



America's "HOTTEST" PARK

The first thing a visitor to Hot Springs National Park in Arkansas notices is that it isn't a typical national park.

Sure, there are about 26 miles of trails and low-lying mountains, dotted with wildflowers and redbud and dogwood trees. But the visitor center is smack dab in the middle of a small city that's also part of the park, and the entire 5,500 acres are mainly centered around one thing — water. In fact, one of the most popular things to do in Hot Springs is take a bath!

Water With a Past

Native Americans were the first to take advantage of the naturally occurring springs; their use is documented to the late 1700s and early 1800s. French trappers, hunters, and traders undoubtedly became familiar with the region when they moved in. After the U.S. acquired the Louisiana Purchase, President Thomas Jefferson sent an expedition to explore the springs. A widely publicized report brought wide-spread interest in the alleged therapeutic properties of the 143°F waters. Rough wood and canvas bathhouses soon sprang up, but they easily succumbed to fire, poor workmanship, and the constant exposure to water and steam.

In 1832 — 40 years before Yellowstone — Congress set aside Hot Springs Reservation (the park's first designation), making it the

oldest unit of the national park system. The federal government took active control of it in 1877. National park status came in 1921.

Hot Springs became known as "The American Spa." In the era before modern medicines, those who suffered from rheumatism, arthritis, sciatica, kidney and liver diseases, and a host of other ailments looked for relief or cure from the thermal waters. Better bathhouses, some rivaling luxurious European spas, were built to accommodate

health seekers and vacationers. Even the government got in on the act, operating a free bathhouse and public health facility for those unable to pay for treatments recommended by their doctors. The Army/Navy Hospital's use of hot water therapy contributed to the popularity during and immediately after World War II.

Ball clubs also considered Hot Springs



the place to go for rehabilitation. Babe Ruth was a frequent visitor, and several teams held spring training there. Other famous citizens who retreated to the springs include entertainers Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Kate Smith, and Will Rogers; industrialist Andrew Carnegie; Presidents Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Bill Clinton.

A host of outlaws regarded Hot Springs as a great place to hide out while enjoying a little pampering. Pretty Boy Floyd, the Barker clan, Al Capone, and Lucky Luciano are some of the more notorious visitors. Luciano's luck apparently ran out when the long arm of the law finally snagged him in Hot Springs after he fled New York. The new Gangster Museum of America, located on Bathhouse Row, explores this era of the 1920s to the 1940s.

Advances in medicine led to the decline of water therapies during the 1950s. Bathhouses began to close, and by 1985 only one remained in use. Bathhouse Row was designated a National Historic District in 1987. Concerned local residents, as well as the National Park Service, started exploring how to return the area to its original splendor.

days when "taking the waters" was a fashionable pastime. Strange and even amusing equipment, some looking as if they were designed for torture rather than healing, are seen in the different rooms. All kinds of pulleys, gauges, levers, and nozzles occupy the electro- and mechano-therapy chambers. Steam cabinets remind you of those seen in cartoons where people go in grossly overweight and come out



The Fordyce Bathhouse was built in the Spanish Renaissance style in 1915 by the wealthy and affluent Fordyce family.

Everything Old Is New Again

The first step came in 1989 when the renovated Fordyce Bathhouse opened as the park's visitor center. Today, a self-guided tour of its 23 rooms gives an idea of how it looked in those

slender. But it's the lavish decoration that really catches the eye — inlaid tile and Italian marble floors, walls, and tubs; fountains; an abundance of stained glass windows and polished, dark wood; and, in the men's changing room, an 8,000-piece skylight depicting an underwater scene. The third floor assembly room is perhaps the Fordyce's crown jewel. Concerts and private socializing took place in the elegant space with its dazzling tile and marble floor and curved stained-glass ceiling panels.

