

# Heaven on Earth

At the heart of Mornington Peninsula's beauty is Peninsula Hot Springs. Co-founder Charles Davidson shares what triggered his ambition to create such a dreamland as Danielle Ralph experienced it firsthand.



Today has been one of the most relaxing mornings of my life. I feel completely at ease having been pampered in a perfectly tranquil environment.

I'm at Peninsula Hot Springs, set on 17 hectares in the rolling sandy dunes of "The Cups" in Fingal (Rye). This is the place to discover yourself in a peaceful state. And it truly is the closest you can find to heaven on earth.

It's easy in today's society to feel trapped by obligations and responsibilities and to forget to reflect on the beauty of nature. Peninsula Hot Springs, inspired by Charles Davidson's thought to offer Australians that break to reconnect with themselves and others, lives up to his dream.

The kilometre drive up Springs Lane is the beginning of one's journey. While travelling to the

private location, the natural surrounds block out day to day agendas to simply be in the moment.

Upon arrival, the amazing development completely takes me by surprise. The private Spa Dreaming is adults only and offers a meditative bathe, whereas the newly added public Bath House is the more social setting with over 20 different bathing options.

There are now over 30 thermal spas in total at Peninsula Hot Springs, all varying in temperature. I venture to the top of the hill to find people bathing in the 360 degree view pool while looking over the entire property. Bliss.

The whole setting is like a peaceful maze. It's an exciting journey to experience the different bathing areas, if you can take yourself away from each one.

Back in dreamland, I take a dip in solitude as rain trickles from the green scenery and into the hot tub. The hot mineral spring water is flowing from an aquifer 637 metres below the surface. At 50 degrees Celsius the water rises through the bore to within 10 metres of the surface before being pumped to the pools.

In summer an aquifer of cold water cools selected areas to facilitate bathing all year round. For more heat I venture into the sauna, which looks like a secret cubby house hiding from reality in the Spa Dreaming Centre. A quick rinse brings my body temperature back down before my private bathing experience.

To completely escape, time alone listening to the rain fall while the body heals seems like the perfect combination. I'm greeted in the relaxation room where encouraging words, calming tunes,



comfy cushions and fresh herbal tea could keep me here all day before being politely escorted to my secluded thermal spa. I can even adjust the temperature of the water by releasing hot or cold streams. Chilled lemon water accompanies deck chairs, should I choose to lie out in the cool air.

A gentle bell rings when it's time to meet back in the relaxation room before a 60 minute Kodo massage. My masseuse, Margaret, tailors the treatment to my needs. There is nothing intimidating about the experience, which comforts and encourages me to relax and enjoy. It's time to give my body and mind a rest to rejuvenate and revitalise. I do just that.

My nose selects Reharmonise from three choices of Li'Tya scented oils, which aims to sooth, calm and strengthen the soul. It's excellent for nervous tension, digestive weakness and insomnia. My

nose knows me well! It's a combination of blue cypress, ylang ylang and native mandarin and works its magic on my skin with the help of gentle hands massaging my body.

Li'tya, meaning 'Of the Earth', emphasises living in the now. I don't want this now to end. The rhythmic body massage inspired by traditional aboriginal techniques hits the spot. I manage to let go of any inhabitation and enjoy the treatment at hand that almost sends me into a peaceful slumber.

Like white clouds, white robes float in and out of the relaxation room, to and from the thermal spas and treatment rooms and into the café, where a fresh berry smoothie and Moroccan chicken salad satisfies my insides with a flavoured punch. I can still hear the peaceful music linger and smell the scent on my body as I enjoy my meal, still

wearing my bathrobe – the only attire requirement in this little café. It's run by polite and efficient staff, who contribute to the mood of the facilities. It's here I sit to share my experience with you... but my mind drifts to already contemplating my next visit. My mind and body could get used to this.

For Co-founder and Director Charles Davidson, it was his first thermal mineral pools experience over in Japan in 1992 that began the journey to create this dreamland for Australia. Peninsula Hot Springs is in fact the first natural hot springs and day spa centre in Victoria.

"It was the middle of winter with snow all around the pools and I was lying out looking at the trees and the sky just so sublimely relaxed compared to the busy city life I had living in Tokyo at the time," Charles recalls. "All I could think of was



why don't we have this in Australia? Aussies love relaxation and this was the most relaxing experience I had experienced in my life."

He assumed there was no hot water in Australia seeing we are a flat continent without volcanos and earthquakes. But inspired, Charles visited numerous hot springs and spoke to geologists in Japan about the potential here in Australia... to no avail.

"Five years later while still in Japan I caught up with the Head of Victorian State Office after work one day and he asked me 'What do you want to do with your life?' I said I'd love to do hot springs and he said 'You know I think there is hot water on the Peninsula!'"

The ambition heated up, water was located, Charles' brother Richard joined the project and the property was purchased. Eight years of researching, testing, planning and developing saw the hot springs commence. Along the way Norm Cleland joined the team and together they invested a lot of effort into something that wasn't well known or easy, but has since become very popular. The risk paid off.

"We started with the Spa Dreaming Centre, which was the minimum we could build and test to see if Australians would enjoy jumping

in mineral springs and relaxing. Surely enough, they did. They've kept on coming in increasing numbers every year," he says.

That first facility opened in 2005 and was extended in 2009 to include the main Bath House. Accommodation is currently in progress to add to the established facilities that now enables Charles to live out his dream – one he never lost sight of and continues to relish in.

"At the beginning of the year I book myself and my wife in for a monthly massage for the whole year as part of our personal time together. We try to plan our diary around that. I'm also assessing what I'm getting as a not so mystery shopper," he says with a laugh. "I bathe twice a week, if not more. I try and have as many meetings as possible in the pools with friends and people I know well."

Utilising what he created is all part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle for himself and his family. Bright and early in the morning, Charles' eight year old daughter opted to bring her friends to Peninsula Hot Springs for her birthday. "We watched the sunrise in the top pool and slowly made our way down the hill. By the time we got to the bottom of the hill the girls were saying 'this is the best birthday party ever!'"

Through believing in what he fell in love with, Charles established, and can be proud of, a place that many people now too, fall in love with.

"I love seeing the multiple generations. You see a mum with her kids and parents and sometimes even the grandparents who come and do an activity together and they all get something out of it," he says.

"I also get great joy out of seeing teenagers who come here with a group of friends who would otherwise be down at the pub. They're sitting in the pools having a laugh, telling stories. It's a really nice social alternative. You're really getting back to community connection. It's like they are out of their comfort zone and getting that endorphin high. You get incredible conversations from being in a space of relaxation."

So whether it's taking time to relax on your own or with friends, there definitely is plenty of reason to afford the time to breathe in and enjoy Peninsula Hot Springs. "I'm always learning how we can add to and help the wellbeing of the community," says Charles. "We're slowly weaving more things in, offering more facilities as well as wellbeing activities. **There is something for everybody.**"

