

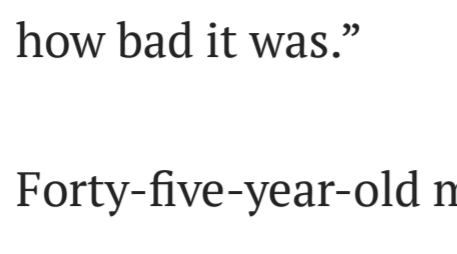
Perspective National Queensland Wellness

Brisbane mum finds cold comfort in city's bathhouse boom



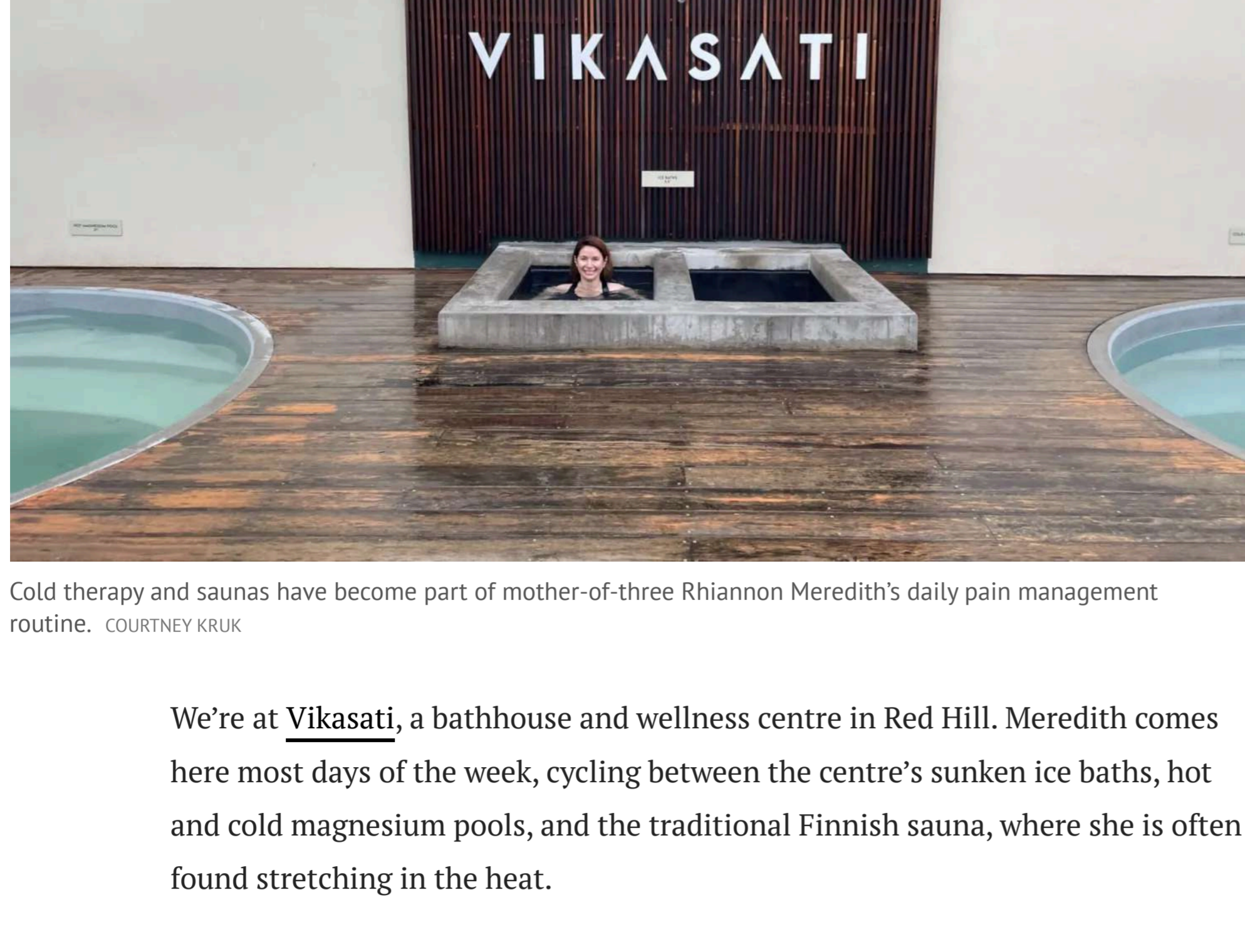
Courtney Kruk
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“There was a point when I wished I had cancer so I was just going to die. That’s how bad it was.”

