



Chakra healer Ida Dayu Alit Sumiati at Raffles Bali, where the food is intricately designed and delicious.



of whom have a suite named in their honour.

After a strange pandemic in which some stranded families called the place home for months, the 1899 building is back and ready to show off. A two-year restoration that finished shortly before COVID-19 struck preserved the structure while embedding modern comforts like Wi-Fi, sophisticated lighting and sound-proofing.

The 115 all-suites hotel remains a big drawcard for Australians, many of whom choose to visit because their parents had done so a generation before. The staff are a stand-out at every turn, from efficient check-in to restaurants where personalities are allowed to shine.

You can't argue with the Raffles hotel take on what it describes as "luxury wellness". There's yoga beside the splendid rooftop pool, and organised activities such as a guided walk through Singapore's justly famed and UNESCO-listed Botanic Gardens. Our two-hour stroll ended with a quick meditation session in a colonial-era bandstand.

My stay included a trip to The Intan, a house museum dedicated to old Singapore and its Peranakan culture, a mix of Chinese and Malay. The visit included a mesmerising demonstration of Himalayan singing bowls. It was an odd juxtaposition that somehow worked.

As with Raffles Bali, this is wonderful place to just hang around on site for a couple of days. A corridor of framed photos shows past guests ranging from David Bowie to Queen Elizabeth II, and everyone seems to be having a good time. Just wandering the grounds is a lovely way to savour the hotel.

And when you're ready, the new, spacious on-site spa provides a signature facial that really does make you look better. I couldn't hear any birds during the 90-minute massage – but the technique couldn't be faulted.

Dining options include a choice of tasting menus – from France, chef Anne-Sophie Pic keeps a watchful eye on the Singapore outpost of her La Dame de Pic.

This is a restaurant confident enough to allow a sommelier to add a local beer to paired-wine progression. It's a nod to Singapore's famous hawker centres where beer is generally the only alcohol consumed with meals. Having the guy who helps make the beer pour it in a Michelin-starred restaurant in a hotel that's also an official national monument is a noteworthy experience.

Breakfast in the Tiffin room is much the same as it has been through the decades (though I'm sure the coffee has improved). The high-ceilinged space opens out to a courtyard complete with fountain that, like the palm court, has featured in countless wedding photos.

The hotel hopes the new options hatched under the wellness elements will attract both first-time and returning guests. It definitely works as an add-on to the traditional stopover for Australians bound for or returning from Europe.

After all, who doesn't want to live in a Somerset Maugham novel (but with much better food) for a while? **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Raffles Bali and Raffles Singapore.



**Need to know**

**Rates**  
Raffles Bali villas from \$US1300 (\$1926) a night; Raffles Singapore suites from \$US1000 a night.

**Wellness**  
Raffles Retreat Bali from \$US4933 (\$7372) for two people for a three-night stay. Treatments include the 90-minute 7-Chakra Balancing, from IDR3,000,000 (\$300), and the 90-minute signature massage from IDR 2,500,000. Raffles Retreat Singapore prices from \$55655 (\$6353) for two people for a three-night stay. The 90-minute signature gemstone massage is \$5390 (\$582).

**Getting there**  
If you want to double-indulge as *Life & Leisure* did, it's a 2½-hour flight from Singapore to Denpasar. Air Asia and Scoot run several flights a day.

**WELLNESS VICTORIA**

**Thermal therapy**

Alba retreat on the Mornington Peninsula has plenty of space, but sadly, not in the pools, writes **Rachael Bolton**.



Turning off the main road, the Alba Thermal Springs & Spa rises into view as a man-made monolith, confounding in its scale. The ultra-modern concrete facade is spare, imposing, industrial; a Bauhaus mean girl poised against a windswept hillside.

We park alongside electric vehicle charging stations crowded with sleek black Tesla Model Xs and cross to a perfectly weathered wooden pathway. The muted grey-green tones of exquisitely maintained tea-tree brush and Australian natives hug the pathway up to an imposing maw of dark glass.

The Alba opened on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula late last year, one of several new hot springs destinations to pop up on the state's luxury spa circuit. Peninsula Hot Springs is directly across the road; Metung Hot Springs opened this year; and two more are set to open on the Great Ocean Road and Phillip Island.

