

Victoria, Australia leads in wellness tourism with its growing hot spring destinations, offering stunning bushland landscapes and rejuvenating thermal waters for travellers seeking relaxation and holistic health benefits

Words **Shermian Lim**

A woman in a white dress stands on a white architectural structure that extends over a body of water. Above her is a large, circular structure with a wooden panel design. The scene is captured in a cinematic style with soft lighting.

Time for a dip



Melbourne is undeniably perfect starting mid-March, as Australia's autumn months begin to unfold.

If you are like me and like to book travel plans six months ahead, now is the time to start organising your adventures in Melbourne. Ushering in a welcome reprieve from the scorching summer heat, events and festivals light up the season, from the renowned Melbourne Food and Wine Festival to the colourful celebrations of Holi. You might also indulge in Melbourne's top dining hot spots – Gimlet, Freyja and St. Ali's, to name a few – discover fantastic artisan finds at the South Melbourne Market and definitely clock in more than 10,000 steps checking out the city's trendiest neighbourhoods.

Lately, I've been seeking more than just days of city exploration in my travel itineraries. Like many other travellers now, I set aside time to unwind and indulge in a bit of self-care before flying home. So I shift gears and head out to geothermal bathing spots on the Mornington Peninsula, considered some of the best in the region. Known for its vineyards, beaches and scenic coastal landscapes, this popular destination is just a 90-minute drive from Melbourne – perfect for a few days of relaxation and reset.

As global wellness trends continue to flourish, hot springs in Australia's Victoria region have become an integral part of the wellness travel movement. The Great Victorian Bathing Trail – a renowned 900km tourism route that links hot springs, mineral springs and sea baths along Victoria's southern coastline – is a testament to the region's commitment to wellness tourism. Economically, it's a wise bet: by 2027, global wellness tourism is projected to be a trillion-dollar industry.

Spanning across Victoria, the trail connects various hot spring destinations, each offering unique experiences that cater to different aspects of well-being. The region's geothermal waters are famed for their mineral-rich content, which is believed to have various health benefits, including improving circulation, reducing stress and aiding in detoxification. This natural allure, combined with picturesque settings, has positioned Victoria as a hotspot for everyone – especially worn-out, 9-to-5 career professionals – seeking a holistic wellness experience.

AT THE PENINSULA HOT SPRINGS, A SPRAWLING, 17HA geothermal mineral springs and day spa in Fingal on the Mornington Peninsula, offers bathers a splendid collection of over 70 globally inspired bathing experiences. Outdoor cave pools, barrel baths and other hydrotherapy pools with geothermal waters set at varying temperatures are especially inviting in the cool early autumn weather – ideal for relaxation and quiet reflection. Glamping and newly launched, luxury eco-lodges allow guests to extend their hot springs experience with stargazing and moonlight bathing.

Charles Davidson, Peninsula founder and Victoria native had first heard of reports of hot springs being found on the Mornington Peninsula in 1979, but it wasn't until he had his first onsen experience in Japan that he began to seriously investigate bringing bathing culture into mainstream Australia.

Previous spread:

The hilltop pool at Peninsula Hot Springs; staircase leading up to the Spa Lounge at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa

Clockwise from top

left: Halotherapy room at Aurora Spa & Bathhouse; a geothermal pool at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa; spanner crab crumpet at Thyme; bathing in nature at Peninsula Hot Springs





Left: Charles Davidson, founder of Peninsula Hot Springs **Below:** The store at Aurora **Opposite page:** Massage pool at Alba

"I was living in Japan in 1992 when I visited a mountain town called Kusatsu, which is known for its hot springs resorts and just over two hours by train from Tokyo," Charles recalls. It was the first time he had ever hopped into a hot spring, and with a view of a valley full of snow-capped forests and hilltops, Charles describes the experience as deeply cathartic, relaxing and enabling him to be one with nature. "I wanted to bring back the culture of bathing to Australia where people could enjoy natural hot water, which is like a gift from nature." By 1997, Charles and his late brother Richard had opened Peninsula Hot Springs, the first in bathing culture on the Mornington Peninsula.

