hire a little self-drive boat, pack a picnic and explore its myriad islands and

beaches, keeping an eye out for seals, pelicans and dolphins.

### Essentials

Metung is 315 kilometres from Melbourne. Summer nights on the Lakes are glorious; winter is for those who don't like to share. Glamping from \$550 a night, includes all bathing, daily wellness activity, drinks and canapes on arrival. See [metunghotsprings.com](http://metunghotsprings.com); [rivieranautic.com.au](http://rivieranautic.com.au)

## Peninsula Hot Springs, Mornington Peninsula

**The lowdown** Inspired by bathing trends from around the globe, over 40 pools and more than 30 other bathing experiences – including a Turkish hammam and a Moroccan steam room – are dotted around the 30-hectare site at Fingal, on the southern end of the Mornington Peninsula. Its success is in its numbers, last year, more than 600,000 bathers visited the site, which brothers Charles and Richard Davidson first opened in 1997.

### Go well

Book a relaxation dome for you and up to 11 of your closest friends as a base for snacking and lolling on daybeds in between dips. From \$150 (four hours) with any Revitalise booking. Ever innovative, the springs' newest offering is the Food Bowl, a 1.2-hectare kitchen garden: take a tour to learn about organic gardening for a healthy table.

### Spend the night

Ten glamping tents channel an African safari vibe, for glampers over 18 years. The tariff includes breakfast, or order from the 24-hour menu, which includes a super-local wine menu. They also partner with other local accommodation including the Flinders Hotel, Peppers Moonah Links Resort and the Rye Hotel.





Clockwise from main: nature nurturing, Peninsula Hot Springs; hammam at Hepburn Bathhouse; Lon Retreat & Spa; stairway to heaven, Alba Hot Springs.



**Don't miss**

Choose a full moon and bathe in moonlight from 10pm-2am, while the Fire & Ice section puts you on a path of ice caves, steamy saunas and breathtakingly cold plunge pools. Like it seriously hot? Poach yourself in the Moon pool in the main Bath House area and the Orchid pool in the Spa Dreaming area (for bathers over 16 years), which reach 42 degrees.

**Essentials**

Fingal is 96 kilometres from Melbourne. January is the hot springs' busiest month, while June is the runner-up, for the experience of watching the steam rise from your pool during midwinter. Glamping costs from \$670 for two people. Bathing from \$35 (Recharge, one hour), or \$70 (Revitalise, all day). Moonlit bathing costs \$70. See [peninsulahotspings.com](http://peninsulahotspings.com)

**Lon Retreat & Spa, Bellarine Peninsula**

**The lowdown** There are seven suites at this European-style house spa hotel, but its centrepiece – an indoor, 12.5-metre mineral pool – is also open to guests of the on-site Lon Spa. The retreat is set on 80 hectares of the family farm of Claire and Rob Gemes. The land provides: limestone caves beneath the surface filter the mineral waters that feed the heated mineral pool and spa treatments, and a food forest supplies the retreat's platters.

**Go well**

Naturopath Jade Ogilvie runs the Lon Spa, which uses Sydney company Subtle Energies' sublime products, featuring mogro jasmine and 24 karat gold. Its three treatment rooms focus on reflection, immersion and revival, with Vichy showers and private mineral baths, where you can watch the storm clouds roll in. Follow a beach track to the wild coastline for an

afternoon spent picnicking and hopping between rockpools or wander through 300-year-old Moonah woodlands to Lake Victoria, renowned for its birdwatching.

**Spend the night**

Australian coastal architecture is the touchpoint for the seven suites that look out over Bass Strait, Point Lonsdale's lighthouse and farmland. Each has its own style: a fireplace or mineral-water stone bath, all with kitchenettes with an honesty bar and pantry. Its packages include a ferry across Port Phillip Bay to lunch at Point Leo Estate, on the Mornington Peninsula.

**Don't miss**

Book the one-hour rose quartz facial, or combine a 30-minute version with a one-hour massage in a treatment appropriately called The Slow Down. Add time in the mineral pool, a platter of produce from the farm and nearby suppliers, and a glass of sparkling for the full shebang.

