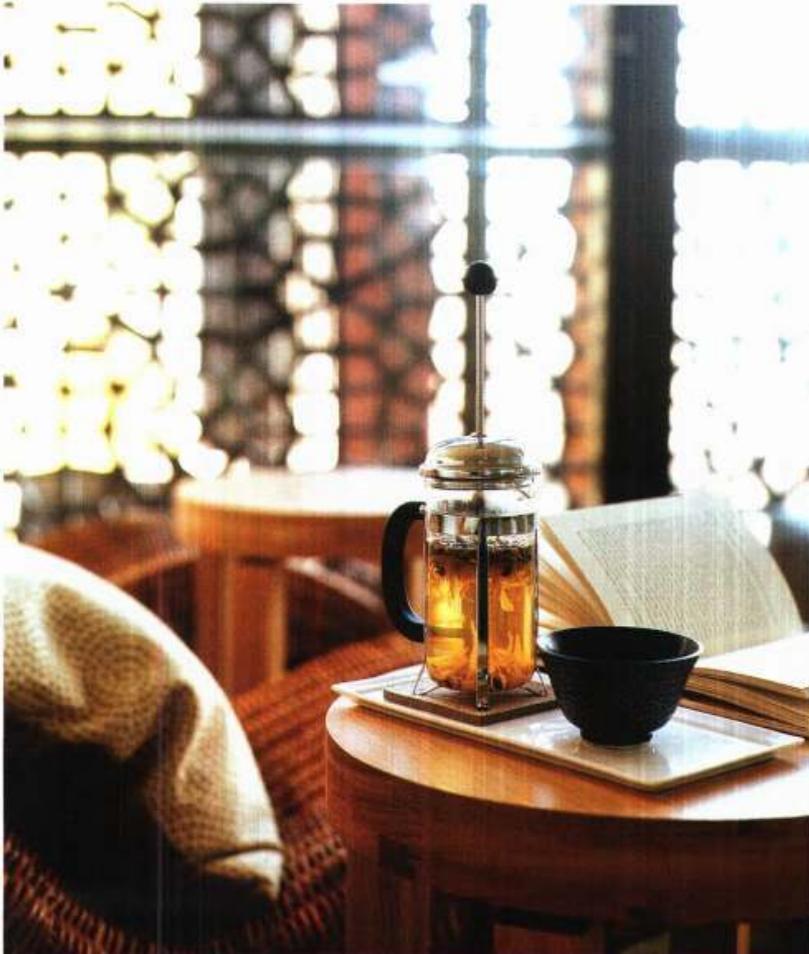




After Hours



So near and yet so far ... internationally regarded Aurora Spa Retreat in St Kilda is a short 20-minute tram ride from the city rush, but offers tranquillity a world apart.

More than *pampering*



MELBOURNE'S bohemian St Kilda suburb is a place of contrasts. Grandiose mansions butt up against run-down '70s-style apartment blocks. Heritage terraces showcasing wall frescoes neighbour modern feats of eco-architecture.

BMWs drive past patch-sprayed Geminis and mafia-style men with black coats and hats saunter by yuppies sporting boat shoes. The well-heeled rub shoulders with the well-intoxicated. A lady in a burqa drifts by, and in a salute to the bizarre, a family on penny-farthings cycle past.

As I arrive at the Prince Hotel, on the corner of legendary Acland and Fitzroy Streets, even the location appears a contradiction — the exterior of the adjacent Prince of Wales Hotel boasts live acts, giving an expectation of the smell of stale beer and rowdy crowds. But go around the corner and step inside the Prince Hotel and you discover a boutique-style reception of dark corners and exotic art pieces.

Make your way up the stairs to the glass walls running with water, enter the Aurora Day Spa, and that's where the contrasts end. Here it's just one smooth ride of luxury. Or wellness, as founding director Lyndall Mitchell says.

She prides herself on the business being about more than pampering. She says Aurora's point of difference with other day spas is their focus on long-term wellness, rather than short-term pampering.

"We listen to clients to ascertain where they need help, whether they are mums or corporate business

people. There is no one recipe. We take a more proactive approach and are more interested in making a difference in people's lives."