A sense of community at Peninsula Hot Springs is apparent, fostered through wellness programmes like hot springs yoga sessions and overnight retreats. Meanwhile, the pinnacle of serenity is found at the hilltop pool, where bathers are surrounded by stunning, 360-degree views of the Mornington Peninsula. As I waded in, the stillness and silence of fellow bathers create a moment of solidarity – strangers in peaceful meditation and deep relaxation together, enhanced by the sun's warmth and a delicious breeze.

Other experiences include a reflexology water trail, Hammam steam bath, massaging mineral showers and cold plunge pools, the latter now gaining recognition for their health benefits. "Many athletes use cold bathing for recovery, circulation and overall well-being. It leaves you feeling invigorated and happy," says Charles. "Wellness is about mindfulness, one of Peninsula's seven pillars for a balanced lifestyle. The cold plunge is about staying in control – just jump right in and don't hesitate."

ALBA THERMAL SPRINGS & SPA IS just a three-minute drive north of Peninsula Hot Springs. The use of soft underlighting, curved concrete, earth-toned hues, ceramic tiles and wood panels highlight the facilities' sophisticated and serene design. It's complemented by native Moonah woodland grasses and shrubbery – like a medieval outdoor bathhouse with a distinct touch of

Australian bushland. Alba's sales and marketing director, Kadi Morrison, shares that the goal was to create a space for visitors to truly disconnect. "We encourage a no-phone policy, so people take time out from their busy lives – away from their emails."

As guests wander leisurely in luxurious white robes, they explore the 31 mineral-rich geothermal and forest pools – three more will soon be open – scattered across Alba's 15ha property, partially nestled within a hilltop once used as farmland. The semi-enclosed pool is a favourite among visitors, while the Eve pool, with its shallow waters, provides a serene spot to soak up the mellow rays of sunset. With naturally heated waters reaching up to 43°C, the pools offer a healing and restorative experience. And to extend the relaxation activities, a visit to the effortlessly chic and futuristic Alba Spa is a must. The spa lobby, featuring curved pod lounges and spacious sun beds, sets a calming tone for any of the 35 available treatments, which include full body massages, hydrating facials and Vichy showers.

For those with extra time at Alba, the experience doesn't have to end after the spa treatment. Pre-book one of the nine private pools on the Terrace that offers ultimate privacy while providing expansive views of Alba's other pools. Guests can also indulge in local wines and cheeses, part of Alba's popular food and beverage offerings. Reflecting on changing attitudes toward wellness, Kadi explains, "For many, the meaning of well-being shifted after Covid-19. It might mean disconnecting from your screen and your busy life, but it doesn't always mean eating kale and drinking green smoothies."

This ethos is reflected in Thyme, Alba's on-site restaurant. Curated by Melbourne chef and TV personality Karen Martini, the menu caters to all preferences, featuring indulgent options like spanner crab with whipped cod roe on a polenta crumpet, alongside healthier dishes such as the Buddha salad – a mix of greens, jelly noodles, shiitake mushrooms and toasted red peanuts – or the Alba bowl, comprising seasoned tuna, spring onions, avocado and cucumber kimchi over rice.

