

Melbourne's other playground has a wealth of distractions

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1 There is often stiff competition to get into the renowned attractions of the Mornington Peninsula, southeast of Melbourne. Go southwest, however, and there will likely be less human and vehicle traffic between you and the Bellarine Peninsula's similarly sophisticated locations. Consider Terindah Estate, where the eye is drawn across Port Phillip Bay to the skyline of Melbourne, 100km away by road. One of 40 regional vineyards with cellar doors, Terindah has several welcoming spaces, including a restaurant and recently added vintage-tram wine bar. It is named Peter's Odyssey for the winery's co-founder, who died soon before his quirky conversion concept became reality. Inside and on the adjoining deck, savour freshly boxed bites, estate wines, including sparkling and pinot noir, and that vista stretching from lawn-and-leafy green to bay blue.

terindahestate.com

2 When I arrive at Harvest Experience, Michelle Visser Hodson laments there is not much to harvest from her garden in winter. Even so, a stroll among raised vegetable beds, fruit trees, greenhouse, miniature vineyard and roaming chickens soon has our basket loaded with ingredients. We head back to her custom-built cooking school, launched last year. The venue is the unexpected culmination of a tree change, but our host seems born to lead small-group classes. She is calm, encouraging and offers snippets of



food science as we follow her beetroot ravioli recipe, including making the ricotta and purple pink pasta from scratch. The end result is a yummy lunch enjoyed by proud classmates.

harvestexperience.com.au

3 Appointments at Lon Spa are in demand, but book ahead for a serene experience. Simply stepping inside is calming, as you are welcomed by a dreamy scent, gentle music and relaxed staff. Nestled in 40ha of coastal bush and farmland alongside seven luxury accommodation suites, the facility draws on underground mineral springs for its therapeutic pool and soaking tubs. Natural, Australian-made Subtle Energies products are used for treatments such as the Blissful Marma Massage. It opens with deep breaths over a steaming bowl of water scattered with Himalayan salts and essential oils, including frankincense, and concludes with a mist redolent of Indian rose. In between, I am so expertly caressed and cradled that my mind feels similarly nurtured. Blissful indeed.

lonretreat.com.au

4 Bellarine Distillery's cellar door/bar is called The Whiskery, but visitors probably come for gin rather than whisky – and perhaps to admire co-owner Russ Watson's flamboyant whiskers. He started the operation to make whisky, but that has only recently become available, and in small quantities. Meanwhile, the gin has been going gangbusters. The five versions have delightfully distinct qualities, and playful names and labels celebrating



Port Phillip Bay views from Terindah Estate, main; Michelle Visser Hodson of Harvest Experience, far left; Russ Watson at Bellarine Distillery, below left; Pier St, Portarlington, below

BELLARINE PENINSULA

BAY WATCH

the distillery dogs' exploits. From citrusy Teddy and the Fox to robust, chocolatey Trooper and the Roo, The Whiskery's tasting paddle reveals them all. Other options at this old shed reborn include cocktails, imported scotch and pizza.

bellarinedistillery.com.au

5 Bicycles allow visitors to see the sights while working off Bellarine kilojoules. They are particularly handy after travelling here from Melbourne by passenger ferry. For those low on stamina, Bella E-bike Hire is the solution. Its electric bikes provide a power boost that removes the pain from the pleasures of the picturesque Bellarine Coastal Trail. This friendly local business delivers and collects its bikes where needed, and also offers transfers (including luggage), so you can ride one way on the 33km Bellarine Rail Trail, for example, or call them if you get winery wobbles.

bellaebikehire.com.au

6 From Thomas the Tank Engine days to blues performances, there are numerous ways to ride the Bellarine Railway's 16km track. If your destination is indulgence, take the Q Train, which offers five-course meals during a leisurely three-hour return journey through farmland and coastal scenery. It is fine dining on wheels, complete with white napery, knowledgeable staff and seasonal degustation menus featuring local ingredients such as venison and mushrooms. Drinks are also predominantly regional aboard Australia's only restaurant train, which comprises mid-century carriages from Queensland's old Sunlander service. First-class passengers enjoy matched wines or beers with each course, served in private spaces created by converting sleeper compartments into exclusive dining rooms for two.

theqtrain.com.au



7 Overlooking Port Phillip Bay's narrow entrance, Fort Queenscliff was built in the 1860s to rain hell upon foreign invaders. Later expansion included the substantial red-brick perimeter wall now concealing the charming holiday town of Queenscliff's almost forgotten military history. It is still a Defence Force property, albeit a quiet administrative one, so access is only by 90-minute tours. Highlights include 19th-century guns, museum artefacts such as a leopard skin worn by an Edwardian-era fort drummer on parade, and a rare black-stone lighthouse. Since 1862, mariners have lined the beacon up with the nearby white lighthouse to navigate that treacherous entrance.

fortqueenscliff.com.au

8 Although Pier St sits beside the Portarlington foreshore carpark in an unremarkable block of a building, the folks behind this cafe have made it the place to be. The airy, white interior is adorned with beachy-chic touches. Outside, striped umbrellas perch over picnic-style tables while boats, including the ferry, come and go. I am here for breakfast, including the kitchen's take on avocado toast topped with zingy saltbush pesto and local goat's cheese. Seafood comes to the fore later in the day, with dinner served Thursday to Saturday. Mussels are synonymous with Portarlington, which hosts an annual festival devoted to the molluscs, which this eatery serves three ways.

pierstreet.com.au

9 Among the Bellarine's numerous golf courses, none surpasses Curlewis. Ranked 25 in Golf Australia magazine's best public courses in 2021, it is challenging but beautiful, especially the 12th hole's panorama of bay and mountains.

Established in 1970, Curlewis relaunched in February with new facilities, including accommodation – some overlooking the 18th hole's triumphs and tragedies – and a clubhouse where vintage silver trophies mingle with modern art such as limited-edition Andy Warhol prints. The restaurant, Claribeaux, is similarly next-level. This large, open space with undulating ceiling and walls of glass offers 180-degree views of the course. From goat's cheese soufflé to classic steak frites, the menu leans French with modern-Australian flair.

curlewisgolf.com.au

claribeaux.com.au

BEST BEDS

10 Built in 1888, Portarlington Grand Hotel had long been neglected, but the design firm that transformed Melbourne's Espy hotel has completed a substantial renovation of the property. The makeover embraces graceful original features while introducing contemporary style and comforts, including elevator access to the accommodation. Landings with ornate plaster moulding and period-appropriate reproduction William Morris carpet lead to 18 guestrooms. The best open on to balconies framed with iron lace, and are an ideal spot for relaxing, watching native birds chattering in the trees opposite and enjoying views of the bay. This three-storey building has been made grand again. Several options for good times await downstairs, from the light-filled atrium bar to the big yet inviting bistro; from \$235 a night.

portarlingtongrandhotel.com.au

Patricia Maunder was a guest of Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine. tourismgeelongbellarine.com.au

