Preserving The Thermal Springs And Bathhouses Of Hot Springs, Arkansas

By Jennifer Bain

May 12, 2024

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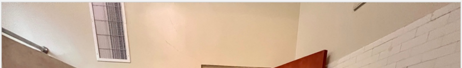
An aerial view of downtown Hot Springs, Arkansas with Hot Springs National Park and \

Editor's note: This corrects that Hot Springs National Park is the second-smallest "national park," not the smallest.

Like people have been doing here in the Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas since the late 1800s, I slip off a white bath sheet and ease into an antique bathtub filled with swirling thermal water. For 20 relaxing minutes, I enjoy a therapeutic soak before transferring to a sitz tub in another part of the Buckstaff Bathhouse.

“What you’re going to do is put your honey all the way down in there,” an attendant instructs as I sit gingerly in a sink-like contraption so my perineal region can get extra attention.

That’s not something you hear during most spa treatments — or in national parks for that matter — but the Buckstaff isn’t actually a spa. Instead, it’s a well-preserved 1911 Neoclassical Revival bathhouse in Hot Springs National Park that celebrates the golden age of medical bathing.



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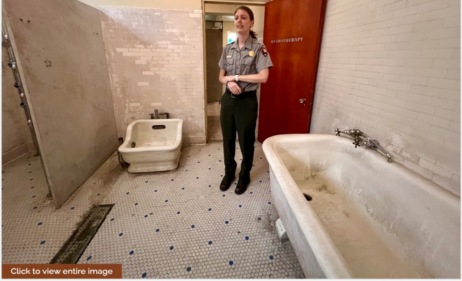

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Hot Springs National Park ranger Kendra Barat shows off historic sitz and bath tubs at the Park Service's visitor center/museum in the Fordyce Bathhouse/Jennifer Bain

In the 1800s, when modern medicine was in its infancy and most sick people were treated at home, those with money gravitated to the burgeoning city of Hot Springs to treat their bodies, minds and spirits. They didn't always have hot, running water at home but could soak in hot, mineral-rich water in opulent bathhouses, hike, stroll along a promenade, socialize and use the state's first gymnasium.

As government and medical officials worked with bathhouse owners to incorporate the latest hydrotherapy techniques, doctors prescribed bathing regimens that included bathing, steaming and cooling down sessions.

People — mainly men, I'm surprised to learn — bathed to treat aches, pains, arthritis, stomach aches, migraines and venereal diseases. "Where the sick get well and the well stay well," is the slogan on one vintage Buckstaff postcard.

BUCKSTAFF - BATHS

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The Buckstaff Bathhouse still operates much like it did during the golden age of medical bathing in Hot Springs, Arkansas/Jennifer Bain

Arriving in April with a healthy group of eight, I eagerly recreate most of the steps that were designed to maximize the healing power of water that now comes from 47 federally protected natural hot springs.

First, we buy tickets (you can't make reservations), although just for one $40 bath and not a three-week cycle of 21 baths. Then, after being whisked from the changeroom to tiny private bathing rooms, we hop into whirlpool tubs for 20-minute soaks in water that maxes out at 102F. Attendants no longer scrub guests with bath mitts to help open pores, induce sweating and stimulate blood flow.

Next is those five minutes in a sitz tub full of warm, shallow water while sipping iced thermal water.

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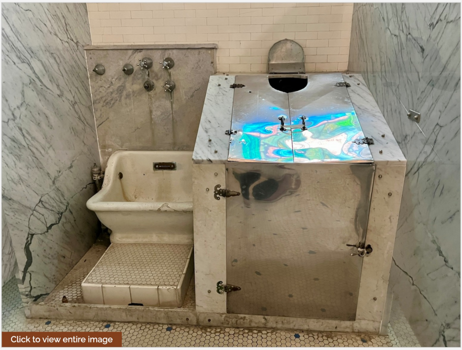
Then it's over to a bench in a strange, head-out "vapor cabinet" for about three minutes where temperatures that reach 145F can help with lung and sinus conditions.

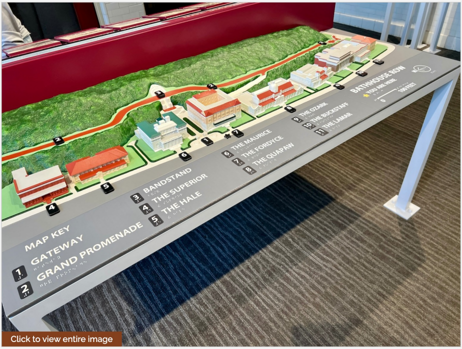


In the national park visitor center/museum at the Fordyce Bathhouse, a vintage sitz tub and head-out vapour cabinet are on display/Jennifer Bain

After that, I lie — my body covered in hot towels, my head wrapped in a cold one — on what feels like a hospital bed in a communal room. Cool water needle showers are on hold, so the finale is a 20-minute, full-body Swedish massage for $45 with a second attendant.