Forty-five-year-old mother-of-three Rhiannon Meredith is resting in a 5-degree ice bath. She’s telling a painful story but looks relaxed, hands loosely clasped and gaze set towards the waking sky.



Cold therapy and saunas have become part of mother-of-three Rhiannon Meredith’s daily pain management routine. COURNEY KRUK

We’re at Vikasati, a bathhouse and wellness centre in Red Hill. Meredith comes here more at the end of the week, cycling between the centre’s sunken ice baths, hot and cold magnesium pools, and the traditional Finnish sauna, where she is often found stretching in the heat.

“I used to do a lot of Bikram yoga,” she explains. “Like, when I say a lot, I used to go six times a week before I had kids.

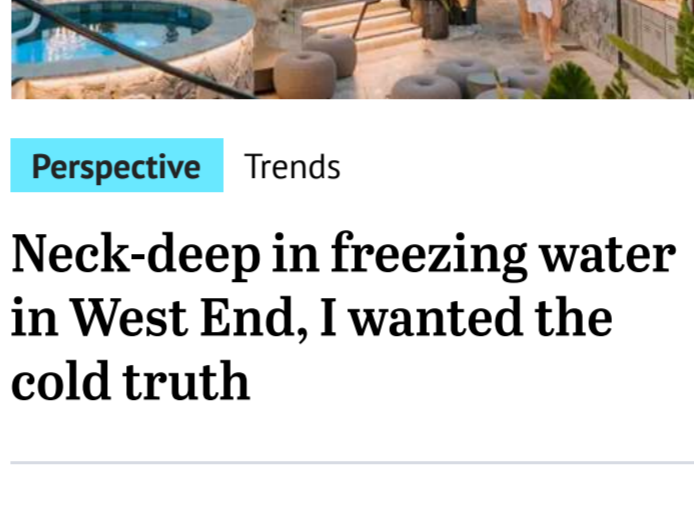
“Then I realised I was just medicating with it because I would say to people, ‘if I don’t go, I get really sore’. I wasn’t diagnosed then.”

Meredith has an autoimmune disease called ankylosing spondylitis, a type of arthritis that causes swelling between the vertebrae and in the joints between the spine and pelvis. It’s incredibly painful and has affected her since she was a teenager.

