



# HEART OF THE COUNTRY

WHEN IT COMES TO SHORT BREAKS, THE HISTORIC TOWNS OF **DAYLESFORD AND HEPBURN SPRINGS** IN RURAL VICTORIA'S SPA COUNTRY MAKE AN IDEAL DESTINATION TO RELAX AND REJUVENATE

by **EMILY TAYLOR**

Pretty-as-a-picture cottage Iloura in Hepburn Springs  
OPPOSITE: Hepburn Lagoon 'Trail Rides' charming stables





**A WEEKEND WELL SPENT**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The serene Lake Daylesford, with restaurant The Boathouse perched on its distant banks; breakfast delights at Cafe Koukla in the centre of town; don't miss mineral bathing at Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa; a fragrant vista at Lavandula Swiss Italian Farm (lavandula.com.au); The Surly Goat in Hepburn Springs serves up delicious local fare from an ever-changing seasonal menu; photogenic signs of the past—such as the charming Glenlyon Shire Hall—remain throughout the region; a touch of rural luxury in one of Illoura's two plush bedrooms; one of Hepburn Lagoon Trail Rides' VIP residents



**WHEN ESCAPE IS ESSENTIAL BUT OVERSEAS EXCESS IS OUT OF THE QUESTION...**

... the humble mini-break might be just what you need. Happily, there are countless destinations on our doorstep in which to spend a little downtime (minus the international flight). Making a strong case for the “staycation” is Victoria’s Daylesford region, nestled in the picturesque foothills of the Great Dividing Range. The spot itself is no new trend among clued-in travellers: for more than 120 years (after the railway line from Melbourne opened in 1880) those in the know have flocked to the adjoining towns of Daylesford and Hepburn Springs for the clear air, bucolic surrounds and famous spring water.

This is spa country, home to the largest concentration of mineral springs anywhere in Australia, and a place where “taking the waters” for health and wellbeing has been a drawcard since the late 19th century. Today, the region retains much of its bygone-era charm and—less than an hour-and-a-half north-west of Melbourne by car—offers easy respite from the daily grind.

Visitors can choose to stay in a hotel or guesthouse but, for a true local feel, consider checking into a pretty villa or country home, either in town (and easy walking distance from pubs and restaurants) or a little further off the beaten track for total serenity. Lilac-splashed two-bedder Illoura (from \$530 per night; two-night minimum; dayget.com.au/illoura) offers the best of both accommodation worlds—a chocolate-box cottage in a lovingly tended garden that’s as chic as it is sweet, situated in quiet Hepburn Springs. Handily, it’s right across the road from the Hepburn Mineral Springs Reserve, which is home to walking trails, picnic spots and the famous Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa (hepburnbathhouse.com).

A heritage-listed gem that first opened its doors in 1895, the bathhouse boasts a

meticulous renovation that remains sympathetic to the original buildings while incorporating modern spa updates. Choose from traditional social bathing or a private mineral mud bath, but block out the remainder of your day. You’ll emerge rested and relaxed—and probably ready to crash, such is the power of the nutrient-rich waters, drawn directly from the source beneath the spa.

When you’ve washed away the stress of the city, there’s much more to explore, from picturesque lavender fields to bush hiking trails that curl through country shaped by the region’s volcanic history. An adventurous way to make the most of your time in nature is on horseback, with Hepburn Lagoon Trail Rides (hepburnlagoonrides.com.au), which is based out of the prettiest stables you’re likely to visit. Beginners will enjoy the learning curve that comes with acquiring a new skill, while advanced riders can indulge in the opportunity to canter through the bush as the real world disappears—at least for a couple of hours.

With appetites well earned, the biggest decision you’ll need to make is where to eat—the region is renowned for its food and locally produced wines. For a relaxed lunch with tranquil Lake Daylesford views, The Boathouse (boathousedaylesford.com.au) should be on your list—a table on the deck is a delight on sunny days. And join the locals at The Surly Goat (thesurlygoat.com.au) for a glass of Ballarat red at the bar, or a hearty steak with Cafe de Paris butter by the fire.

After just a couple of nights in this restorative spot with its infectious rural spirit, you’ll return to the big smoke with a renewed sense of serenity, just as visitors have done for a hundred years. And there’s no passport required. ■

**THE LOWDOWN**

**BOOK SMART**

Check into Illoura and other luxury lodgings through accommodation agency Dayget. It’s a one-stop shop for finding the area’s best private homes for your visit (dayget.com.au).

**CAFE CULTURE**

Like some local art with your latte? Cool Cafe Koukla (cafekoukla.com.au) at the base of Hotel Frangos on Daylesford’s main street is decorated with murals by renowned Australian artist David Bromley, who spends much of his time in the town.

**MAKE A TOAST**

An Australian country town needs a traditional pub, and the area more than delivers. Call in to the Daylesford Hotel (daylesfordhotel.com.au) and select a tippie from its extensive local and regional wine list. It’s an easy way to sample some of the area’s impressive drops in one spot, alongside classic pub fare.

**GET OUT OF TOWN**

Ease your transition back into the real world by stopping at RedBeard Historic Bakery (redbeardbakery.com.au) in nearby Trentham on your way home. Organic ingredients and a huge woodfired oven have made its delicious bread nationally famous.