**Essentials**

Point Lonsdale is 103 kilometres from Melbourne. To truly cosset yourself, visit in winter, when you can move from hot tub to a hot seat in front of the fireplace, while summer sees pink skies and epic sunrises and sunsets. Stays from \$490 a night, spa treatments from \$190; non-guests can add communal bathing or a private mineral bath to their treatments. See [lonretreat.com.au](http://lonretreat.com.au)

**Deep Blue Hotel & Hot Springs, Warrnambool**

**The lowdown** Found at the western end of the Great Ocean Road, Deep Blue's outdoor sanctuary opened in 2019, and is best known for its hand-sculptured cave pools. Pure geothermal waters, drawn from a depth of 850 metres, fill Deep Blue's 15 open-air bathing pools, from its foot spa to the cold plunge pools and an aromatherapy pool,

diffused subtly with essential oils, framed by she-oaks and native shrubs. An indoor bath house with private bathing rooms, a cold plunge pool and day spa complete the scene.

**Go well**

Each cave pool has a different sensory twist – using colour or sound therapy – while the rainforest cave pays homage to the nearby Otway Ranges. The new salt therapy room lulls you to rest while micro salt ions do their respiratory cleansing. Warrnambool is having its day in the sun as roadtrippers discover its Southern Ocean shores and long stretches of uncrowded beaches, volcanic plains and unique sites, including Tower Hill and the UNESCO-listed Budj Bim National Park, and the Little Penguin colony on Middle Island, as told in the movie *Oddball*.

**Spend the night**

Built in 2004, the 4.5-star hotel's 81 guest rooms include five penthouses and 27 rooms with full views out to Lady Bay Beach, Middle Island and the Southern Ocean.

**Don't miss**

Stargaze from a 41 degrees Reflection pool during Deep Blue's popular twilight bathing sessions, or book one of the new sea-inspired treatments in the day spa, which includes a seaweed scrub, the sea holistic massage with linen compresses and a cactus and agave eco wrap.

**Essentials**

Warrnambool is 258 kilometres from Melbourne. This coastline is wild during the winter – the best time to sink into a hot pool, and July to September is also peak whale watching season. The earlybird gets the bargain, \$33 (8-10am), rising to \$57 for twilight bathing (6-9pm). An hour in the indoor bathhouse costs from \$25 midweek. Stays costs from \$300 a night. See [thedeepblue.com.au](http://thedeepblue.com.au)

**Peppers Mineral Springs Hotel Hepburn, Hepburn Springs**

**The lowdown** The Retreat is a modern spa addition to the art deco Peppers hotel. Small and select, it's open to hotel guests and visitors, allowing only nine bathers at a time. There are two steamy 38 degree open-air pools with a cool plunge pool set between them, all overlooking the parterre gardens.

**Go well**

Attached to the hotel, The Retreat is open to those 16 and above. Spend an hour gliding between the pools, a basalt stone sauna, and detox infrared saunas and the roaring steam room, or book a treatment in the spa, which uses products from US brand Pevonia Botanica and Fremantle-based Sodashi.

**Spend the night**

Hoteliers have been fluffing pillows for health-seeking guests on this site since 1883. There are 29 rooms in the historic hotel; seven self-contained garden suites and the four-bedroom Italianate Villa Parma, which is ideal for groups. The hotel restaurant is open Thursday-Saturday; if eating outside, book in advance. If you forgot to book, the 165-year-old Farmer's Arms in neighbouring Daylesford welcomes walk-ins to dine at the bar, where a tight, well-crafted menu sits alongside a wine list of local heroes, [farmersarmsdaylesford.com.au](http://farmersarmsdaylesford.com.au)