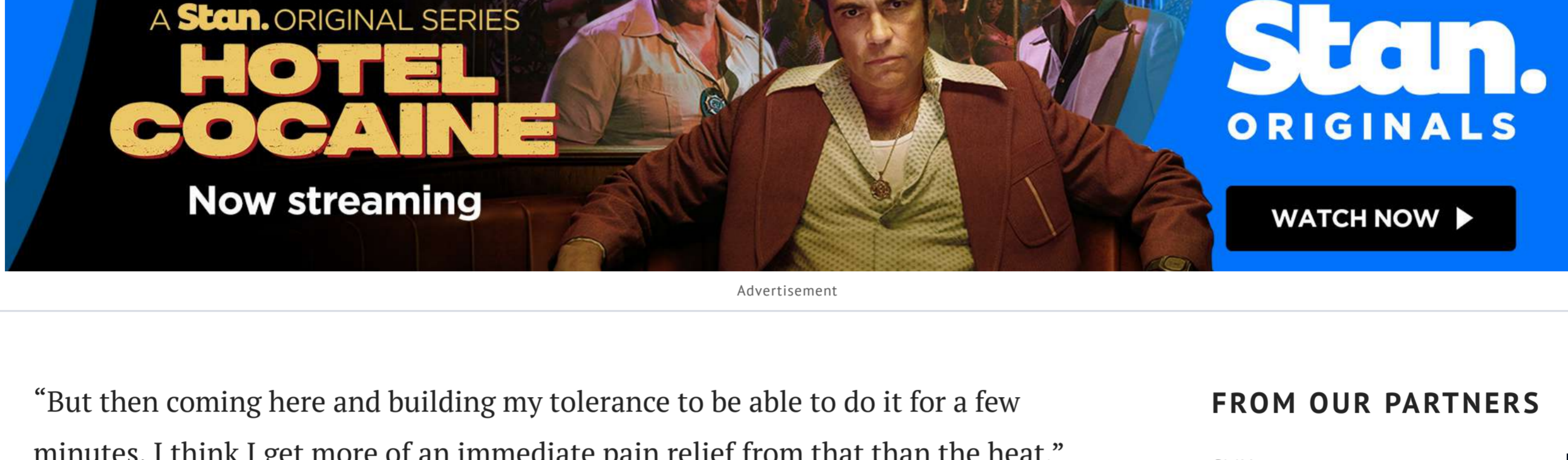
“My body is always kind of attacking itself, and it ends up in my joints. Usually, I have to stand over there and hang upside down,” she says, pointing to a corner of the 24-person sauna.

“I’ll do that for 30 to 45 minutes to stretch my back, and then I do the ice bath. I used to hate the ice bath with a passion and think it made me flare.

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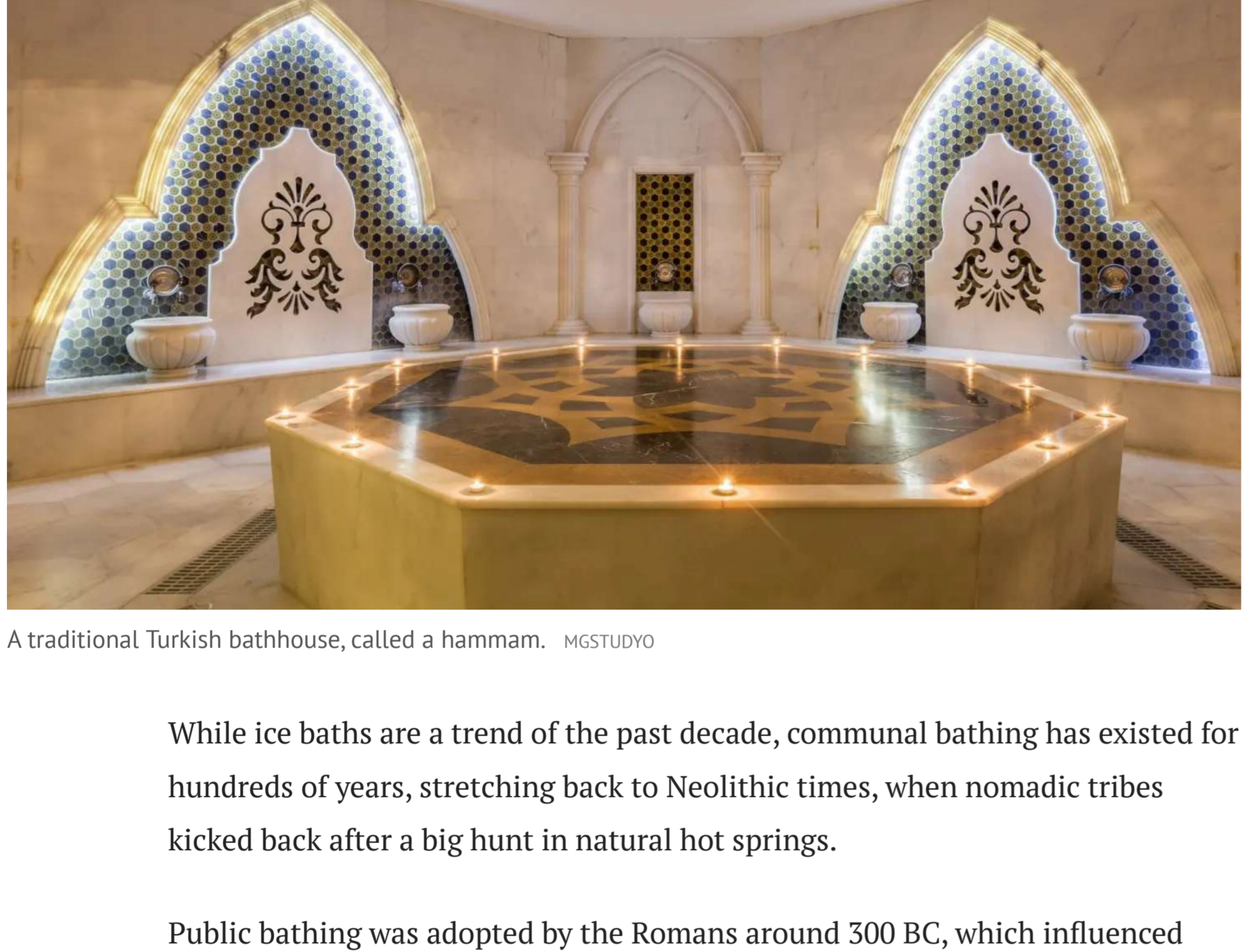


