

feature



Westin pool



Haven Lounge



Exterior

# Grand CENTRAL STATION



Deluxe king room



Bodhi J Spa



Garum

In desperate need of some R&R, **Julie Hosking** finds the perfect escape in the city.

blame the magic hands.

I was standing in the lobby of the Westin, trying to attract my date's attention without drawing attention to myself. If you happened to observe this exchange – and I sincerely hope you didn't – it involved a lot of hand signals and mouthing along the lines of "hurry up, get in the lift" on my part and "what on earth are you doing, what are you on about" on his.

We'd set the rendezvous for 5pm but I'd drifted into the land of nod. When the phone beeped to announce his arrival, I leapt out of bed, threw on my dress and raced out the door. It wasn't until the lift opened at the lobby level that I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror: my dress was quite obviously on inside out. Whoops! I'd just hit the up button and head back to rearrange myself. Too late; a gentleman was politely standing aside for me to exit the lift.

"Thanks," I mumbled, relieved he appeared not to notice my lack of dress sense. I could see my other half sitting over near reception but I didn't want to venture that far out and risk revealing my sartorial lapse. But he wasn't getting the message. Why would he? As he informed me when he eventually made his way over to the lifts, somewhat bemused, and I whispered what was wrong: he didn't even notice what I was wearing. Nor did any of the other – mostly men – within cooee.

I'm pretty sure the ladies behind the reception desk noticed something amiss, though perhaps it was just concern for my wellbeing, given the weird signals I was apparently making. But if they had, they would only have quietly inquired if I needed any assistance.





Garum bar

This is, after all, a luxury hotel chain where discretion is all part of the service.

As are magic hands. They are not advertised as such on the website but I can attest to their existence: it's their fault I couldn't dress myself properly.

I had arrived a few hours earlier, neck, shoulders and lower back a giant knot of corporate stress. Running too close to appointment time for comfort, I leave my luggage with the valet, and take the lift to Bodhi J spa. I've enjoyed their treatments before, at the Wembley premises, but this is a whole other level of elegance. I feel myself relaxing as soon as I sit down in the spacious waiting room. Then I'm led into the couples room (minus the other half of the couple) for a Sodashi Signature massage; before long, I'm adrift in a world of softly scented heaven, my only concern that I will start snoring.

If I do, the owner of the magic hands (I wished I'd taken note of her name but, in my defence, I was blissed out) is too polite to say so when the 90 minutes are up all too soon – I'm sure there's a thesis in the reasons why relaxation minutes go so much faster than working minutes – and I'm led to the balcony for a platter of fresh fruit and a herbal tea. There's a light breeze wafting over me and I close my eyes. Better head to my room before I do drop off.

The first thing I notice about my room, a club king, is the huge window, which not only offers a bird's eye view of our super city but bathes the place in natural light. (Curtains will black it out for sleep, should you wish.) The next is the size of the bathroom. I'm clearly chilled because I do something most out of character and run a bath (I prefer showers, I hasten to add). Before long, I'm wrapped in the softest hotel bathrobe I've ever had the pleasure to wear and lying on the bed, tingling with excitement about indulging in a guilty pleasure: reading uninterrupted. And that's when I fall asleep.

Luckily, I'd arranged that aforementioned rendezvous or I would have lost a good portion of my 24-hour escape to dreamland. Yes, I was tired but there is too much to explore to waste precious hours in the admittedly ultra-comfortable bed. In fact, I would recommend anyone contemplating a staycation to book for two nights to maximise not just the hotel experience but the surroundings of evolving Hibernian Place. What used to be a rather unsavoury end of town is finally having its moment.

Clothes donned the right way round, and dignity somewhat restored, it's time to shed the shackles (did

I say that) of parenthood for one night. What is it that couples do again?