The strange but soothing regimen takes about 90 minutes and my main attendant is so busy juggling six clients that she barely has time to talk. To delve deeper, I stroll along "Bathhouse Row" on Central Avenue to admire eight preserved bathhouses built between 1892 and 1923.

"Bathhouse Row is the historic heart of an American spa," fading signage explains. "Since the 1830s, the city of Hot Springs has channeled much of its energy into becoming a national health spa. The Federal Government made `taking the waters' available to all by providing baths and health services to veterans and the poor, and the National Park landscaped many of the exercise paths that were considered essential to good health."



A 3D model shows how the \

Congress created Hot Springs Reservation in 1832 as the nation's first federally protected recreation area, decades before Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872. After the National Park Service was formed in 1916, the reservation was upgraded to a national park in 1921 to protect the geothermal spring water and surrounding lands for public health, wellness and enjoyment, much like what happened with the hot springs in what became Banff National Park in Canada in 1885.

At 5,550 acres, Hot Springs is America's second-smallest "national park" in the National Park System, trailing the 192-acre Gateway Arch National Park. (*The smallest unit of the National Park System is Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial, at just 0.02 acres*). Fordyce Bathhouse serves as a visitor center and museum for Hot Springs.

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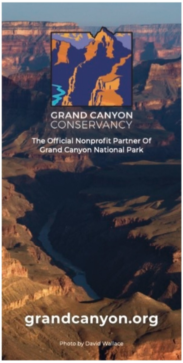
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Photo by David Wallace

Inspired by the spas of Europe, Samuel W. Fordyce arrived in 1873 seeking relief from Civil War injuries and found rickety bathhouses, crowded streets and untapped potential. He funded hotels, city utilities, bathhouses and even an opera house and helped transform Hot Springs into a world-class health destination.

HERE
National Park Service
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Hot Springs National Park
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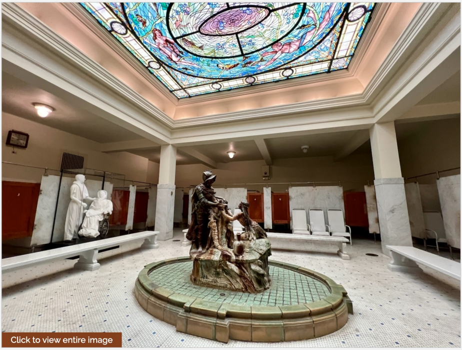
Built in 1914-1915 and now used as the Hot Springs National Park visitor center/museum, the Fordyce Bathhouse boasts Renaissance Revival architecture/Jennifer Bain

“Feeling that it was entirely by the use of hot water that I was restored to health, I concluded to erect and equip the finest bathing establishment in the world,” Fordyce boasted in 1914. His ornate Renaissance Revival bathhouse opened the next year and ran until 1962.

In 1989, an extensively restored Fordyce reopened as the park’s visitor center and historically furnished museum. It’s here that I make sense of my Buckstaff experience by walking through rooms that recreate the bathhouse steps, and then reading new exhibits that reconsider the past.



The medical bathing era was dominated by men, and the opulent men's bath hall at the Fordyce Bathhouse drives home this point/Jennifer Bain

But first, I get a crash course in water.

For thousands of years, springs bubbled out of a nearby mountainside “casting off clouds of vapour.” Rainwater collects in a watershed known as the recharge area. It seeps down through the layers of novaculite, sandstone and shale, and is heated by a naturally occurring geothermal gradient. More than a mile below the earth’s surface, a narrow fault allows the hot water to shoot back toward the surface, where it emerges as thermal springs.

“The water coming out of Hot Springs today fell as rain nearly 4,500 years ago — the same time the pyramids of Egypt were being built,” signage explains.

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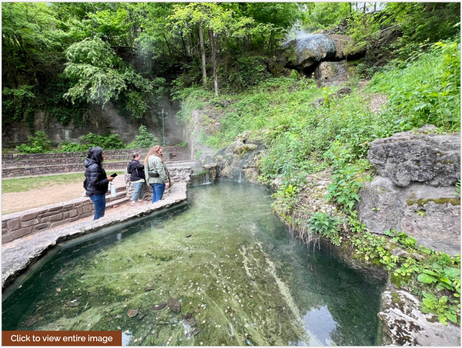
Memorabilia from the golden era on Bathhouse Row in Hot Springs, Arkansas is on display at the Fordyce Bathhouse (now the Hot Springs National Park visitor center)/Jennifer Bain

Like all water, it's two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. It mixes with cooler groundwater near the surface and so averages 143F (that's 20 degrees warmer than hot water from your faucet).

