



## IN THE KNOW

The Sanctuary studio rooms start from \$650 and villas from \$950 a night, which includes entry to the hot springs, breakfast, complimentary mini bar and private pool experience. All public buildings and pathways are wheelchair-accessible, as are several pools.

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# COCOON OF CALM

## A new retreat offers shelter from the storm on the Mornington Peninsula

LINDY ALEXANDER

The winter solstice has just passed, and with it comes the promise of lengthening of days and sunshine. But with wind lashing the trees and rain sweeping past in restless squalls as I drive to my accommodation, it seems the weather hasn't got the memo.

As soon as I step inside The Sanctuary however, the tumult outside recedes. Inside, a log fire is crackling and soft music is playing. My shoulders drop instantly.

Alba Thermal Springs and Spa sits on the traditional lands of the Boon Wurrung and Bunurong people, tucked into 15 hectares of bushland on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula. The Sanctuary, perched high on a ridge, is Alba's new luxury retreat, comprised of five freestanding villas and two studio rooms (one is wheelchair-accessible), with sweeping views across the rugged landscape.

Villa three is my cocoon of calm. The palette is neutral, with the organic hues of soft sand and warm taupe reflecting the coastal surrounds, while the floor-to-ceiling windows frame the bushland that presses in close. A textured curved wall gently separates the bathroom from the main space, which is gloriously generous. The pillowy king bed, soft throw on the sofa and flicker of the fire all add to the sense of being utterly secluded and tucked away.

Although the mineral hot spring pools are just down the hill, I'm immediately drawn to the deep stone bathtub, sitting in front of the wide window, perfectly placed for soaking and watching the foliage sway outside. Outside, the balcony overlooks verdant greenery and would usually be an invitation to

linger, though today the weather keeps me firmly inside. The bath will also have to wait because there's a knock on the door. Alba's courtesy vehicle has arrived to take me to the spa.

I've booked in for a Body Balance ritual, a new 90-minute treatment that begins with a brisk rapadura sugar and rosepetal scrub, leaving my skin supple and butter-soft. After a warm shower, there's a slow, deep massage with a nourishing body balm. By the end, it's hard to peel myself off the table.

Still blissed out from the treatment but more than ready for dinner, I head to Thyme, Alba's onsite restaurant. It's warm and lively inside, with the lights glowing against the dark outside. I start with a 2019 Blanc de Blanc from local winery Ten Minutes by Tractor and it's one of the best sparkling wines I've had. The menu, created by Karen Martini and superbly executed by head chef Mario Di Natale, leans into bold modern flavours – think smoky miso eggplant with a tang of black vinegar; a towering fish sandwich with a crisp, golden fillet and savoury rice cakes studded with local mushrooms, sweet corn and puffed wild rice.

The desserts tick all the boxes too. They're perfectly balanced without being overly sweet – the chocolate delicie with coconut caramel and Sichuan peanut popcorn clusters leans into its savoury notes and the "three-colour drink" take on rice

The Sanctuary, main; bath, top right; The Cove, below



pudding is redolent of Southeast Asian treats, with its coconut crème, pawpaw spheres and shard of sesame brittle.

There's no path leading directly from the restaurant and hot springs complex to the villas, so guests either need to request a courtesy pick-up for the ride back up the hill from the very obliging staff or drive the short distance themselves. Back inside my villa, my drapes have been drawn and a small box of chocolates sits on the pillow. Although the fire has dwindled to coals, the space really does feel like a sanctuary. I settle in and run the bath, ready to unwind into the evening.

In the morning, I wake to an indecisive sky. One minute clouds race across the moody, bruised horizon and rain falls, then the light shifts and hints of blue break through. I've chosen to dine in for breakfast and call down to reception with my order. Before long, a green smoothie arrives accompanied by thick rounds of house-made crumpets with tiny white figs, honey and mascarpone, and avocado on grainy schwarzbrötchen bread. It's the ideal fuel for a day in which I intend to do very little. From my windows, I watch mist rise from the pools beyond, and decide it's time to finally slip into the thermal waters.

I head to The Cove, a sheltered circle of steaming water edged by low-lying bushes that I could partially see from my villa. I slide in, and have the distinct feeling of being like a duck in reverse: above the surface the wind whips the trees and the air bites, but beneath, everything is languid and toasty warm.

The Salts is next, a private float pool reserved by the concierge as part of my stay. It reminds me of a concrete silo, only in miniature, with a shallow pool of silky, mineral-rich water and a domed roof overhead. The salt composition means I float in zero gravity, eye mask on and inflatable pillow under my neck, only vaguely aware of time passing. When I finally take off the mask, I see a rainbow arcing across the glass above. It's an unexpected delight in the middle of a dreamy, weightless soak.

Once showered and dry, I gather my things and close the door on my villa, my skin still soft from the salt and rose. Wind-ing away from Alba, the Mornington Peninsula delivers one final blast of wild weather for the road. It occurs to me that some places are simply made better by the elements, and The Sanctuary is one of these. I drive away, leaving the wild outside, but carrying the calm within.

Lindy Alexander was a guest of Alba Thermal Springs.