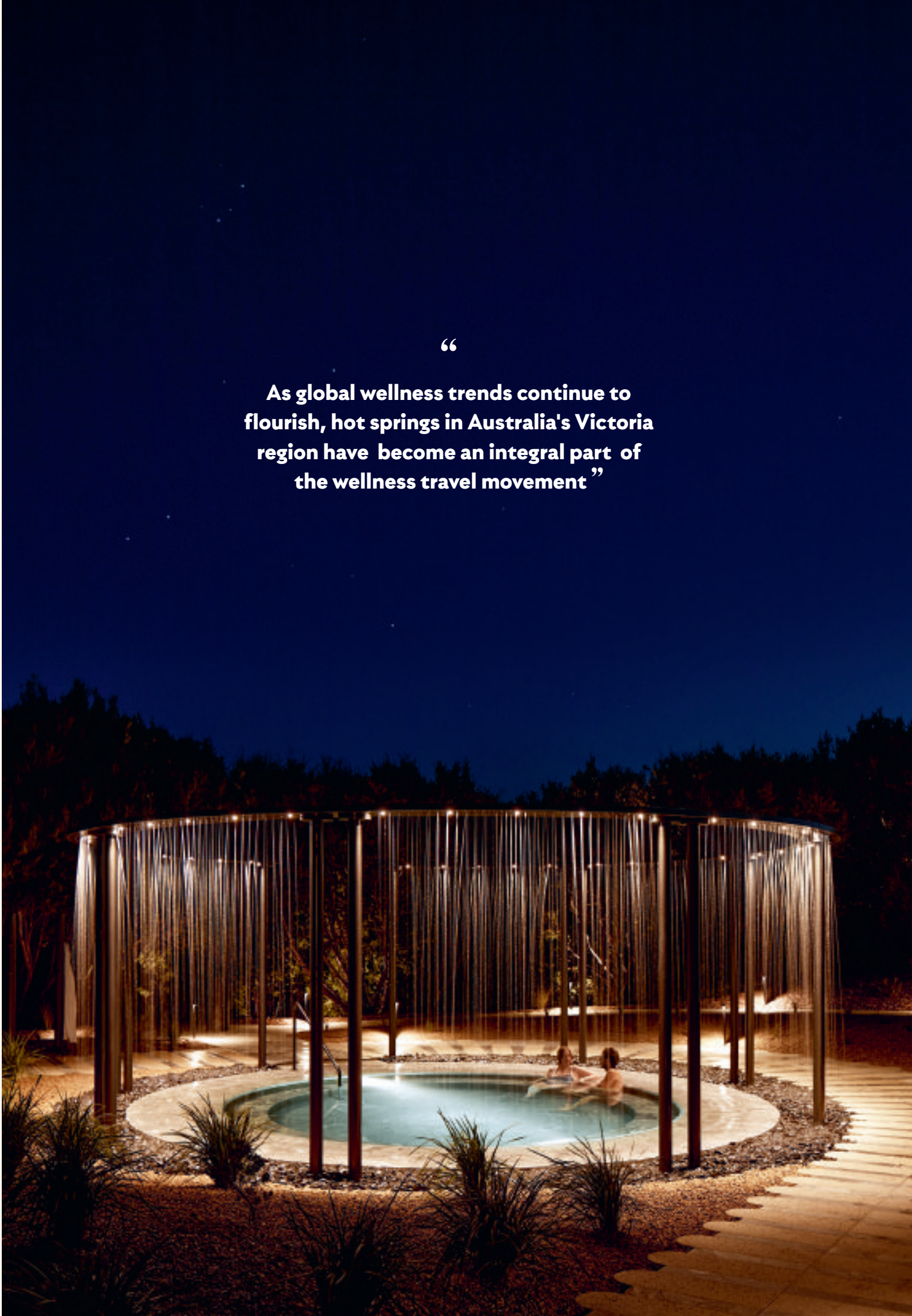
A SENSE OF CALM IN AURORA SPA & BATHHOUSE'S LOBBY

is palpable the moment you step through the entrance. Soothing botanical fragrances from the apothecary station, where customers can create custom salt scrub blends, fill the air. Designed by



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As global wellness trends continue to flourish, hot springs in Australia's Victoria region have become an integral part of the wellness travel movement”





Top: Lyndall Mitchell, founder of Aurora Spa & Bathhouse

Below: A hydrotherapy pool at Aurora Spa & Bathhouse

the award-winning architectural firm Woods Bagot, the space features neutral colours that create a warm and welcoming environment. Located behind the Continental Hotel Sorrento on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, Aurora's state-of-the-art, 500sqm bathhouse fits up to 60 guests at a time and is inspired by European-style bathhouses.

Aurora's bathhouse offers an immersive 11-step ritual, featuring aromatherapy steam, thermal beds, sensory showers, massaging pools, a glacial mist room, halotherapy, cold plunge and Nordic sauna. Guests can enjoy massages, body wraps and facials in eight treatment rooms, plus a private magnesium float room for ultimate relaxation.

Lyndall Mitchell, owner of Aurora Spa & Bathhouse and a 32-year veteran in the wellness industry, believes it's essential to show that places like Aurora offer more than pampering – they provide real therapeutic benefits. Techniques like hot-to-cold contrast therapy improve circulation and detoxify the body. "When people understand these benefits, they're more likely to make it a regular practice," she says. While wellness is often marketed as indulgence, its true value is in promoting overall well-being.