Since the park isn't near a volcano, the water doesn't have a sulfurous smell like thermal springs in places like Yellowstone and Iceland. It's safe to drink and contains small amounts of silica, bicarbonate, calcium, sulfate, magnesium, chloride, sodium, fluoride, potassium and oxygen.

"This geological wonder spurred human development and fueled a unique bathing culture," explains one exhibit. "Here, people have soothed their aches, quieted their minds, and even healed their wounds of war. The park provides the public with geothermal spring water in its natural state."

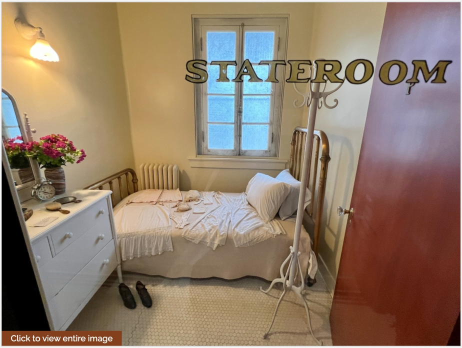


Along the Grand Promenade behind Bathhouse Row, you'll find this Hot Water Cascade (a display spring)/Jennifer Bain

Little is known about how the Quapaw people who occupied the land for more than 10,000 years used the hot springs, but Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto was the first European to visit when he arrived looking for gold in 1541.

Settlers started building camps around the springs in the early 1800s and those rickety structures evolved into wooden bathhouses and then elaborate bathhouses.

From the "Access Through the Ages" exhibit, I learn that Congress created Hot Springs Reservation to ensure that private interests couldn't restrict public access to the thermal water's health benefits. The water was supposed to be available to everyone, but not everyone received equal access.

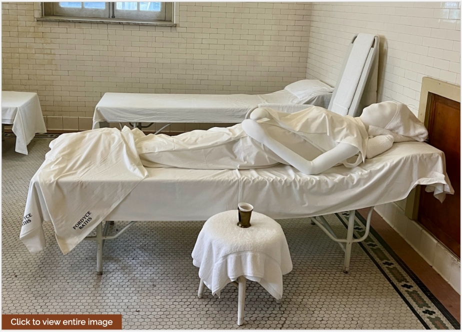


Affluent men and women could rent staterooms for the day at the Fordyce Bathhouse that came with valet or maid service/Jennifer Bain

Those who couldn't afford bathhouse fees visited open springs on the hillside, built campsites and forged a community called "Ral City" (short for neuralgia, an arthritis-like ailment).

When former Civil War general Benjamin Kelley became the park's first superintendent in 1877, bathhouse owners pressured him to limit access to the springs on the mountain due to fears that people were polluting the waters. Federal troops were called in to quell protests. Kelley later got federal funds to give the poor free baths — but people had to go through the humiliation of declaring themselves impoverished.

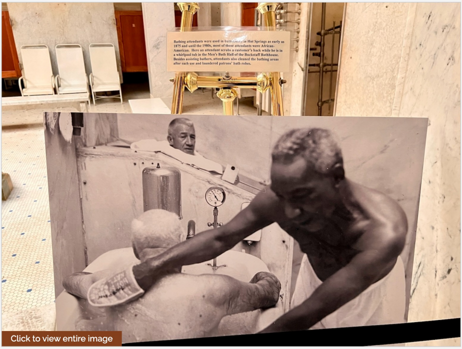
"Could you afford a bath?" interpretive signage asks visitors. One Fordyce bath cost 50 cents in 1815 and a course of 21 baths cost $10 at a time when butchers made 39 cents an hour and iron workers earned 16 cents an hour.



At the Hot Springs National Park visitor center/museum, you can see how the bathing regimen included time in a \

In 1887, America's first general hospital for army and navy patients opened here so the healing waters could help wounded soldiers.

But it was also a time of racism in the segregated South. African-American bathhouse workers weren't allowed to bathe where they worked, so African-Americans entrepreneurs ran their own bathhouses until the Civil Rights movement forced America to desegregate in the 1960s.


