



# In search of serenity on Victoria's luxury spa circuit

*In the search for a moment of pure indulgence and luxury there is often a disconnect between the aesthetic and authentic peace.*



This is one of many pools spread across the grounds of Alba Thermal Springs & Spa, including geothermal ones and cold-water plunge pools.

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**T**urning off the main road, the Alba Thermal Springs & Spa rises into view as a man-made monolith, confounding in its scale. The ultra-modern concrete facade is spare, imposing, industrial; a Bauhaus mean girl poised against a windswept hillside.

We park alongside electric vehicle charging stations crowded with sleek black Tesla Model Xs and cross to a perfectly weathered wooden pathway. The muted grey-green tones of exquisitely maintained tea-tree brush and Australian natives hug the pathway up to an imposing maw of dark glass.



The imposing Alba Thermal Springs and Spa on the Mornington Peninsula. *Courtesy of Hayball Architects*

The Alba opened on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula late last year, one of several new hot springs to pop up on the Victorian luxury spa circuit. Peninsula Hot Springs is directly across the road; Metung Hot Springs opened this year; and two more are set to open on the Great Ocean Road and Phillip Island.

The complex reportedly cost \$90 million to develop and was designed by Australian architectural firm Hayball. Whatever else we could say about it, from an architectural standpoint, the building is a poem of clean lines and scale; by turns dramatic and surreal, playful and serene. The real delight is the way the designers have played with scale and space.



Alba has 31 pools in total, each of which has been configured to match its surrounds, such as this secluded one.

Water is drawn from a natural aquifer and pumped to 31 pools of which nine are for private hire. They include salt baths, geothermal, cold-water, and herbal-infused pools – arranged across 15 hectares of perfectly manicured native grassland and garden.

We're here as a treat for my husband's birthday. We decided in January that 2023 was going to be a year of indulgence and self-care. My internet sleuthing has told me Alba should fit that bill.



A staircase beneath a light well adjoins an internal pool. The building is dramatic in scale and sculptural in form, inside and out. Willem Dirk du Toit/Hayball

The day we're here, the sky is pure white and the wind whips the hillside, bringing with it all the freshness of nearby Bass Strait. It makes the forecast 22 degrees feel more like 18. It's brisk, but that's ideal when you're planning to submerge yourself in water up to 43.5 degrees in temperature. There is also a sauna and steam room at our disposal.

We wonder to ourselves how the facility draws patrons over the summer months. It's hard to imagine bisquing oneself in a cauldron on a 27-degree day – the average for Mornington in January. At least there are a few icy plunge pools scattered among the bunch to cool off in. The limited choice on a hot day might make the lead-in \$80 entrance fee feel a little ridiculous, though.

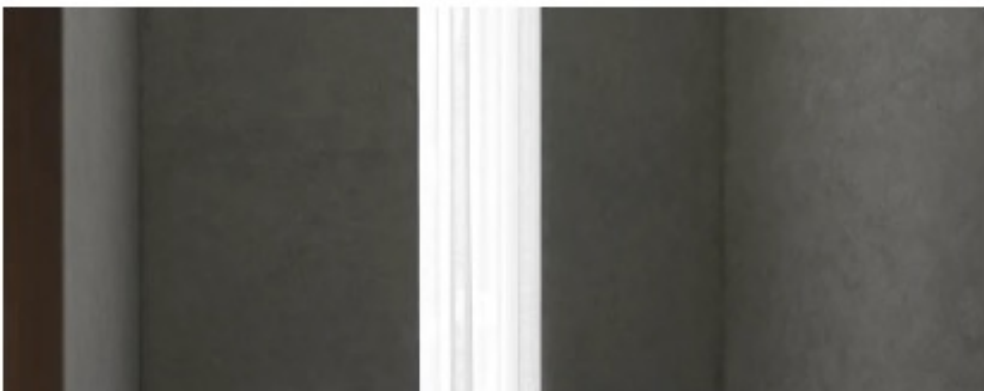
Perhaps the place clears out a bit and is more exclusively used by customers of the full-service spa and high-end restaurant, Thyme. That would be nice. Alba may limit the number of guests to 400 at a time, but it feels like there are way too many people here.

