

Hot Springs, Arkansas: All about water, and more

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Mention Hot Springs, and thoughts immediately go to our region's favorites: Hot Springs, Virginia, with the historic Omni Homestead Resort in Bath County; and Hot Springs, North Carolina, a favorite stop on the Appalachian Trail. And then, there is Hot Springs, Arkansas, near Little Rock.

Though the soothing spring waters of the Appalachians share similarities with the thermal springs of Arkansas' Ouachita Mountains, one could argue that Hot Springs, Arkansas, with its distinctive, drinkable water and fascinating history, is the mother of hot springs destinations.

The town, which encompasses Hot Springs National Park, has long been a mecca for therapeutic thermal soaks. The traditional hot mineral baths, once believed to be curative for various ailments, are now enjoyed mainly for relaxation, along with modern spa treatments.

With history as a backdrop, visitors come to Hot Springs to experience spa activities, as well as a budding foodie culture and outdoor attractions.

Soak in history

Native Americans called the area of abundant hot springs "valley of the vapors" and considered it sacred ground. Centuries later, it became federally protected land when President Andrew Jackson pushed to preserve the natural springs. Congress established Hot Springs Reservation in 1832, and almost a century later the reserve came into the National Parks system.

During the late 1800s, as health seekers flocked to "take the waters" and numerous bathhouses were built, Hot Springs became a bustling turn-of-the-century spa resort. But by the 1950s, with advances in modern medicine and a decline in the use of prescriptive water therapies, many bathhouses were closed.

Today, eight architecturally unique bathhouses remain in the National Historic Landmark District, and the town thrives around its famous Bathhouse Row. Two are still open as spas: the Buckstaff and the Quapaw, which offer thermal mineral water baths and spa treatments. Other bathhouses have been repurposed. The Ozark is a museum of contemporary art, the Superior Bathhouse is now a brewpub, and the ornate Fordyce serves as a visitor center and museum.

Get active in “Spa City”

Hot Springs’ walkable downtown buzzes with activity around the hotels, shops, and eateries on Central Avenue and Bathhouse Row. Visitors will want to stroll the Grand Promenade, a brick pathway behind Bathhouse Row, to see where the springs bubble to the surface in several pools.

The park is home to 26 hiking trails, many accessible from the Grand Promenade. A short hike up Hot Springs Mountain leads to a tall lookout tower that affords 360-degree views. The West Mountain network of connecting trails and the 3.9-mile Greenway for pedestrians and cyclists are also accessible from town.

Hot Springs’ most popular attraction is Garvan Woodland Gardens, owned by the University of Arkansas. Walk, or take a golf cart tour, along four miles of garden paths that wind over stone bridges and through themed gardens. Favorite displays are the Japanese Gardens, waterfalls with explosive flowering Azalea, and seasonal blooms such as “daffodil hill” and the tulip extravaganza. Other attractions within the Gardens include the architectural masterpiece Anthony Chapel, and a new giant tree house (to be completed in 2018). In winter, enjoy one of Arkansas’ most elaborate outdoor holiday light displays, which opens mid-November and runs through New Year’s Eve.

Legendary haunts

Do you fancy having a drink at Babe Ruth’s favorite bar, visiting Al Capone’s hotel suite, or seeing Bill Clinton’s boyhood home? If you visit Hot Springs, you’ll join the ranks of famous and notorious visitors, alike, from U.S. presidents and actors to athletes and gangsters.

The historic Arlington Hotel, with its classic art deco bar, is a town landmark and the largest hotel in Arkansas. Mobster Al Capone stayed here regularly in suite 443, and famous guests include Theodore Roosevelt, Bill Clinton, and Yoko Ono.

Catch some live entertainment at the Ohio Club, Arkansas' oldest bar, established in 1905. Grab a barstool in the cozy club that has hosted and attracted many famous guests including Mae West, Babe Ruth, Tony Bennett, and Sammy Davis Jr.

Take a self-guided tour along Hot Springs' Historic Baseball Trail, highlighting the venue for spring training for the Chicago Cubs, Pittsburgh Pirates, Boston Red Sox, and other Major League teams. The trail marks milestones for some of the most legendary players who trained in Hot Springs, including Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio and Jackie Robinson.

Hot Springs offers a choice of lodging and eclectic cuisine, including the newest boutique hotel, The Waters, in a former doctors' office building across from Bathhouse Row. The hotel's Avenue Restaurant has a talented and creative chef, and excellent options nearby are the Superior Bathhouse Brewery, Rolando's Latin fusion, and Deluca's authentic Italian pizza. Outside of town, Lookout Point Lakeside Inn on the shores of Lake Hamilton is a relaxing retreat, offering gourmet breakfasts, scenic boat cruises and afternoon wine receptions.