Bathing attendants were used in bathhouses in Hot Springs as early as 1875 and until the 1980s, most of those attendants were African-American. Here an attendant scrubs a customer's back while he is in a whirlpool tub in the Men's Bath Hall of the Buckstaff Bathhouse. Besides assisting bathers, attendants also cleaned the bathing areas after each use and laundered patrons' bath robes.
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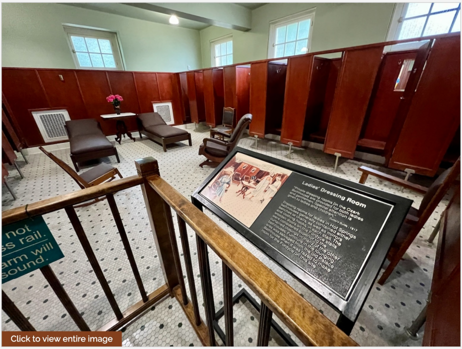
Most of the Bathhouse Row bathing attendants were African-Americans who were not allowed to bathe in the bathhouses. This photo of an archival photo shows a man scrubbing a Buckstaff Bathhouse patron's back/Jennifer Bain

It was also a time of sexism. Strolling through the Fordyce, I see how the women's bath hall is small and simple while the men's version boasts marble benches and a domed skylight with about 8,000 pieces of glass arranged to represent Neptune's daughter, mermaids, dolphins and fish in swirling water.

A roof garden overlooks what men's and women's "courts," where men sunbathed nude and women were forced to remain modest.

Bathhouse guests could rent private staterooms for the day with valet or maid service. Everyone could gather in an assembly room to meet friends, read letters, listen to music and play games. In the oldest gymnasium in Arkansas, people used wooden equipment such as punching bags, parallel bars and vaulting horses to increase their range of motion and strengthen muscles.



The park's visitor center/museum shows what a dressing room for women looked like during the heyday of medical bathing/Jennifer Bain

In the Fordyce basement, I peer through foggy glass to see where hot water bubbles from the earth.

Each bathhouse used a network of troughs to bring the thermal water into the tubs. The water is captured in green boxes, flows into collection pipes, goes to a storage reservoir and gets pumped through a heat exchange station to cool before being stored in tanks and distributed to bathhouses and fountains.

On a tour with ranger Kendra Barat, I hear how Harry Hallock sissued hygiene rules and began checking the qualifications of doctors and attendants beginning in 1910 when he was the medical director. Park officials forced bath attendants to take classes and pass detailed exams until a superintendent came along and put an end to that heavy-handed practice.

FORDYCE SPRING
46
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It's not much to look at, but the Fordyce Spring can be seen through glass in the visitor center/museum basement/Jennifer Bain

That vapor cabinet that I sat in? It was once used to stimulate skin secretions and caused profuse sweating, rapid pulse and higher body temperatures that supposedly helped with advanced syphilis, jaundice, obesity and rheumatism.

Venereal disease was the most common ailment among Hot Springs visitors in the 1890s. But as penicillin and other drugs replaced mercury rubs in the 1940s, people stopped bathing for health reasons. Demand peaked here around 1947 with more than one million baths.

“People really did leave feeling so much better,” says Barat, who gives our tour a feminist slant and delves into the way men were considered “more reliable patients” back when “there was just so much unknown about women's bodies.”

In Bathhouse Row's heyday, though, people like President Theodore Roosevelt, musician Count Basie and industrialist-philanthropist Andrew Carnegie visited. So did gangsters like Al Capone — and the history of illegal casino gambling is told at the Gangster Museum of America across from the Buckstaff.

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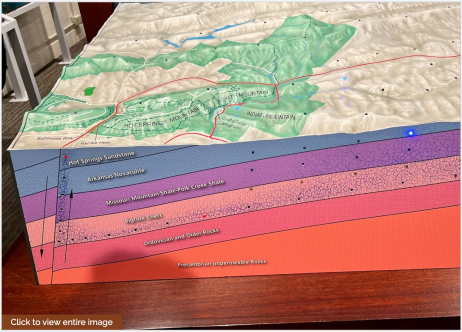
The oldest gymnasium in Arkansas, a place where Major League Baseball players once trained, is at the Hot Springs National Park visitor center/museum in the Fordyce Bathhouse/Jennifer Bain

In the late 1880s, Hot Springs became the birthplace of Major League Baseball spring training and attracted stars like Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson. Players who trained in the Fordyce gym also drank heavily and used hot bath regimens to “boil out impurities in their systems.”

Now Hot Springs is a city of 38,000 that's known for spa and lake vacations. Highlights for me are the solitude of In the Trees (a treehouse mountain resort), mining quartz crystals at Avant Mining Fisher Mountain about 40 minutes west of the city, and exploring an oddly shaped national park that's part urban and part forest.



