



# The 'hottest' tourism and health product on the Peninsula

## Peninsula Hot Springs

by Tim Bracher

Back in 1997 I took a phone call out of the blue from someone at the Australian Trade Office in Japan.

I was helping run tourism on the Peninsula at the time and the enthusiastic voice on the other end of the line wanted to know if I'd heard anything about geothermal springs in the region.

Apparently, over an after-work beer in Tokyo, someone from the Victorian Government had mentioned in passing to the young Austrade official that trial drilling by the Department of Minerals and Energy nearly 20 years earlier had found hot mineral water on the southern peninsula.

Fast forward eight years and, this month, Charles Davidson's dream of introducing the Japanese obsession for heated mineral spas reaches fruition in the quintessential Aussie setting of beach and dunes behind Rye.

It's the first hot spring bathing facility in Victoria, and will eventually be the only one in Australia to integrate therapeutic spa, bathing, accommodation, food and beverage.

It's something of a home coming for the brothers Davidson – Charles and Richard – who not only spent their childhood on the Peninsula, but whose ancestors were the region's first permanent settlers in 1840. They were running the British East India Company on the Island of St Helena and had hosted Napoleon Bonaparte as their prisoner-guest on behalf of Queen

Victoria and the Empire. They even planted the Peninsula's first grapes.

Five years working for the Mitsubishi Corporation and Austrade in Japan was not only long enough for Charles to thoroughly absorb the Japanese lifestyle, but also to gain a local wife, Yuki. The result was not only two sons and two daughters, but a determination to blend the therapeutic and relaxation benefits of Japanese spa culture with the Aussie love for the outdoors. A look at spa resorts in 15 other countries provided the final knowledge they required.

The luxuriant 40 degree + mineral water at Peninsula Hot Springs flows to the surface from 637 metres below the gently rolling sand and pastoral country, into the nine pools and baths of the half-hectare complex set on a 17 hectare property.

In between shoulder-deep soaks in the slate lined pools, you can dine in the 'Mediterr-Asian' style café and juice bar, or partake of a range of treatments including every conceivable style of massage, mud baths, steam infusions and hot rock therapy. From \$18.50 a day (\$9.50 for children), it must be the cheapest path to earthly Nirvana this side of heaven.

The lengthy 'journey' for the Davidson brothers and their more recent business partner, Norm Cleland, has included extensive permits, frustration with financiers and drilling contractors, as well as trips to Japan with the architects to ensure that the complex perfectly captured the desired sense of serenity and harmony.

New Zealand born Norm left the international corporate world of Carter Holt Harvey to share the vision with the brothers.

Richard Davidson brought an environmental science background, which has ensured that Peninsula Hot Springs not only strictly complies with environmental regulations, but its extensive indigenous landscaping is helping to return a section of 'The Cups' to its pre-farming cover of taller trees, open grasslands and extensive flowering coastal plants.

The Davidson's interim venture, Mizu Spa, began in December 2000. Offering B&B accommodation, outdoor baths and massage services, it paved the way for what will undoubtedly be the 'hottest' tourism and health product on the Peninsula.

Don't worry if you happen to slip under and swallow a mouthful, because the EPA classifies it as 'potable' drinking standard and its mineral content is every bit as good as the famed central Victorian waters (see panel). 'Gatorade without the flavour' is how Norm Cleland describes it, so don't be surprised to be sharing your bath with



some of Victoria's elite sportspeople. The high levels of bicarbonate, sodium, chloride, magnesium and potassium provide health benefits similar to the famous spas of Europe, USA and New Zealand.

The source of the geothermal springs remains something of a mystery. It is thought that the water fell as rain in northern Australia, seeped deep into the ground and travelled slowly South over the millennia. It is estimated to be at least 10,000 years old and possibly much older. As the water passed through the various layers of rock and sand it became heavily laden in minerals, trace elements and negative ions.

The deep thermal waters rise close to the surface up through the Selwyn Fault Line, which runs across the granite outcrop that is Arthurs Seat. Occasionally light earth tremors are felt from the fault further encouraging the flows of the hot mineral waters. From their source the natural flow of the water is thought to come under immense pressure up from the fault out to Bass Strait.

The final bore was drilled to a depth of 637 metres through a variety of sands, limestone, marls, brown and black coal and finally to a basalt basin.

Chemicals are not needed in the water because of the continual flow through the pools. The total volume is naturally replenished every four hours, each pool is completely drained each night and, in true Japanese style, patrons are asked to 'shower and scrub' before entering the pools to provide the purest of bathing experiences.

The water emerges at 47 degrees, but the pools vary in temperature between a comfortable 38 and 42 degrees. Regardless of the temperature, a dip in the cooling plunge pool is not only recommended, but is usually sought by patrons after a prolonged soak. An indoor thermally heated pool is provided for occasions when the Bass Strait south-westerlies may deter all but the hardest of souls.

For those who seek both privacy and tranquillity, the Spa Dreaming Centre offers private indoor mineral baths and outdoor pools as well as five double massage rooms, a steam room and relaxation lounge.

R.A.I.A. 2004 gold medal winning architect Gregory Burgess was engaged to design the

main building. Elements from some of his previous projects, such as Brumbuk in Halls Gap and the Uluru Aboriginal Cultural Centre can be seen.

An emphasis on natural materials, Japanese simplicity, local sandstone and indigenous vegetation can be seen stylishly intertwined everywhere.

The shop sells bathing related merchandise and a large range of the Victorian-made Li'Tya Spa products, which use Australian plants and minerals.

Several local accommodation houses: Mizu, Hilltonia, Verve Beachside, 14 Nelson and Moonah Links, have been lined-up to provide overnight indulgence packages. Longer term plans for the complex include its own 130 room resort, a health centre and dedicated conference facilities. Close cooperation with the nearby golf courses is expected to bring a solid mid week trade.

Peninsula Hot Springs welcomes family groups, although children under 12 are required to be under adult supervision at all times. However, it's ladies – young and older - who are expected to be the backbone of trade, at least initially.

"It may take a group like the Hawthorn Football Club to show the men how beneficial and enjoyable it can be, but then it shouldn't be long before the local clubs are also making use of it", predicts Charles.

"It's well known in New Zealand that the All Blacks' secret weapon are natural hot mineral springs and that they always spend time after tours recovering at a spring - how else could a country of 3.5 million be so dominant in the world of rugby".

The complex is open daily between 9am and 7pm for casual bathing in the pools and pre-booked treatments. At night the whole complex is available for group and corporate bookings, allowing patrons complete use of the facility.

#### PENINSULA HOT SPRINGS MINERAL ANALYSIS

Bicarbonate (total)	mg/L	1163
pH		6.82
Ammonia (as NH <sub>3</sub> )	mg/L	2.7
Boron	mg/L	1.3
Bromide	mg/L	3.6
Calcium	mg/L	116
Chloride	mg/L	1432
Fluoride	mg/L	0.73
Magnesium	mg/L	90
Potassium	mg/L	64
Silica (as SiO <sub>2</sub> )	mg/L	23
Sodium	mg/L	868
Strontium	mg/L	1.7
Sulphate	mg/L	2.7
Total Mineral Count		3770 ppm

*Analysis conducted by the Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences, Wairakei Analytical Laboratory, Taup, New Zealand*



## Peninsula Hot Springs

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