



Getting Warmer

In the Australian state of Victoria, a new wave of modern bathhouses and hot spring facilities is reviving a therapeutic tradition.

— by Judy Chapman

I have long been an advocate of bathhouses and thermal spas. When immersed in mineral-rich spring water, you simply feel really, really good. Your breathing and heart rate slow down, your skin softens, and your nervous system settles into a state of calm abandon. Communal bathing also brings people together in a convivial and uplifting way, and these days, any time spent away from digital devices is a welcome respite.

Australia has seen a revival of interest in bathing traditions in recent years, and nowhere has the trend yielded such wonderful results than in Victoria, a

STILL WATERS

Clockwise from above: A spiral staircase leads to the treatment rooms at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa; calming decor in the reception area of Sense Of Self; a hammam treatment at Alba.





state blessed with an abundance of natural thermal water. Take **Sense Of Self** (sos-senseofself.com), the newest and biggest bathhouse in Melbourne and for my money, the city's best place to decompress. Opened in 2021, it's hidden away in an old brick warehouse in inner-city Collingwood. Co-founders Mary Minas and Freya Bewick traveled the globe to gather inspiration for their venture, bringing together Moroccan, Japanese, Mediterranean, and Scandinavian bathing rituals under one roof. The entry fee is good for two hours: ample time to complete several circuits of the facilities, from the warm mineral bath (the size of a small swimming pool, it's kept at muscle-melting 39°C) and Finnish sauna to the freezing-cold plunge pool. In-between your steams and dips, chill out and drink tea in a communal relaxation zone filled with natural light and tropical plants.

The interiors, appropriately, are beautiful and soothing, combining natural materials like terra cotta and travertine with curved rendered walls, brass fixtures, and rose-gold tapware. Capacity for the bathhouse is capped at 24, so there's plenty of personal space and the energy feels harmonious. I

COMFORT ZONE
Clockwise from
from above left:
The shop at Aurora
Spa & Bathhouse;
an Aurora spa
treatment utilizes
a hydrating facial
mist; changing
rooms and a cold
plunge pool in the
bathhouse at Sense
Of Self, which
occupies a former
warehouse on the
edge of Melbourne's
Collingwood area;
geothermal bathing
pools at Metung
Hot Springs.

also love that they offer "Quiet Mornings" on weekdays — silent hours that allow you to really switch off and regenerate.

As much as I adore Sense Of Self, Victoria's most exciting new bathing spots have popped up well outside the city limits. Topping the list is **Alba Thermal Springs & Spa** (albathermalsprings.com.au), which debuted last October on the bucolic Mornington Peninsula, about an hour's drive south of downtown Melbourne. Long a popular getaway for its coastal walks and vineyard visits, the peninsula has also drawn visitors for its thermal pools and hot springs, but never with the atmosphere-driven appeal on display at Alba. The main spa building, designed by Australian architecture firm Hayball, sits partially embedded in a hillside, its curving expanses of concrete appearing more like an art gallery than a wellness center. With its sunken courtyards and minimalist aesthetic, it's gorgeous. But the real art on the display is the surrounding 15 hectares of native gardens and regenerated bushland, throughout which are scattered 31 geothermal pools. Each of these is unique in terms of temperature, size, and style. There are warm pools, cold pools, herb-infused

botanical pools, and even private rooftop salt pools, and as passes for the springs are good for the entire day, you can take your time sampling them all.

Alba's 22-room day spa offers everything from Ayurvedic treatments to cryo facials. One highlight is a traditional hammam ritual in which you are rubbed down with a kese mitt, scrubs, and serums. Another pleasant diversion is the food at Thyme restaurant, curated by renowned Melburnian chef Karen Martini. Described as Asian flavors accented with Mediterranean undertones, the menu is equal parts healthy and indulgent — a crumbed fish sandwich with nori tartare, say, or chai-spiced tiramisu. The best part is that there's no dress code; showing up in your robe and slippers is almost *de rigueur*.

A short drive away in the coastal town of Sorrento, the historic Continental Hotel is the new home of the **Aurora Spa & Bathhouse** (auroraspa.com.au), previously located in Melbourne's St. Kilda neighborhood. Owned by local wellness pioneer Lyndall Mitchell, the reimagined facility may occupy a subterranean space, but it takes the modern bathhouse concept to new levels of serenity and sophistication.

Visitors follow a circuit of 10 different bathing

experiences, all set at varying temperatures to treat your body to the benefits of contrast hydrotherapy. Among them are a reflexology pool, an aroma steam room, a salt-infused halotherapy suite, sensory showers that alternate hot and cold water alongside different scents and sounds, and a "glacial mist" room set between 6 and 10°C. In between dips, there are thermal relaxation lounges to sink into. I finish my visit with the spa's signature Himalayan Sound and Stone massage, which uses percussion sound and warm Himalayan pink salt stones to lull you into a deep state of bliss. Treatments at Aurora have always been excellent, and this one is no exception. I fall asleep within minutes (always a good sign).

Some 300 kilometers to the east of Melbourne on the shores of the Gippsland Lakes, another newcomer is making a splash with geothermal waters drawn from 500 meters below ground. **Metung Hot Springs** (metunghotsprings.com) is a glamping and bathing destination set among 12 hectares of coastal wilderness near the quiet holiday town of Metung. A sister property to the Mornington's long-standing Peninsula Hot Springs, it offers a range of spa treatments inspired by Aboriginal healing traditions alongside nature trails and low-key locavore dining at the adjacent Metung Country Club.

The various pools, of course, are the main attraction, especially those perched on the edge of an escarpment overlooking Lake King. Here, individual bathing barrels filled with steaming 40°C water are the perfect perch to soak up the tranquil views. There's also a stone-clad pool that invites nocturnal bathers to lay back and gaze at the stars.

Each of Metung's 10 safari-style tented suites — four of which back onto a freshwater lagoon — also come with a pair of barrels, giving overnight guests the chance to bathe in solitude around the clock. Immersed in my own tub, it doesn't take me long to feel calm, connected, and content — at least for the moment. ☺



COURTESY OF AURORA SPA & BATHHOUSE; MARTINA GEMMOLA (2); RIKKI-JO MOLINARO