**Don't miss**

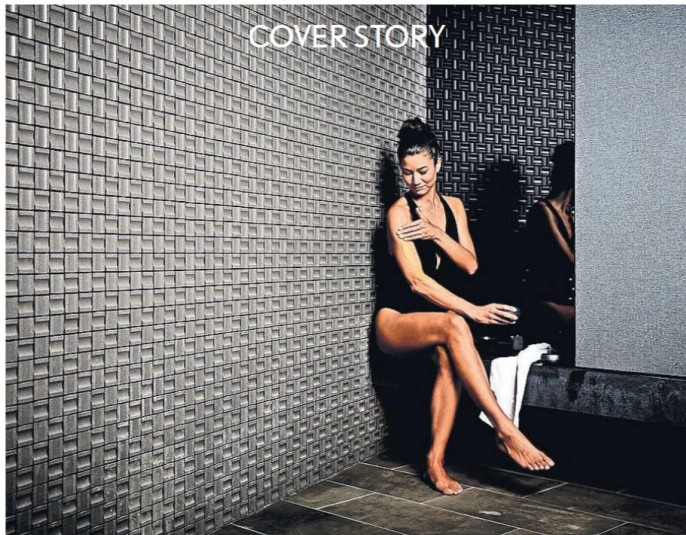
Follow a walking path five minutes from the hotel, to reach Hepburn's famed natural springs. Bring a bottle to fill at one of the five pumps for a drink rich in calcium, sodium and other health-giving minerals.

**Essentials**

Hepburn Springs is 115 kilometres from Melbourne, and the Daylesford region is particularly beautiful in its spring and autumn finery. A 60-minute bathing session at The Retreat costs from \$65 (non-guests) ▶



COVER STORY



\$49 (hotel guests). Hotel stays cost from \$299 a night. See [peppers.com.au](http://peppers.com.au), [mineralspa.com.au](http://mineralspa.com.au)

**Alba, Mornington Peninsula**

**The lowdown** Fifteen hectares, 31 pools, a celebrity chef and day spa, the new Alba is an eye-popping \$100 million investment in Victoria's wellness scene. Its waters, which reach up to 43 degrees, are drawn 550 metres below ground from the same aquifer as its neighbour, the Peninsula Hot Springs, and is cleaned and sent back into the aquifer to aid its longevity. Opened in late October, it initially banned mobiles, but its Brutalist architecture is so striking – let's just say the phone ban has quietly faded away.

**Go well**

As well as outdoor bathing pools, Alba's 22 spa suites offer everything from a simple pedicure to a full-day hammam ritual featuring facials by Vanessa Megan.

**Spend the night**

There's no accommodation onsite at Alba, but its collaboration with Peninsula hotel royalty, Jackalope, is ample compensation. Stay two nights at the nearby art hotel, which uses Alba's salts, body oils and lotions into the hotel for an in-room self-care ritual using Jackalope's Japanese baths and infrared sauna; \$1500 for a couple for two nights. See [jackalopehotels.com](http://jackalopehotels.com) The group is negotiating other accommodation packages for a range of budgets.

**Don't miss**

Bathrobes are de rigueur at Thyme, the all-day, Mediterranean-inspired restaurant by Melbourne chef Karen Martini. Her dishes range from light, healthful pannacotta and poke to her fish sandwiches and a tangy chicken schnitzel. A glass of Quealy's sparkling pet-nat, Splendido, is a must-have accoutrement, regardless of the time of day. The restaurant is also open to non-guests.

**Essentials**

Fingal, on the Mornington Peninsula, is 96 kilometres from Melbourne. It costs from \$110 to visit the 22 public geothermal pools, including locker, towel and robe. Alba's time will come in the cooler months, when the sun is lower. In summer, the sun-shy should opt for early or late bathing times. See [albatheathermalsprings.com.au](http://albatheathermalsprings.com.au)

**Hepburn Bathhouse, Hepburn Springs**

The lowdown Hepburn's famed public mineral springs are set in a reserve overlooked by an Edwardian pavilion, built in 1908, which, with the addition of a modern bathhouse, comprises the Hepburn Bathhouse. Soak in the large mineral pool heated to 33 degrees, and a 35-degree spa pool. For adults-only serenity book the Sanctuary, where a steam room, salt and magnesium pool, a cold plunge, hammam and outdoor spa pool await those over 16.

**Go well**

Victorians have been taking the waters here for generations. For total relaxation, choose a mid-week visit, out of school hours.

