

**National Geographic**

# Enjoy the Healing Waters of This Small National Park

**Hot Springs, Arkansas, is in fact home to natural hot springs, which flow from the mountain down to the historic spa town.**

**Location:** [Arkansas](#)

**Established:** March 4, 1921

**Size:** 5,550 acres

Most national parks cover hundreds of thousands of acres, are far from city streets, and keep natural resources away from commercial users ... but not Hot Springs. This smallest of national parks borders a city that has made an industry out of tapping and dispensing the park's major resource: mineral-rich waters of hot springs.

The heart of this peculiar park is Bathhouse Row on Central Avenue, the main street of Hot Springs, Arkansas. Rising above Central Avenue is Hot Springs Mountain, from which the waters flow. The mountain's lower western side once was coated with tufa, a milky-colored, porous rock formed of minerals deposited from the hot springs' constant cascade.

When Hot Springs prospered as a health spa in the mid-19th century, promoters covered, piped, and diverted the springs into Central Avenue bathhouses. They also prettified the slope by covering it with tons of dirt and planting grass and shrubs. "Ever since then," a longtime Hot Springs resident says, "it's been afflicted by eastern landscape architects who can't stand the sight of rocks."

The park calls itself the "oldest area in the national park system" because in 1832, 40 years before Yellowstone became the first national park, President Andrew Jackson set aside the hot springs as a special reservation. The federal land became a national park in 1921. By then Hot Springs had long been famous as a spa where people "took the waters," seeking relief from bunions, rheumatism, and other afflictions.

The park preserves the springs' "recharge zone," slopes where rain and snow soak into the ground, and the "discharge zone," which contains 47 springs belonging to the park. Each day about 700,000 gallons of water—at 143°F—flow from the springs into a complex piping and reservoir system. This supplies water to commercial baths and to free "jug fountains," where people flock daily to fill containers with the odorless, fresh-tasting, chemical-free water.

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

The Chicago White Stockings, Cincinnati Reds, Pittsburgh Pirates, Boston Red Sox, and other baseball teams flocked to Hot Springs for spring training from the 1880s to 1940s, soothing their sore muscles at the bathhouses.

## **FUN FACT**

The thermal hot springs waters in this park heat naturally to 143°F.

*Copy for this series includes excerpts from the [National Geographic Guide to the National Parks of the United States, Seventh Edition, 2012](#), and the National Parks articles featured in "Cutting Loose" in National Geographic Traveler.*