Water remains the star attraction in Hot Springs. About 700,000 gallons of the stuff are taken from 47 protected springs each day. The colorless, tasteless, and odorless (thanks to its





Travel

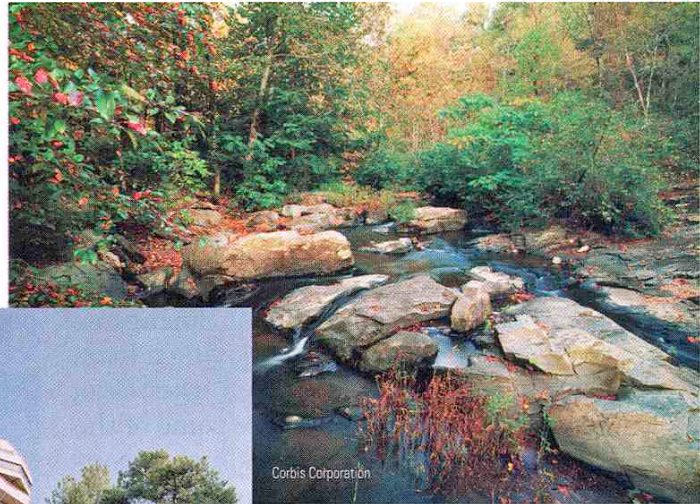
low sulfur content) liquid is available for drinking and collection, free of charge, at several hot and cold springs around town. Foot soaking is even allowed at one location. While the National Park Service doesn't claim the water has curative powers, it does certify its safety through regular quality testing.

Fortunately for those interested in spa services, several bathhouses offer a variety of treatments. Two operate within the boundaries of the park. The Buckstaff has been in business continually since 1912. The Quapaw just reopened in 2008 and is built in a Spanish colonial revival style with a large tiled dome topped by a copper cupola.

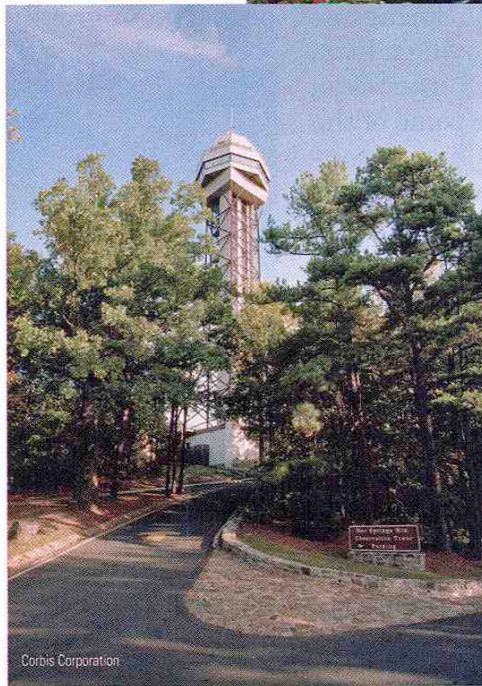
The Great Outdoors

Visitors to Hot Springs would be remiss if they neglected the park's trails, which include some easy hikes. Both the Tufa Terrace Trail (two-tenths of a mile) and the Grand Promenade (half a mile) are paved and run behind Bathhouse Row. Other short, natural trails lead from town up into the Ouachita Mountains to the east and west. Many people drive the steep, winding road that leads to the Hot Springs Mountain Tower for a scenic view of the town and surrounding terrain. Several trails go further into the mountains from there. Goat Rock, 1.1 miles behind the Gulpha Gorge campground and picnic area, is another great vantage point, accessible only on foot.

Hot Springs may not be like other national parks, but it's got a charm all its own, one



ABOVE: Gulpha Gorge, Hot Springs National Park. LEFT: Hot Springs Mountain Tower—Located at the top of Hot Springs Mountain, visitors to the tower board the elevator that takes them about 216 feet in the air. From the top at the observation area, you can see for over 140 miles.



that's been appreciated for centuries. Hopefully, it will still be valued and enjoyed for hundreds of years to come.

The town of Hot Springs offers a variety of lodging options, including hotels, campsites, cottages, and B&Bs. There's also a wide selection of restaurants. Two to try are Rolando's on Bathhouse Row, serving up fresh Central and South American cuisine in a pleasant setting. The other is McClard's, former President Clinton's favorite barbecue spot.

For additional tourist information, go to www.arkansas.com or www.hotsprings.org.

Penny Musco from Montclair, N.J., is a freelance writer whose young adult daughter is on a quest to visit all 50 states — and she's taking her mother along for the ride.