

Stay in touch with nature

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Susan Gough Henly eases away the worries of the day with indigenous natural therapies.

On a blustery early spring afternoon, my teenage daughter, Alice, and I drive to the ball of Mornington Peninsula's foot. This is prime golfing country, but we are not in search of velvet greens but seek instead the "source", as they say in France, the underground springs that feed this lush landscape. A mere pitching wedge from the Moonah Links is the Peninsula Hot Springs, the inspiration of brothers Charles and Richard Davidson.

These are the first natural hot springs and day spa in Victoria and really the only hot spring in Australia that offers a full spa menu and a natural, yet sophisticated experience. (Hepburn Springs, for instance, has spring water but it has to be artificially heated.)

Charles became a convert to the relaxing and rejuvenating qualities of hot springs during the five years he lived in Japan. With Peninsula Hot Springs he has sought to translate a Japanese aesthetic into a natural bathing experience for Australian sensibilities, combined with indigenous healing therapies.

Peninsula Hot Springs works with spa care products created from organically harvested native ingredients, and traditional Aboriginal massage practices. Ya'itd-Midtung elder and medicine woman Anne Warren works with Peninsula Hot Springs therapists to ensure the authenticity of the therapies. Designed by award-winning environmental architect Gregory Burgess, the Peninsula Hot Springs, with public and private indoor and outdoor pools, rests gently in the rolling green landscape dotted with ti-trees, she oaks, and coastal banksia. More than 20,000 indigenous trees have been planted on the site.



We change into white bathrobes and slippers before our half-hour soak in one of the two private outdoor pools. There are also four public pools clad in the earthy tones of Castlemaine slate. Ranging in size and temperature, they are tucked among the shrubbery and trees so carefully you can barely see them. The largest is the Grotto at 38 degrees, the hottest is the Orchid Pool at 40-42 degrees. Cuckoo shrikes, fairy wrens, silver eyes and even an occasional wedge-tailed eagle provide the surround sound.

A gentle tinkling of a bell stirs us from our reverie and we are ushered into adjoining treatment rooms. Alice has signed up for a Li'tya Kodo, a full body Aboriginal relaxation massage to enhance the mind and body balance. I have decided on an age-old Maori massage that replicates the flow of ocean energy as a way to incorporate the rhythms of nature. As well as Maori therapies Charles Davidson has also drawn inspiration from the ancient Persian and Ottoman cultures. He has also replicated an Arabian tent for social spas.

My Makoha experience starts with masseuse Elaine placing a hot cloth infused with essential New Zealand oils (avocado, apricot, grape, Manuka, and putakawa) on my head and feet as I lie face up on the massage table. She puts smooth black volcanic stones, warmed by the hot springs, in the palms of my hands to help me connect with the natural world. She then pours warm oil over my arms and shoulders and sprays a mist of jasmine water to help cleanse the room and bring my senses to the moment.

She starts a pattern of deep breathing with long exhaling breaths, helping me breathe more deeply as my body slows into a calmer rhythm. Her strong arms never leave my body as she embodies the patterns of the ocean swell with her movements. Later she tells me that all the therapists she trains must swim with the dolphins and snorkel underwater to watch the way animals and plants move to the rhythm of the seas.

My daughter and I later agree that this Antipodean version of "taking the waters" and absorbing, literally, the wisdom of its ancient traditions could become habit forming.

Fast Facts

Peninsula Hot Springs, 140 Springs Lane, Rye, 5950-8777.

<http://www.peninsulahotsprings.com.au>. Public pools: \$15-\$30, private pools start at \$85 for a double. The Makoha and Li 'tya Kodo massages cost \$110.