According to Lyndall, educating people about these benefits can shift their perception. In Europe, for example, bathing is integrated into healthcare, with rebates provided due to its recognised impact on well-being. Bathhouses and spas there are part of daily life, not reserved for special occasions. Instead of spending evenings at home, people connect with friends and family in these communal spaces, embracing a balance between work and enjoyment. In countries like Japan, the culture of bathing is similarly ingrained, with over 1,300 years of bathing history and traditions. It's a routine practice, akin to meditation in India, which is introduced to children from a young age.

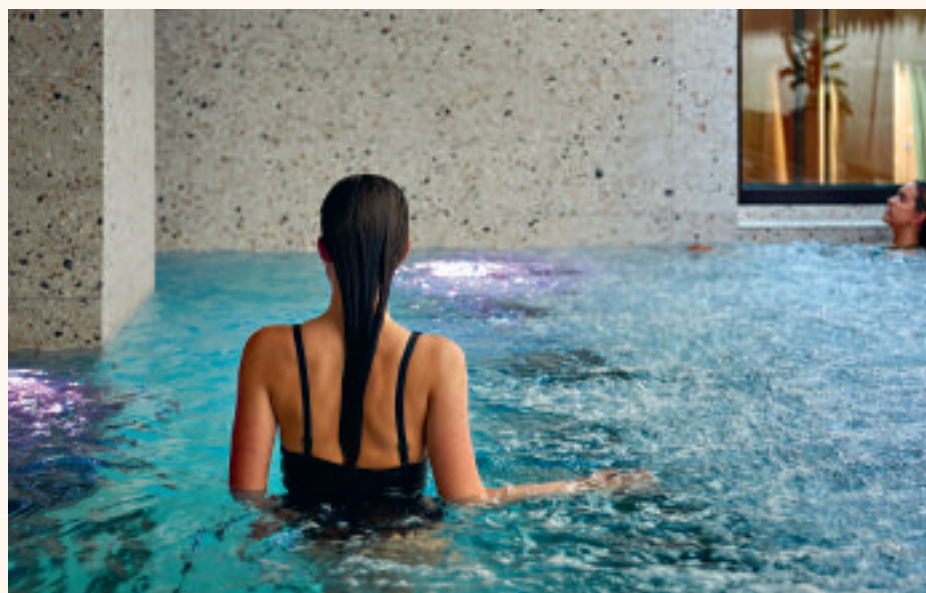
Although bathing culture is still developing in Australia, Lyndall sees a gradual shift in how people approach wellness. "When I first entered the industry, we didn't talk about wellness the way we do today," she reflects. "But in the past decade, I've been invited to speak at places like Macquarie Bank and other large corporations, where there's a growing interest in wellness for employees. It's taking time for people to adopt these practices, but once they do, they absolutely love it."



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Lon Retreat & Spa

At Lon Retreat & Spa, time slows down, letting you unwind in peace. Tucked away on 80ha of farmland, founder Claire Gemes transformed her sprawling family home into seven luxurious suites, each offering stunning ocean or rural views. While there, enjoy a therapeutic session in their award-winning spa, soak in the mineral-rich geothermal pool, take a brisk walk around the picturesque countryside or a 10-minute stroll through the woods towards the beach in the back of the property. lonretreat.com.au



Jackalope Hotel

Warm red brick walls contrast against jet black roofs, and a 7m tall, shiny black sculpture of a jackalope greets guests as they approach the entrance. Sleek dark interiors and contemporary art pieces create an atmosphere of luxury and creativity. Perched among vineyards on the Mornington Peninsula, a stay at one of the Jackalope's 46 bespoke rooms includes a sumptuous view of the infinity pool overlooking lush vineyards, and rustic breakfasts cooked-to-order and served in-room, if you like. jackalopehotels.com

Directory

Alba Thermal Springs & Spa
albathermalsprings.com.au

Aurora Spa & Bathhouse
auroraspa.com.au

Peninsula Hot Springs
peninsulahotsprings.com