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“But then coming here and building my tolerance to be able to do it for a few minutes, I think I get more of an immediate pain relief from that than the heat.”

The possibility of pain relief motivates me to test my threshold for the ice bath – 7 degrees colder than the last cold plunge I tried – during a week-long trial of Vikasati.



A traditional Turkish bathhouse, called a hammam. MOSTUOVO

While ice baths are a trend of the past decade, communal bathing has existed for hundreds of years, stretching back to Neolithic times, when nomadic tribes kicked back after a big hunt in natural hot springs.

Public bathing was adopted by the Romans around 300 BC, which influenced Turkish baths (hammams) in the 15th century, a cultural activity that is still practised today.

Japan has onsens, Korea jimjilbangs and Russia banyas, while Nordic countries are well known for their saunas.

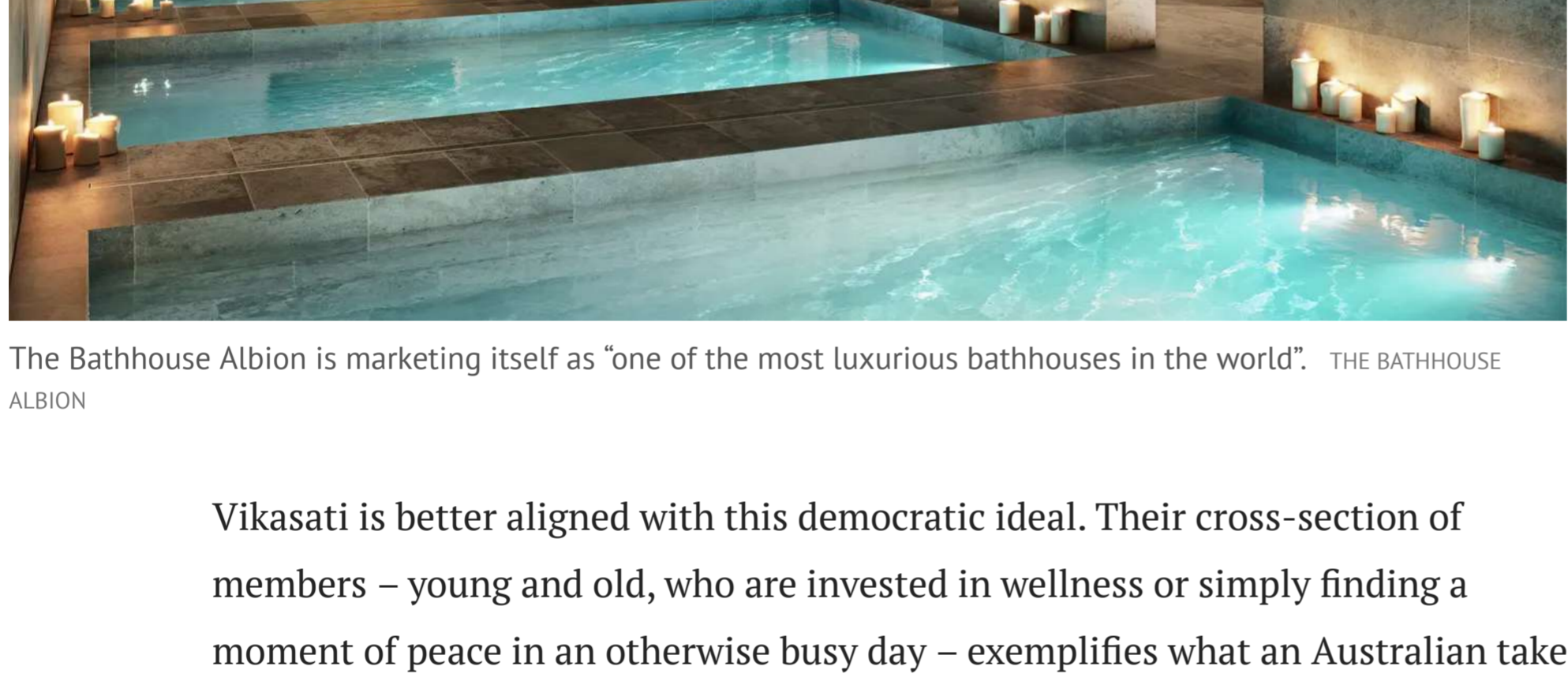
It’s been interesting to observe the emergence of bathhouse culture in Australia, especially in south-east Queensland, a region that’s leading the movement.

