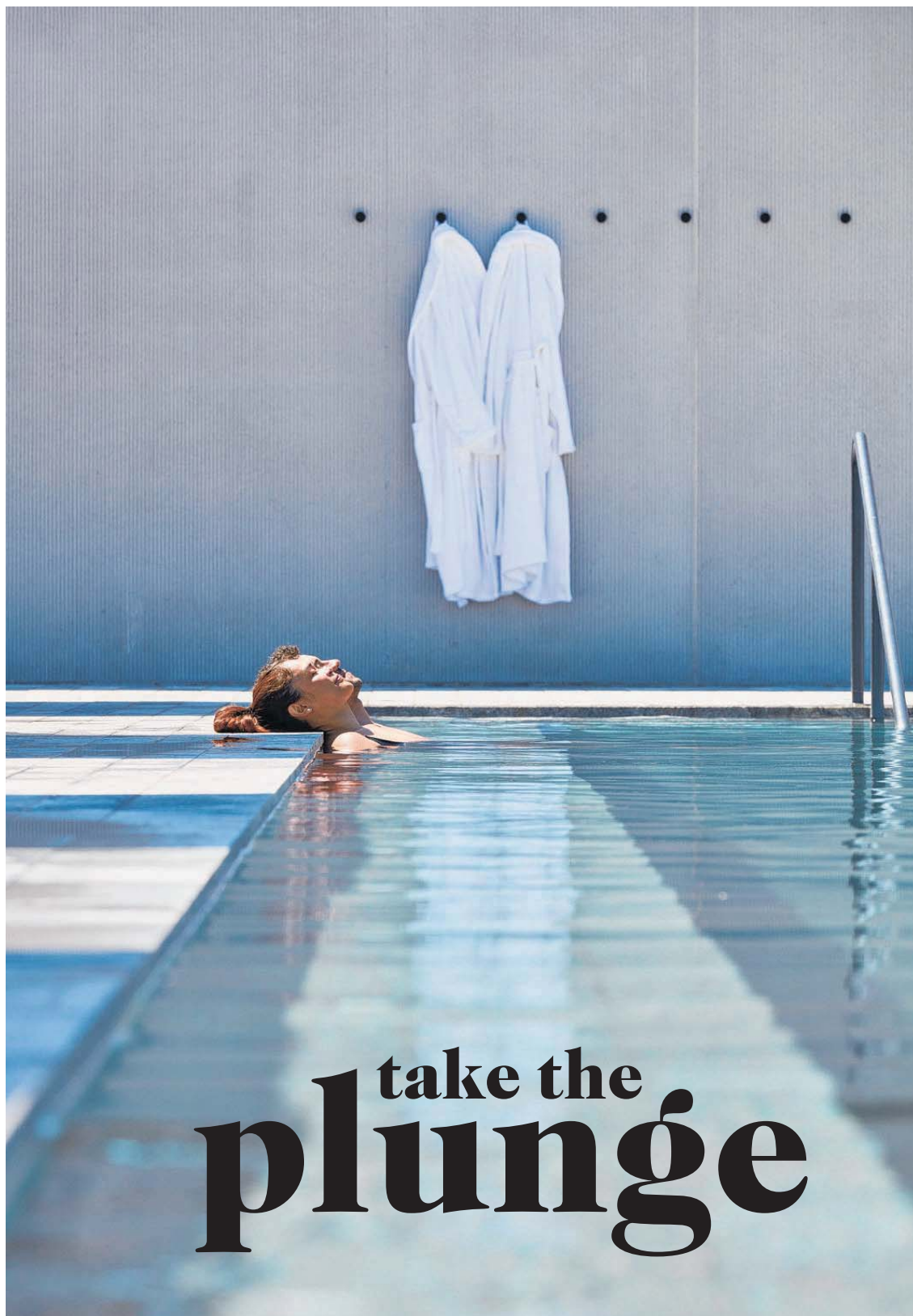




16 MAY, 2023

Take the plunge

New Zealand Herald, Auckland





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Australia is synonymous with the beach but with cold weather on the horizon, it's time to think about steamy spa baths. The Great Victorian Bathing Trail is a road trip that will knead away every winter nigggle, writes Neil Porten.

Australians have taken to swimming like a platypus to water. From Broome to Bondi Beach, they're a nation that seems to be permanently in boardies or budgie smugglers. In Victoria, plans are afoot to capitalise on this aquatic obsession with a bathing trail linking sea baths, geothermal hot pools and spa-based bathhouses.

I was happy to dive in and test the waters, taking a road trip south from Melbourne along the coast to Sorrento.

After a session in the sauna and a memorable dip in the infinity pool 64 floors up at the new Ritz-Carlton Melbourne hotel, the beaches of St Kilda visible and the Mornington Peninsula somewhere in the haze, I was ready to quit the city to see the clear waters of Port Phillip Bay from sea level.

The coast-hugging roads, State Route 33 to Mordialloc and then SR33 to Mornington are slower but more interesting than the inland motorway. Port Phillip Bay is calm, reflecting the white-cloud sky.