We start our journey of rediscovery in the executive club lounge. A perk of being in a club room, it's a place where business types, friends and lovers – young and old(er) – can enjoy some fine wine, beer and spirits and a platter or two of cheese, salami and other nibbles before venturing further afield. It's a nice, quiet space, though I can't help thinking it would benefit from being a little higher up the impressive building, making the most of the Westin's views around the city.

Before we get too accustomed to the free-flowing booze, we make our way to Garum. I've been lucky enough to have eaten in the Roman-esque restaurant in the stunningly converted Hibernian Hall a few times since the Westin opened in April but it's always been for lunch.

The room is dimly lit, more romantic and intimate of an evening, despite the high ceilings, and the bottle of 2014 Piero Riccardi Collepazzo Cesanese (Italian, of course) only adds to the sense of occasion.

Guy Grossi, one of Victoria's most beloved chefs – if you haven't eaten at Grossi Florentino, make it a priority next time you're in Melbourne – was determined to create a restaurant that was the opposite of pretentious, one where you arrived to a warm welcome and left with full and satisfied bellies. Garum is not your average hotel restaurant.

We start with polpo (octopus gaeta style, with sourdough, olives, tomato and capers) for him and salumi (cured meat and salami) for me. Both delightful, but it's the mains that have both of us salivating. Agnello, an Arkady lamb shoulder with parmigiano and sage, is so good I could mainline the broth. Thankfully, it comes with bread, so I don't have another embarrassing episode, and simply mop it up with the bread.

Norm declares his bistecca, a Margaret River rump with leafy greens, the best he's had in a long time. And this is a man who likes his steak. We have also, somewhat greedily, ordered a side of rosemary and garlic potatoes, wonderfully crunchy on the outside and soft and flavoursome on the inside.

This does, however, make our decision to order a dessert positively porcine (even if we did share). If we had only vague plans to kick on for an after-dinner drink at the hip Hadiqa, they are quickly abandoned at the thought of walking, nay rolling, more than a few feet from the hotel.

Down but not defeated, however, we re-emerge the next morning ready to tackle breakfast. Our stay gives us the option to dine in the club room or Garum but, having had such a great night, we opt for the latter. We find ourselves seated next to a reporter and producer from 60 Minutes. As we speculate about what they are doing in our town (more on the Lloyd Rayney case, we'd discover a few weeks later), we tuck into probably one of the biggest and best breakfast buffets I've ever seen. The cold section alone takes up an entire room off to the side of the restaurant. I start with fruit and toast, before heading over to the open kitchen to load up another plate with sausages, eggs and beans. When I can't even make a start on the mini-muffins (surprise, surprise), one of the wait staff kindly offers to pop them into a paper bag for me. Waste not, want not.

For those inclined to walk off any of this overindulgence, the hotel is in a great spot for exploring. Nature lovers need only stroll down to the Swan River, where they can then take a 10km walk around the bridges; sports fans can turn left towards Optus Stadium (take note: a perfect place to stay on game day, come AFL season); shopaholics, hang right towards the city's myriad temptations.

For those who are serious about keeping trim, taut and terrific, Westin's Workout Fitness Studio – on the same "wellness level" as Bodhi J Spa – is open 24 hours. I know which direction I'd turn on that floor but each to their own.

I'm already planning a return this summer, this time for two nights. My to-do list includes several hours by the infinity pool (too cold this time around), coffee from Offshoot, a healthy lunch at Arthur & Co, dinner at Garum (I have my eye on the pork ragu), late-night drinks at Goody Two's (the glam grown-up bar was a few weeks off opening when we stayed), and perhaps high tea in the Westin's beautiful Haven Lounge. (Yes, there is a lot of eating on this list, don't judge me.)

Not to mention another date with those magic hands. I'll just make sure I look in the mirror before leaving the room this time. 🍷

The author was a guest of Westin Perth.

**The Westin is offering a Festive High Tea for \$49 throughout December, call 6559 1888 to book or see [westinperth.com.au](http://westinperth.com.au); [garum.com.au](http://garum.com.au); [bodhi.com.au](http://bodhi.com.au).**