“I feel like we’re still on the early-adopter curve,” says Vikasati co-founder Will Murphy, pointing to the low number of bathhouses in other states and cities.

Brisbane alone has more than half a dozen, including “one of the world’s most luxurious bathhouses” opening in Albion next weekend.

The Bathhouse Albion, equipped with hot and cold pools, ice baths, saunas, a float room and relaxation lounge, is architecturally designed with travertine stone finishes mimicking the opulence of European bathhouses.

An annual “lifestyle membership” there will set you back \$10,000, with casual sessions priced between \$59 and \$119. It’s par for the course, but not exactly the democratic view of bathhouses popularised by cultures elsewhere.



The Bathhouse Albion is marketing itself as “one of the most luxurious bathhouses in the world”. THE BATHHOUSE ALBION

Vikasati is better aligned with this democratic ideal. Their cross-section of members – young and old, who are invested in wellness or simply finding a moment of peace in an otherwise busy day – exemplifies what an Australian take on bathhouse culture could be.

“For a long time, bathhouses have only been accessible to people who go to a five-star hotel or go on a retreat, or who have a bit of money,” Murphy says.

Naturally, the explosion of wellness culture – an industry worth an estimated \$US4.3 trillion globally – has helped propel the popularity of bathhouses like Vikasati. But Murphy says it’s not just already healthy people who use the facilities.

“It’s people who value being healthy,” he says. “So they might be on their journey, or they’re wanting to put themselves in that environment of healthier people.”

I approach wellness: it’s a largely unregulated industry that leans on a lot of quasi-science.

But having been to a traditional Turkish hammam, a strange but glorious giant spa world in San Sebastian, and several Japanese onsens, I love the idea of Australia having its own bathhouse culture.

What you experience at Vikasati is akin to what exists in other countries. It’s a welcoming, non-judgmental place. It removes people from the pressures of life for an hour or so, and there’s a real sense of community, whether people are using it for stress relief, pain management, wellbeing or relaxation.

We are due for a concept like this, and it’s nice to see south-east Queensland leading the way.

The author was a guest at Vikasati.

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Courtney Kruk is City Reporter at Brisbane Times, writing about the city and its people.

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