At the St Kilda Sea Baths, the 25m seawater pool is heated for year-round swimming. After your laps, you can soak in the hydrotherapy spa pool and then enjoy views of the bay from the lounge.

A few minutes south, the Brighton Baths Health Club, an institution since 1881, appeals to harder swimmers with its saltwater pool set at sea temperature. But in the winter months, you can couple your cold-water regimen with some time in the oceanfront eucalyptus-scented aromatherapy steam room.

Right along this metropolis-adjacent shoreline, commuter villages offer opportunities to rest and refuel, with vistas of yachts, fishing kayaks and dinghies pootling on the water. On this Sunday drive, I'm sharing the road with

many cyclists, in both sleek and lumpy lycra, while dog-walkers, joggers and chiselled runners training for some ultra-event jostle for dominance on the footpaths.

At Mornington, I reconnect to the most coastal route, pit-stopping at the clifftop Mornington Park to enjoy the view back towards Melbourne, the skyscrapers murky in the distant haze. It's less than an hour to Sorrento from here following the southernmost curve of Port Phillip Bay. Multicoloured beach huts at Dromana and campers among the seafront gumtrees in

Rosebud show the connections Victorians have to the water.

The limestone heritage buildings of Sorrento offer boutique shopping and dining, fishing charters and day cruises leave from the pier, and if the calm waters of the bay are too sedate for you, a drive over the crest of the peninsula takes you to the surf beaches of Bass Strait.

I'm staying a night at the swankily refurbished Intercontinental Sorrento hotel, perched for the views out to sea. The interiors are by Oscar-winning costume designer Catherine Martin, who took inspiration from the Baz Luhrmann movies *Strictly Ballroom* and *The Great Gatsby* — Luhrmann is Martin's husband. But it's the resort-like exterior pool deck where you'll want to flaunt your best swimsuit.

Flaunting aside, the hotel's best-kept bathing secret is underground at the Aurora Spa. The recently opened bathhouse is a marble-walled complex of pools and rooms perfect to indulge the life aquatic.

Attendant Angelina is on hand to explain the suggested procession, beginning with a cleansing ritual: grab a handful of salt — white or pink — mix with a few squirts of body lotion then, working from the lower body up, rub the goopiness all over your skin to exfoliate before rinsing off in the shower.

Scoured and showered, the sky-lit daydream pool is the first of the three magnesium-rich heated pools to try. It has a pool-length lounging framework and push-button bubbles that froth around the neck and shoulders. The shallower reflexology pool has a central sitting area and fist-sized smooth stones line the floor to activate the pressure points of the soles of the feet. Water jets and swan-neck fountains massage the back

and shoulders in the vitality pool.

Alternating hot and cold is a recommended



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hydrotherapy I can't say I've embraced warmly. Submersion in the icy plunge pool literally and figuratively leaves me cold. But the six steps in — slowly and deliberately — taking time to read the instruction sign while chest-deep in heart-pounding chilliness, then another six slow steps out feels character-forming. Once at least.

Just reward is a restorative laze on a heated ceramic lounge before heading to the thermal suite. My favourites are the heat of the sauna and the tropical humidity of the aroma steam room. But I'm intrigued by the promised respiratory benefits of the halotherapy room — a recreated salt cave — and the glacial mist room, which has a tray of shaved ice and one button for "wind" and one for "rain". I finish my 90-minute session under a sensory shower, another hot-and-cold combo with added scent and soothing sounds.

Sensory pleasure of the gastronomic kind is just a few steps from the bathhouse at Scott Pickett's restaurant Audrey's. In a beautiful space with a peek of the bay, lingering here for a long seafood-prominent lunch is a great idea. Sydney oysters, Western Australian scallops, Moreton Bay bugs, spanner crab, squid, john dory — a pan-continental feast sommelier Virginia was happy to match with Victorian wines, including a Crawford River Riesling from the Thompson family winery, a Shaw + Smith M3 Chardonnay, and a Chambers Old Vine Muscadelle from Rutherglen.

I was tempted to bathe for a final time that

day, in the deep tub in my room in the hotel's heritage wing, overlooking the roofs of the old town, but I was saving myself to enjoy the final stop of this brief pool-hopping trip.

The dunes and scrubland of an old farmstead in the Fingal countryside have been transformed into the oasis retreat that is Alba Thermal Springs and Spa. On arrival, the main spa building's stark concrete, glass and metal heft is softened by its curves and partial embedding in the hillside. The landscaping of indigenous plants and accessible paths snaking up and through the contours of the hilltop creates a connection between the 31 pools, which vary enormously in their size, temperature, form and setting. Naturally heated underground aquifers refill the pools every day with water containing

magnesium, potassium, sulphur and calcium.

After shucking off the hard shell of my outside existence in the serenity of the deluxe changing facilities, I don a soft white bathrobe and join the other acolytes for a hydrotherapeutic pilgrimage. Loungers and umbrellas line The Dunes, a long pool with a hoist for accessibility. A central feature of the layout is the hook-shaped Cascades Waterfall, with a pool at the bottom and another at the top, and views across the Mornington Peninsula. The Shell is a pool of privacy behind tall concrete walls. I slip into The Falls just as a light shower passes over, negating the need for the pool's own rain-effect apparatus.

