

Hot Springs National Park

Picture steam billowing into the air above cascading streams of hot mineral water in a scenic mountain valley. Spring water bubbles up from deep in the ground to create warm mud baths and clear, hot pools. It's a spa provided by Mother Nature which you can still enjoy today in central Arkansas!

Not surprisingly, the Hot Springs have attracted humans for millennia. Archeological evidence shows that for over 8,000 years members of many Native American tribes set aside their weapons and peacefully gathered in the valley to take pleasure in the healing properties of the thermal springs. When Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto reached the area in 1541, he learned that Native Americans' name for the area translated to "Valley of the Vapors."

Early European settlers were equally delighted by the hot springs, where water which has been heated a mile below ground bubbles to the earth's surface at 143 degrees Fahrenheit. In the early 1800s a bustling town grew up around the springs to serve health seekers. It was believed that soaking in the waters benefited people with diseases of the skin and blood, nervous problems, rheumatism and related ailments, as well as diseases suffered by women. Physicians set up practices to treat patients traveling from other U.S. states and Europe, so lodges and bath houses were also in demand. While many wealthy people visited the Spa, the U.S. Public Health Service also treated people who were not able to pay. Careful attention was given to good health care, and the Government Free Bathhouse was one of the first facilities in the United States to use penicillin.

In order to conserve uncontaminated water for public use and protect the underground hydrological system which feeds the springs, the U.S. Congress created Hot Springs Reservation in 1832. It was made a national park in 1921. Covering just 900 acres, Hot Springs is the smallest national park by area in the country, but it continues to attract two to three million visitors annually for recreation, relaxation and health benefits.

Just 45 minutes from Little Rock, and adjacent to downtown Hot Springs, this is one of most easily accessible national parks. You can tour Bathhouse Row's eight historic buildings, and even enjoy a thermal bath in two of these outstanding examples of Gilded Age architecture. The Buckstaff and Quapaw bathhouses offer you an invigorating dip in the naturally warm waters. A third bathhouse, the Fordyce, was transformed into a museum so that you can learn about this fascinating city's past. The museum tells stories of the Hot Springs discovery and settlement, uses during the civil war, gang and gambling operations, and the renovated spa city it has become today.

There is much to discover and enjoy in both the national park and the town. Come and find out for yourself why people have been attracted to Hot Springs throughout the ages.

Source(s):

Hot Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau. (2011). Retrieved February 16, 2011 from website <http://www.hotsprings.org/>

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