

THE LORE OF THE LAND

INDULGING WITH
ABORIGINAL-INSPIRED TREATMENTS

by Giselle Whiteaker

The therapist strikes a match and there's a quiet crackle as the dried leaves catch, the nascent flame soon dampening into a smoulder. Aromatic wisps of smoke swirl from the coolamon bowl holding the blend of leaves, known as O'Yarung. Lying face down on the massage table, taking deep breaths as instructed, I can sense the movement of the scent as the bowl is slowly, carefully, and somehow thoughtfully rotated around me in an anticlockwise spiral. I imagine I can feel the smoke's gentle caress as it cleanses and purifies, signalling the start of the Kodo treatment at Peninsula Hot Springs on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, Australia.

Later, Aine Everett-Vance, Guest Experience & Operations Manager in Spa & Retail at Peninsula Hot Springs, tells me the smoking ritual is a sacred time, which is to be observed quietly with reverence and respect. "Traditionally, each Aboriginal community uses a specific blend of leaves, plants and flowers that varies according to the particular purpose or ceremony," she says. "We use this blend for purifying and cleansing within the smoking ritual that has been shared with permission by Ya-idt'midtung Elders."

This ritual is a small, yet significant, part of a set of three Aboriginal-inspired treatments available at Peninsula Hot Springs. Kodo, named after an Indigenous Australian word for 'melody', incorporates Aboriginal therapeutic techniques in a rhythmic massage that uses pressure point therapy to realign energetic flow and welcome deep restfulness. The Dreamtime Stone massage, developed in collaboration with a Kurradjie (Indigenous medicine man), features warm and cool stones that tell the stories of the various Australian locations where they were collected. This treatment is designed to cultivate inner stillness, quiet awareness and the art of dadirri (deep listening). Concluding the trio, is the Yinga deep tissue massage, a medium-to-firm pressure massage created in collaboration with a local Bunurong Elder that uses pressure point and stretching techniques to instil a sense of wellbeing that goes well beyond the epidermis.

The three treatments are different from each other, but also distinctive within the spa menu. Aboriginal healing techniques blending into a contemporary spa experience is a rare thing.





How did these treatments come to be?
“After purchasing the land on which Peninsula Hot Springs is located in 1997, we reached out to the local Aboriginal Elder Aunty Caroline Briggs to advise her of our vision for the land and how we wanted our guests to connect with the local environment to find relaxation and wellbeing,” says Charles Davidson, Co-Founder and Creative Director of Peninsula Hot Springs Group. “We knew the community with the closest connection to the land upon which the hot springs were located was the local Aboriginal community and we wanted to establish a respectful and collaborative connection.”

“We also developed a close relationship with the Aboriginal spa brand Li’tya, its founder Gayle Heron and her lead spa educator and Ya-idt’midtung Elder Anne Warren. Gayle and Anne worked closely on the development of the treatments and experiences, which derived from the sacred knowledge and medicines of the Ya-idt’midtung,” says Charles. “We were then trained in Li’tya spa treatments and offered a full range of massages, facials and body wraps that used Aboriginal-inspired modalities that both told a story and delivered incredible experiences for our guests. The heart of our offering came from the shared knowledge of the Elders.”

“The treatments we have agreed to share with Peninsula Hot Springs are from my ancestral knowledge and lineage that is within the Ya-idt’midtung language group in the Snowy Mountains,” says Midtung woman Anne Warren, who is an educator, healer, holder of Woman’s Medicine for her Country, voice of Grandmother Ancestral Wisdom, and owner of Larn’wa, which has taken the reigns from the now-defunct Li’tya. “The treatments have been created to help educate and raise awareness about Aboriginal Australia.”

How is the knowledge shared?

“The protocols, products and philosophy are passed on to the therapists during in-depth training on site,” explains Anne. “Therapists are encouraged to both give and receive the treatments so they can experience the subtle energetic connections and healings. The teachings in our philosophy and treatments remain our intellectual property and are only a part of our wider more in-depth information that is available to engage with.”

“As part of their education, our spa therapists attend in-depth cultural training with Larn’wa, where they are guided in how to facilitate a sacred Ya-idt’midtung O’Yarung smoking ritual, among many other important learnings,” says Anne.

What’s different about each of the treatments?

“The Dreamtime stone massage features a combination of warm and cool stones, and is designed for you to experience the restoring power of touch to promote whole body renewal,” says Anne. “Created in collaboration with Mooks, an Aboriginal Elder and medicine man of his people, this authentic treatment brings together Aboriginal Australian culture and botanicals.”

“The Yinga treatment, unique to Peninsula Hot Springs, and the Kodo treatment involve a collation of movements that are a combination of lymphatic drainage, deep tissue pressure point and spiralling movements that enhance feelings of balance, grounding, clearing and energising,” she continues.

“The sequences have been developed to synchronise closely with our understanding of how Ya-idt’midtung healing works,” adds Anne. “Everything is connected as an expression of energy. We work with this, moving from the inside to the outside, in spirals and circles, movements that enable release and connection.”





How does it feel?

The Kodo experience begins with the woody scent of smoke wafting past my nostrils – a far cry from the delicate florals usually in play – signalling that this no ordinary treatment. The smoking ritual lends a sense of gravity to the moment. Native ingredients may now be common in Australian spa products, but this is the first treatment I've found guided by Aboriginal healing. I inhale deeply and think of native scrub, of eucalyptus-scented summers, of growing up here in Australia and what that means.

The medium-pressure sequence of movements that follows is also far from the norm. The therapist's hands are in constant movement, the pressure consistent. The flow is hypnotic, each repetition guiding the way to a deeper state of relaxation. I can't tell where the sequence starts or ends and I lose all track of time, adrift in the moment.

Brought back to my senses by a gentle whisper, I stretch languidly and slowly slide from the table. I feel relaxed yet somehow energised, a feeling that stays with me for the rest of the day. That's the sign that I've experienced something special – an introduction to ancient healing that comes from the land and its people – and I can't wait to be part of it again. ■

Acknowledgement of Country

I pay my respects to the Boonwurrung/Bunurong peoples and their living cultural connections to the land and waters of the Mornington Peninsula, where Peninsula Hot Springs is situated. I recognise their unique cultural heritage, customs, spiritual beliefs and relationship with the land. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the communities in which I live, work and rejuvenate.