Lyndall says she advises staff to consider themselves as "doctors who are prescribers of wellness".

Her philosophy seems to be working. Aurora was voted last year by readers of *Conde Nast Traveller* as one of the top 10 hotel spas in Australasia and the South Pacific.

The attention to detail at Aurora is impeccable. Everything has been considered for visitors to escape the daily city grind, creating the feel of an oasis, a place to recharge.

I'm assigned a staff member who tends to my every need for the afternoon. She takes me to a quiet, sunny room and pours me a cup of herbal tea as I sink into a lounge seat. The coffee table beside me is laden with meditational/R&R books and a menu dripping with healthy snack options.

As I meld into my environment, layers of stress peeling away, I'm snapped out of my stupor: "What size shoe do you wear, Ma'am?"

My surprise at the question gives away my lack of experience in such opulent establishments ... Are they going to give me a pair of Manolos, I wonder.

"I'll just get you some thongs to slip on for the afternoon." (Well, the thongs were special — European made, massage-style.)

After changing into a robe, my first treatment is by a therapist from the Gold Coast's Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat. As part of a cross-promotional visit, two experienced

practitioners are offering specialty treatments during my visit.

She takes me into a warm, low-lit room, for a session of 'rockupuncture'. Once comfortable on a heated, contoured bed, she begins her therapy — a combination of acupuncture and hot-stone massage. She starts with small and painless needles in my stomach, to "centre the energy" and "tune" my body.

I then turn onto my stomach, and she inserts needles into my back — leaving them to do their work as she massages my legs and then back with the hot stones. She explains the stones are nourishing the acupuncture points, relaxing the muscles, and their weight is gently working on the lymphatic system — encour-

If you think day spas are purely about luxury, think again. Aurora Spa Retreat in Melbourne is setting itself apart as a 'prescriber of wellness' in the midst of city bustle.

**WORDS AND PHOTOS
BY ANNA THOMPSON**



aging the release of fluids that may be trapped in the skin level. Simultaneously, the needles are stimulating the flow of chi, or energy.

By the time she finishes, I've lost all sense of time.

Next I receive one of Aurora's signature treatments — Kitya Karnu (meaning "salty stones"). This one-hour treatment has been voted by international *Wallpaper* magazine as one of the top five spa body treatments in the world.

In my private steam room, lying on a foam mattress, I'm oiled, exfoliated and rinsed off with a fine mist. The cool stones run over my muscles are a welcome relief from the intense heat.

A gentle facial is followed by a scalp massage, using a hair balm that smells like it has medicinal properties — it must be doing me

good, I ponder, as the thick cream is slowly and therapeutically kneaded through my hair, congealing and clinging to every strand.

After showering off and changing back into my robe, my practitioner talks me through recommended products and then leaves me to "be" in the relaxation lounge, for as long as I like, before making use of the well-equipped change room. Again, decadence is in the detail — it's complete with luxurious showers, organic hair and body products, as well as hairdryers and as many towels as you care to use.

As I leave the oasis, I'm affronted by the urban bustle and shocked to discover the sun is setting over St Kilda Beach.

Like a Dali clock, time has melted away. ●

Ms Thompson was a guest of Aurora.

FACTFILE

Getting there: Qantas, Jetstar, Virgin and Tiger all fly from most capital cities to Melbourne. Visit www.flightcentre.com.au and www.tigerairways.com/au/en/

Getting around: For information (including trip planners, timetables and fares) on trains, trams and buses in Melbourne, go to www.metlinkmelbourne.com.au/

The tram ride to St Kilda takes about 20 minutes from the city centre.

Alternatively, paid parking facilities are on the corner of Acland Street and Jackson Street.

Staying there: Guests can stay on the premises at the luxury boutique Prince Hotel:

www.theprince.com.au/
Package deals are available with spa inclusions.

More information: Aurora is located on level 1, Prince Hotel, 2 Acland St, St Kilda, Melbourne. For details, phone (03) 9536 1130, email info@aurorasparetreat.com or go to: www.aurorasparetreat.com