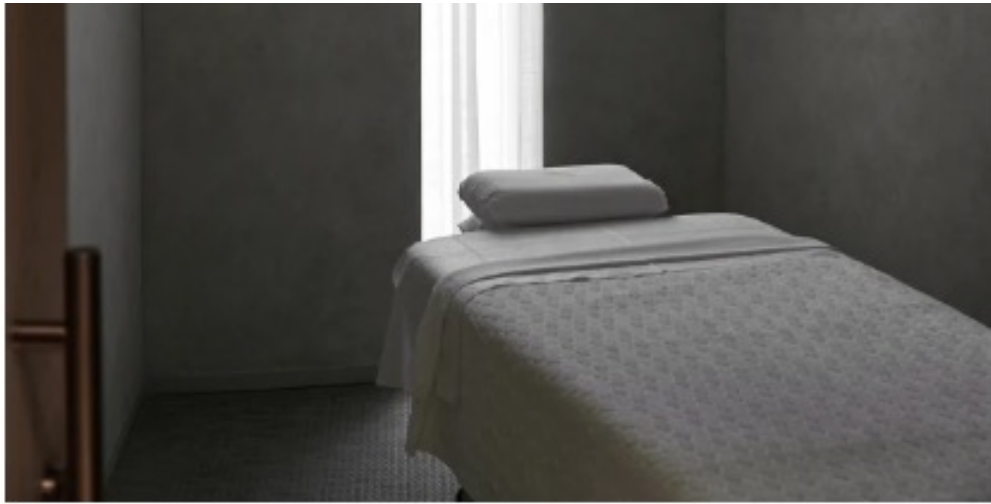


On a busy summer's day, pools and spa tubs are often shared with other visitors.

Couples and small groups (of mainly women) cluster in the mineral pools or wander, clad in Alba's signature fluffy white robes, over the tidy, spare landscape. We look like pilgrims, or perhaps supplicants is a better word – each doing our best to play our part in this cult performance of peace and relaxation.

Phones are supposedly prohibited on the grounds but bikini-clad women pose in beautifully formed concrete entryways, a foot in the water, a glance back over their shoulders at husbands and partners poised at the ready with their smartphones and filters. Half don't even get into the pools they're posing at; they just meander off – presumably in search of their next Instagram moment.





One of the 22 spa treatment rooms. *Willem Dirk du Toit/Hayball*

The Alba website celebrates the location as a “sanctuary of stillness” and it’s true there is silence – but it’s enforced by an uncomfortable proximity to the other patrons.

Lying in any of the collection of small pools, we conscientiously avoid eye contact with the others, lips sealed, no casual conversation. We’re five couples crowded into a sculptured grotto, the waters growling in the drains around us as we stare up at a perfect circle of alabaster sky. We’re two couples lying like beached whales in a shallow outdoor pool. We’re three couples neck deep in a jetted tub. We’re never more than a metre apart from a perfect stranger.



Spa treatments at Alba include Aika Affusion: a full-body salt exfoliation followed by a warm Vichy shower.

The moments when we do find ourselves alone in a pool we can feel what this experience has the potential to be. Maybe solitude, rather than silence, is what we truly desire.

The spa is another story entirely. Back inside the main building – a vast concrete space, – we climb a flawless, chalk-white spiral staircase under an enormous, dazzling light well. At the top we meet our Saint Peter, an attendant who ushers us through giant black doors to a runway of sand-coloured daybeds facing out to another windswept landscape.

Received by our therapists, we're led through a warren of black corridors into dimly lit treatment rooms (there are 22 in all); I am rubbed all over with hot stones and given a million-stage facial that is absolutely the high point of the entire visit.

Afterwards, we drink herbal tea on the daybeds and gaze out at the colourless sky.

We're seated for lunch in the restaurant, Thyme, where the grey tones are softened by furnishings in ochre hues. The menu, featuring locally sourced, seasonal produce, is created by Melbourne chef Karen Martini.



A view from Thyme, the on-site restaurant. Willem Dirk du Toit/Hayball

It's recommended to change into your robe before dining and so the devotees are uniformed in white here too, some with hair still slick from

bathing. Through yet another wall of glass we watch other cult members toddle around the grounds. The service is slow, but when the food does arrive, it is piping hot. There is a kind of pleasure in eating truly hot food, although admittedly some dishes are more successful than others.

The zucchini fritters with saffron labneh are divine. The beef udon, on the other hand, is all presentation. It is quite an experience to eat something that looks so beautiful and yet tastes of nothing at all.

## Need to know

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- ◆ Alba Thermal Springs & Spa, 282 Browns Road, Fingal. Tel: +03 5985 0900; bookings at | [albathermalsprings.com.au](http://albathermalsprings.com.au)
- ◆ Springs Thyme dining package | includes meal and springs access: \$190
- ◆ Alba Antidote spa package | includes springs access, hot-stone back massage, essential express facial and foot and scalp therapy massage: \$355
- ◆ Springs access only | from \$80
- ◆ Alba is open 7am to 10pm seven days a week.