The complex reportedly cost \$90 million to develop and was designed by Australian architectural firm Hayball. Whatever else we could say about it, from an architectural standpoint the building is a poem of clean lines and scale; by turns dramatic and surreal, playful and serene. The real delight is the way the designers have played with scale and space.

Water is drawn from a natural aquifer and pumped to 31 pools of which nine are for private hire. They include salt baths, geothermal, cold-water, and herbal-infused pools – arranged across 15 hectares of perfectly manicured native grassland and garden.

We're here as a treat for my husband's birthday. We decided in January that this year was going to be one of indulgence and self-care. My internet sleuthing has told me Alba should fit that bill.

The day we're here, the sky is pure white and the wind whips the hillside, bringing with it all the freshness of nearby Bass Strait. It makes the forecast 22 degrees feel more like 18. It's brisk, but that's ideal when you're planning to submerge yourself in water up to 43.5 degrees in temperature. There is also a sauna and steam room at our disposal.

We wonder to ourselves how the facility draws patrons over the summer months. It's hard to imagine bisquing oneself in a cauldron on a 27-degree day – the average for Mornington in January. At least there are a few icy plunge pools scattered among the bunch to cool off in. The limited choice on a hot day might makes the lead-in \$80 entrance fee feel a little ridiculous, though.

Perhaps the place clears out a bit and is more exclusively used by customers of the full-service spa and high-end restaurant,

Thyme. That would be nice. Alba may limit the number of guests to 400 at a time, but it feels like there are way too many people here.

Couples and small groups (of mainly women) cluster in the mineral pools or wander, clad in Alba's signature fluffy white robes, over the tidy, spare landscape. We look like pilgrims, or perhaps supplicants is a better word – each doing our best to play our part in this cult performance of peace and relaxation.

Phones are supposedly prohibited on the grounds but bikini-clad women pose in beautifully formed concrete entryways, a foot in the water, a glance back over their shoulders at husbands and partners poised at the ready with their smartphones and

**I am rubbed with hot stones and given a facial that is the high point of the visit.**

filters. Half don't even get into the pools they're posing at; they just meander off – presumably in search of their next Instagram moment.

The Alba website celebrates the location as a "sanctuary of stillness" and it's true there is silence – but it's enforced by an uncomfortable proximity to the other patrons. Lying in any of the collection of small pools, we conscientiously avoid eye contact with the others, lips sealed, no casual conversation.

We're five couples crowded into a sculptured grotto, the waters growling in the drains around us as we stare up at a perfect circle of alabaster sky. We're two couples lying like beached whales in a



Left: Alba has 31 pools, including internal ones (above). Melbourne chef Karen Martini created the menu at Thyme, below.



shallow outdoor pool. We're three couples neck deep in a jetted tub. We're never more than a metre apart from a perfect stranger.

The moments when we do find ourselves alone in a pool we can feel what this experience has the potential to be. Maybe solitude, rather than silence, is what we truly desire.

The spa is another story entirely. Back inside the main building – a vast concrete space – we climb a flawless, chalk-white spiral staircase under an enormous, dazzling light well. At the top we meet our Saint Peter, an attendant who ushers us through giant black doors to a runway of sand-coloured daybeds facing another windswept landscape.

Received by our therapists, we're led through a warren of black corridors into dimly lit treatment rooms (there are 22 in all); I am rubbed all over with hot stones and given a million-stage facial that is absolutely the high point of the entire visit.

Afterwards, we drink herbal tea on the daybeds and gaze out at the colourless sky.

We're seated for lunch in the restaurant, Thyme, where the grey tones are softened by furnishings in ochre hues. The menu, featuring locally sourced, seasonal produce, is created by Melbourne chef Karen Martini.

It's recommended to change into your robe before dining and so the devotees are uniformed in white here too, some with hair still slick from bathing. Through yet another wall of glass we watch other cult members toddle around the grounds. The service is slow, but when the food does arrive, it is piping hot. There is a kind of pleasure in eating truly hot food, although some dishes are more successful than others.

The zucchini fritters with saffron labneh are divine. The beef udon, on the other hand, is all presentation. It is quite an experience to eat something that looks so beautiful and yet tastes of nothing at all. **L&L**



**Need to know**

**Alba Thermal Springs & Spa**  
282 Browns Road, Fingal. (03) 5985 0900

**Pricing** Springs Thyme dining package \$190  
Alba Antidote spa package \$355

**Hours** 7am to 10pm seven days a week

