

RETREAT & RECONNECT

The opening of The Spa at Château Élan in the Hunter Valley provides spa lovers with a chance to reconnect body with soul, thanks to the treatments inspired by nature.

CHÂTEAU ÉLAN AT THE VINTAGE GOLF

course is the latest destination spa to hit the Hunter Valley, the region just outside of Sydney that is so laden with spa resorts you may wonder what benefits yet another could possibly bring. But what this spa-goer and partner discover is that Château Élan is not just a place to treat oneself, but, by drawing you into a sensorial world of relaxation created by healing rituals in a peaceful, pastoral setting, it is a place to give treatment to your whole being.

The healing journey begins with the accommodation. Each of Château Élan's 20 luxury spa suites is named after a stunning city of the world — Paris, Seville, Sydney and others — all with finishing touches that reflect the city. We are appointed the Sydney suite, which seems ironic since we have come here to escape the place; but under this guise — with sumptuous grape-coloured décor, a view overlooking the lush Greg Norman-designed fairways of The Vintage and kangaroos hopping outside our window — "Sydney" is suddenly an idyllic retreat.

The suite itself is a highlight. Big praise for whoever came up with the concept of putting the spa bath in the bedroom. This design symbolically decompartmentalises life, turning the space into one big relaxation zone where one can move seamlessly from the tub to brewing a herbal tea at the mini bar to collapsing on the king-size Ergomotion bed. My only worry is the moment I lie down and switch on the massage function I'm not sure I'll be able to get up again.

But I do (albeit the next morning), because a game of golf calls. It would be sacrilege to come to Château Élan and not have a swing. Since pedestrians are not actually allowed on the golf course pathways that weave through the grounds (sorry to disappoint you, runners and walkers), playing golf is the only way to fully appreciate the beauty of the location, not to mention benefit from the healthful effects of a good stroll. For those after a higher-energy workout, there's a well-equipped gym, a lap pool and two day/night tennis courts.

Of course, the most coveted experience of our stay is yet to come.



Enjoy a herbal tea in the Reflection Lounge after your treatment.

The Spa at Château Élan stands itself among Australia's finest. It is the first in the country to use Terraké products by French cosmetologists Thalgo, and one of the few to use Thalgo's exclusive organic and sustainable beauty line, Terre & Mer, derived from natural marine algae and organic plant extracts.

All Terraké products and rituals are themed according to the four natural forces of water, air, plant life and earth, and are designed to take you on a journey that reconnects body and soul with one of nature's elements. Familiar treatments such as exfoliation, massage and nourishing body wraps are supplemented with unique techniques including rain sticks, light-as-air feather brushes on the skin or balneotherapy, where individual geisha tubs whirl you in a concoction of Terraké oils to a soundtrack inspired by nature and to the glow of colour therapy. When the treatment room lights are turned out, these tubs can emit a spectrum of colours that, according to many ancient wellness traditions, have specific healing properties.

We arrive an hour early at the spa to take advantage of the common facilities. It's just enough time to enjoy a soak in the bubbling, 38°C bath on the Hydrolounge deck with countryside views (sun-conscious bathers will want to take their hats and sunglasses). For the more adventurous there's a plunge pool and a Detox Box (an infrared sauna, said to help you shed calories), but I'm happy lolling with some magazines on the contoured water-resistant lounge by the open fire.

The consultation with my therapist takes place in the Reflection Lounge, where product samples and private recliners transport you further into a realm of calm. She enters

carrying a sampling plate of Terraké scrubs, which I sniff and rub on the back of my hand, selecting one (entitled Terre Magica, based on the earth) for my body exfoliation and polish. After a thorough rub-down it leaves my skin zinging and smelling like cinnamon.

From the "Massages of the World" menu, which includes Balinese palming, Chinese reflexology and Tibetan hot stone, I choose the Swedish massage and ask for some remedial techniques to be added. If there's one thing I've learnt from visiting spas it's to communicate clearly with your therapist about what you want. All deep thumbs, palms and elbows, my tailored massage is the perfect antidote to my city-dweller aches.

My partner relishes his citrus-scented body scrub, but isn't as fulfilled by the soothing head and scalp treatment and massage that followed, possibly because time only allows for an overview of muscle remediation and not the deep pressure he craves.

Each of our rituals is concluded perfectly with pots of Terraké tea brewed from earthy herbs and fruit essences.

If the stay at Château Élan were repeated, a balneotherapy treatment taken in the couples room would be a must, as would a thalassotherapy-inspired, detoxifying marine algae body wrap (which, I'm told, rejuvenates the skin with natural vitamins and enzymes) or an organic, 99 per cent natural facial using Terre & Mer products.

Now I am back in the real Sydney, it's not so much a matter of if but when... ☺

Jodie McLeod is a Sydney-based journalist who lives for (and loves writing about) the good and interesting things in life — from travel to wellbeing, the arts, food and everything in-between.