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Luxury villas up the relaxation ante at this top Victorian hot springs

The just launched accommodation at Alba spa on Melbourne's Mornington Peninsula provides another good reason to overnight in the region.



One of the five new villas at Alba spa

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Steamed, soaked and sitting fireside, the therapeutic effects of Alba Thermal Springs & Spa on Melbourne's Mornington Peninsula are taking hold. I'm here to stay in one of the five new luxury villas opened in this 15-hectare hub of geothermal bathing. Given my state of stillness, I'm grateful that the new additions mean I don't have to leave.

The villas, launched in June along with two studio rooms, are undeniably lovely. Simple, private and elegant, they are set on a ridge in native bushland with floor-to-ceiling windows, balconies and sweeping views. Villas 4 and 5 look across to Arthur's Seat, with and faraway glimpses of the bay. Villas 1 to 3, which have stone baths in their ensuites, look over the spas.

Each has a king bed, heated towel rails, Bang & Olufsen bluetooth speakers, and unusually, an actual fireplace with real fire.



Each villa has a proper fireplace.

It makes the wind and sleeting rain – perhaps the one thing Melbourne luxury providers cannot fully overcome during winter – almost seem

romantic. Not so much while using the outdoor, geothermal pools but more on that later.

Opened in late 2022, the Alba complex is striking for its brutalist architecture and highly regarded for its restaurant, Thyme. Across the road are the better known and longer-running Peninsula Hot Springs, which can claim credit for kick-starting the local thermal bathing craze back in 2005. Alba's neighbour has its own accommodation in the form of eco lodges and glamping, generally a cheaper and more family-friendly proposition.



Each of the five villas has a king bed.

Further along is The Continental Sorrento, The heritage hotel relaunched under the InterContinental brand in late 2022 after a \$120 million renovation, and includes the indoor but equally impressive Aurora Spa & Bathhouse.

Kadi Morrison, director of sales and marketing at Alba, is understandably proud. While Victoria's Daylesford is known as spa country for its iconic

Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa, Morrison claims the alternative offerings on the Mornington Peninsula only serve to make it more attractive. And while Melbourne's Yarra Valley is best known for its food and wine, Morrison isn't alone in claiming that the Peninsula has its measure there too.

Plus, throw in several of the country's best golf courses – The National, The Dunes, St Andrews, Portsea and Moonah Links to name a few – and there's something for everyone.

Despite this, Morrison says more than 80 per cent of Alba's visitors are Melburnians on day trips or getaways, predominantly drawn from the city's wealthy south-eastern suburbs for special occasions like girls' weekends, birthdays and wedding anniversaries. Most interstate and international visitors tend to put the two-hour drive to the penguin parade at Phillip Island and/or the five-hour drive to the 12 Apostles via the Great Ocean Road higher on their list.

But the Peninsula – or the Ninch, as it is better known to the locals – is fighting back with its unique offerings. The nearby Jackalope Hotel, spa and fine dining restaurant is perhaps the closest alternative to Alba and continues to draw rave reviews and bookings long in advance. Point Leo Estate [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/what-might-a-huge-red-pumpkin-be-doing-at-a-victorian-winery-20231114-p5ejyc>]'s restaurant, Laura, and sculpture park have been another big drawcard since the Obamas visited for lunch in 2023.

Morrison says many visitors draw a comparison between the Pt Leo Estate and the aesthetic of Alba. And indeed, using the geothermal pools and treatment rooms at Alba does feel a bit like wandering through a sculpture park, except that you are the piece of art being moulded.



The architecture at Alba as part of the appeal. **Willem Dirk du Toit/Hayball**



The pools at Alba are fed by an underground aquifer.

Unfortunately, on the afternoon and morning I use the pools, it is cold, wet and windy, making me a soggy subject. The most common exchange I have with other guests is whether I have found any warmer pools.

Alba says its pools are naturally heated to between 37 and 43°C, and filled only with geothermal waters – rich in minerals like sulphur, calcium, magnesium and potassium – from aquifers 550 metres below the surface.

The steam and sauna rooms, with floor-to-ceiling windows over the bush, are the most popular option during my visit. An adjacent spa, tucked away from the wind within a concrete bunker with carved openings to let in glimpses of bushland and light, is the place to be.



The spa is the place to be on a winter's day.

The other clear hotspot is Alba's restaurant, Thyme, where diners enjoy red rice bowls and the signature Karen Martini-designed fish sandwich in their white robes.

Everything is genuinely local. Cape Schanck Olive Estate supplies the vegetables and herbs. Miller's Bread Kitchen provides the loaves. Pressed juices, Three Bays mineral water, craft beers, cocktails incorporating local brewers like Jimmy's Rum and great local wines fill the drinks list.

Guests who stay over are rewarded with a complimentary minibar with Ten Minutes by Tractor wines, as well as Aesop amenities and daily access to the hot springs.

In a move that emphasises hedonism over wellness, I'm asked during a morning hot-stone massage, whether I want a glass of champagne. A \$500 package of champagne and caviar is also on offer.

Not on offer is a deep-tissue massage. Alba prefers relaxation and indulgence. Who doesn't need that?

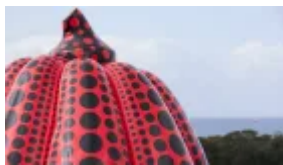
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Need to know

- ◆ Getting there | Alba Thermal Springs & Spa, at 282 Browns Road, Fingal, is a 90-minute drive from Melbourne's CBD or 105 minutes from Melbourne airport.
- ◆ Rates | From \$950 a night for a villa, including public bathing and breakfast.
- ◆ Packages | The \$195 Springs Thyme package includes hot springs access and a meal at Thyme. The \$320 Alba Artisan package including hot springs access, a one-hour massage, locker room access and tea.
- ◆ Hot springs only | weekdays \$95, weekends \$135. Open 7am to 10pm seven days a week.



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