At the top of the hill, I hurry past the icy plunge pool into the low Hemisphere building to savour the heat in the sauna and steam rooms. Over the crest of the hill, the three pools of The Forest are set in native gardens.

You can stay as long as you like in this tranquillity, pool-hopping, or enjoying a meal with other contented, robed patrons in Thyme restaurant. Then you could indulge in a treatment in the spa . . .

For my first-ever spa experience, I've opted for a modest Sole Smooth foot and lower-leg massage. Up the wide cylinder staircase, the relaxation lounge is where I'm offered herbal tea and a moment to contemplate before my therapist, Sunny, leads me to the treatment room.

I say yes to the eye mask and the headphones, which play a recorded meditation. Sunny begins by placing heated towels on my legs, then starts a gentle exfoliation of each lower leg and foot. By now I'm so relaxed it's possible I'm snoring while awake, but I'm just conscious enough to fully enjoy the soothing massage.

It's unfair to have to leave. It is with immense reluctance that I must drive back to Melbourne, this time along inland utilitarian motorways, out of view of the sea. The only water now is the drab autumn rain on the windscreen, a pair of damp boardshorts scrunched up in a corner of my suitcase. But luckily, the Great Victorian Bathing Trail looks to be going from strength to strength. So when I'm by this way next time, I'll be taking the plunge again.



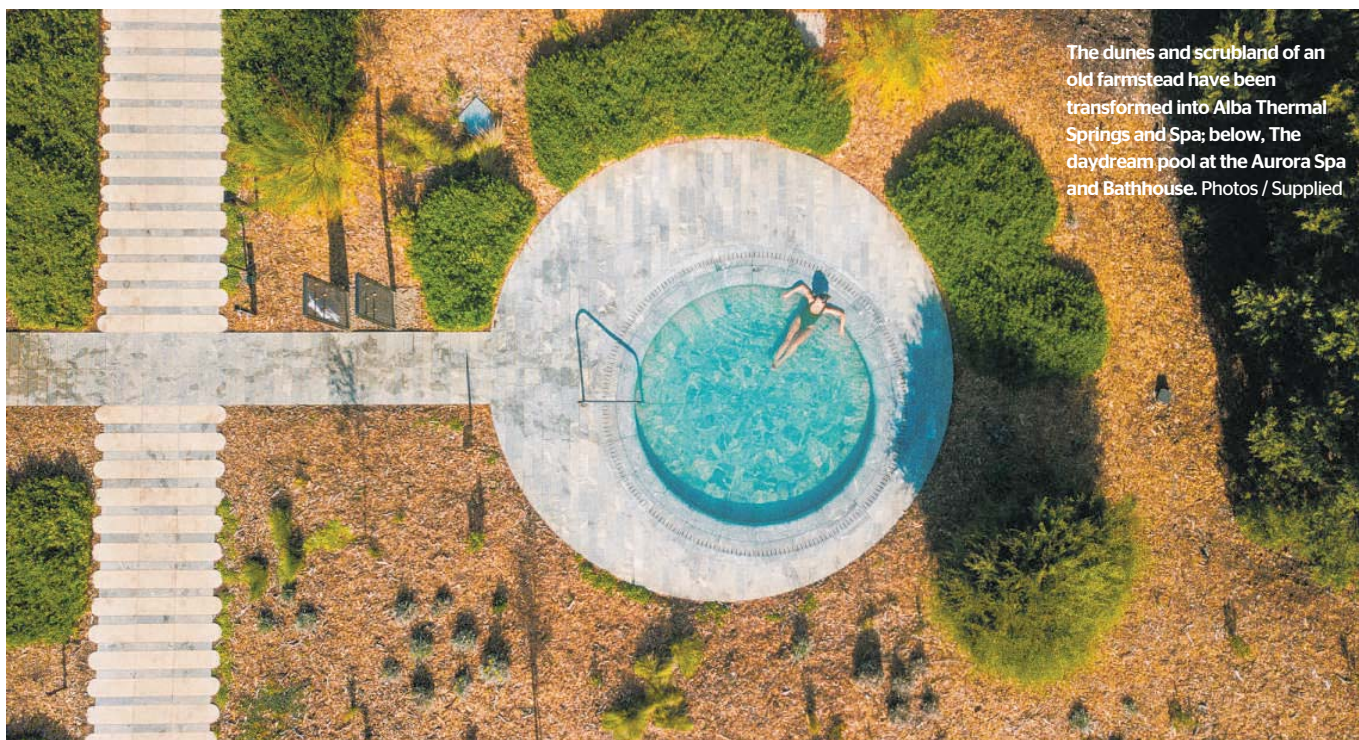
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The dunes and scrubland of an old farmstead have been transformed into Alba Thermal Springs and Spa; below, The daydream pool at the Aurora Spa and Bathhouse. Photos / Supplied.

Checklist

MELBOURNE

GETTING THERE

Air NZ, Qantas and Jetstar all fly direct from Auckland to Melbourne. The drive to Sorrento via Mornington takes a little over 2 hours (non-stop).

DETAILS

visitmelbourne.com