**Spend the night**

Set in bush beside the springs, the bathhouse's own accommodation comprises luxury villas and apartments, with yoga gear, an exercise corner and salts and scrubs to use in marble tubs. Stay two nights and receive a local produce hamper.

**Don't miss**

The gracious old pavilion is also home to the spa treatments area: book in an organic facial with Australian Vanessa Megan or Italian-made Comfort Zone products.

**Essentials**

Hepburn Springs is 115 kilometres from Melbourne. General entry costs from \$55 (90 minutes), stays from \$329; the Hepburn region puts on a vivid show in autumn that's best observed through the pool's floor-to-ceiling windows. See [hepburnbathhouse.com](http://hepburnbathhouse.com)

The same as it ever was



BEN GROUNDWATER

The girl next to me is tucking into a Styrofoam container of mango sticky rice, drizzled with condensed milk. Motorbikes and tuk-tuks zip past metres away, belching fumes into the warm evening air. Crowds push through the market nearby.

"What is there to do in Laos?" she asks the girl next to her. "I'm just hanging around here till my money runs out, then I'll have to go home. But I could maybe do Laos first."

I'm not meaning to eavesdrop – we're sharing the same rickety table, three strangers plonked onto the only spare seats, you can't help but overhear conversations. My tablemates are young foreigners, one Australian, one Dutch, swapping tips on South-East Asia, trading stories, figuring out their next moves.

They're having, in other words, the same conversation all travellers have. The same conversation we've been having since people first picked up backpacks and booked tickets overseas. The same conversation that has taken place in every hostel and street-food market and tacky bar across the world. Where have you been? Where are you going? These conversations write themselves.

And I have to tell you: I love it. It's all the same, and I love it.

I haven't been on the banana pancake trail in a while. Pre-pandemic I was living in Spain, and mostly travelling to Europe. Then there was that two-year halt on overseas travel. Then life just got in the way. It's been five years or so since I hung out in South-East Asia and soaked it all in.

And now I'm in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, and the backpackers have returned. They're everywhere and they're instantly recognisable.

They're all still wearing the baggy elephant-print pants that no Thai person has every worn in their entire lives; the cheap Beer Chang singlets or the "Same same but different" T-shirts. They have a few more tattoos, but that's about the only difference. They're still hanging out in street-food markets, hostel lounges, Australian and English-themed bars with pool tables and cheap beer. I walked past the Downunder Pub & Bistro one day and thought, 'huh, as if you would'. That night it was packed.

The travellers are still a mix of nationalities and personalities: Canadians

with flags on their backpacks, English lads who look and sound like Jack from *White Lotus*, Australians being way too loud and obvious.

As a reformed backpacker, someone who used to do all this stuff like 20 years ago or more, I have a feeling you're supposed to sneer at everything I'm seeing in Chiang Mai today. You're expected to shake your head at the lack of imagination in the modern-day backpacker, to point out you did it first and now it's boring.

That's not my reaction. It warms the cockles of my now responsibility-weighted heart to see that backpacking – in South-East Asia at least – is the same as it ever was. I'm jealous of the girls talking about where they're going to go next, how they're going to spend their money until it's gone and they have to go home and work before they can travel again.

People my age weren't the first to wear Thai fisherman pants and drink the last of our money away.

They were doing that in the 80s, and 70s, even the 60s. It really doesn't matter



if someone's done it before. If you haven't done it, that makes it special. Backpacking doesn't need to change.

Still, I'm sure plenty has been altered in today's experience. Social media now drives so many decisions and even alters behaviour.

Everyone wants that one photo (I've seen Instagram shoots happening at the city gates in Chiang Mai, where travellers walk through flocks of pigeons, I guess hoping to stir them up and get a shot of flapping wings and smiling faces and ancient splendour).

Everything is recorded now too. Every wild night out is logged on multiple devices. You probably have to be more careful of what you get up to. Internet access also means that all of that information we used to swap on the travellers' grapevine is at your fingertips now. Just google it.

Yet you still overhear those classic conversations: where have you been, where are you going. And still, everyone wears the same clothes, goes to the same venues, does the same old things.

You love to see it.

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