A 3D model shows the irregular boundaries of Hot Springs National Park as it wraps around downtown/Jennifer Bain

The urban part is found along the east side of a stretch of Central Avenue, but once you take the Grand Promenade — a half-mile brick National Recreation Trail that runs parallel to Bathhouse Row — you'll see the Hot Water Cascade (a display spring), Hot Springs Mountain Tower and 26 miles of hiking trails.

The Buckstaff is the sole operating survivor of eight remarkable buildings from the golden age of bathing.

The 1922 Quapaw Bathhouse, with its tiled dome, is now a modern spa. The Lamar, built in 1923 in symmetrical California style, houses the park store. Built in 1892, the Hale is the oldest bathhouse and is now the Hotel Hale. The 1922 Ozark serves as the Hot Springs National Park Cultural Center, while the 1912 Maurice is vacant and looking for an adaptive reuse tenant.

LAMAR
National Park Service
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Bathhouse Row Emporium
Hot Springs National Park
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The Lamar Bathhouse is now the national park store, Bathhouse Row Emporium/Jennifer Bain

Which brings us to the 1916 Superior Bathhouse. The smallest of the bathhouses, and the first to racially integrate, it's now home to the only brewery in an American national park and the only one in the world that uses thermal spring water.

Rose Schweikhart, a classical tuba player, launched the Superior Bathhouse Brewery in 2013 as a craft brewery and family-friendly restaurant with a lovely patio since it's on the north end of Bathhouse Row and right beside green space. "We are Hot Springs on tap," she likes to say.

As I sip on root beer made with thermal water and devour a smashburger made with Arkansas beef, I hear how Schweikhart was shocked that nobody was "making beer with this famous spring water you can drink" so she secured a 55-year lease from the Park Service and got to work.

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Rose Schweikhart is the founder/owner of the Superior Bathhouse Brewery, the only brewery in an American national park/Jennifer Bain

"One of the reasons that I make beer with thermal water is because the National Park Service maintains the system so that it's potable," she says, pointing out the pipe that comes right into the brewery. She pays just a couple bucks for 1,000 gallons of thermal water.

"Beer is 95 percent water, so water is the main ingredient of beer even though it's the least exciting ingredient," Schweikhart points out, and "so philosophically water makes good beer, but chemically it's kind of a blank slate. Our water is so unique because it is heated geologically not volcanically."

The springs can produce more than 650,000 gallons of hot water a day — enough for 13 tubs a minute or 18,048 tubs a day. The park store sells empty growlers and mason jars so visitors can fill up at the fountains where locals fill up jugs.

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The National Park Service offers free water at a few jug stations around Hot Springs, Arkansas/Jennifer Bain

"The water you are about to drink is from a time when the world was cleaner and purer and pristine," promises a sign at one fountain. "Hot Springs thermal water began as rainfall over 4,000 years ago. Where has it been since then? Well, scientists say it has been taking its time filtering through successive strata of rock formations. And in this 4,000-year process, the water is incredibly enriched and purified."

Although this thermal water is centuries old, the park warns, "our actions today can have serious effects in the future."

Deforestation and human development threaten the recharge area that needs steady, gentle rain so the water can seep into the ground. Climate change may lead to new weather patterns that reduce rainfall or create violent storms causing the rainwater to run off before the ground can absorb it.

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NPS ranger Kendra Barat leads a public tour along the Grand Promenade in Hot Springs National Park in Hot Springs, Arkansas/Jennifer Bain

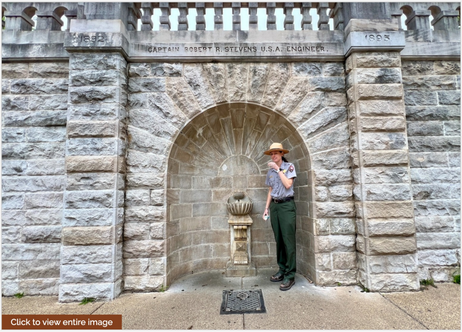
As the Park Service protects this "significant national landmark in the culture of leisure," it reminds people to conserve water and protect the environment.

The average American uses 100 gallons of water a day — 35 gallons for a 15-minute shower, 25 gallons for a load of laundry, 20 gallons to water the lawn for 10 minutes, 1.5 gallons to flush a toilet and 0.5 gallons to drink eight glasses.

When I wind up behind the Fordyce at what's known as "the shell fountain," Barat hands out paper cups and offers a drink.

"A lot of people who travel here are freaked out about it, but some people refuse to drink anything else," says Barat. "I want your honest review."

Pleasingly netural and worth preserving, I'd say.



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Hot Springs National Park ranger Kendra Barat offers drinks of thermal water from what's known as the \

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