



Bathing in History

Spring is *always* in the air at this restored watering hole.

By Vanessa Geneva Ahern

Walking through the majestic brick arches leading to the entryway of the Roosevelt Baths & Spa, part of the Gideon Putnam Resort & Spa (gideonputnam.com) in upstate New York's sprawling Saratoga Spa State Park, it's easy to summon the property's glorious past. Commissioned in the 1930s by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who imagined it as a "world-class, European-style spa," the destination once enjoyed status as *the* high-end bathhouse of local socialites, who came daily in droves, many of them toting hydrotherapy prescriptions from their doctors. It was also a haven for patients recovering from surgery and illness—even the nine-hole golf course was designed by cardiac surgeons.

When not "taking the waters," guests gathered at the resort's Hall of Springs to sip, socialize and engage in sophisticated banter. "More than just taking the baths, the experience was about spending time at the Hall of Springs, belling up to the bar and drinking the water," explains spa director Kimberly Rossi. "It was about walk-



ing through the park and smelling the clean air, or playing a low-key round of golf."

Today, resort guests still relish golfing and inhaling the sweet pine air of the park's 2,000-acre woodlands. But, the Hall of Springs is now a modern venue for weddings. And the Roosevelt Baths & Spa, reopened in 2004 following a major renovation, has become a focal point, featuring 42 treatment suites, separate men's and women's steam rooms and a coed relaxation room.

Operating with a renewed mission to provide a fresh generation of visitors with the hydrotherapy that put the resort on the map some 75 years ago, the Roosevelt now welcomes about 200 guests daily and pours 17,000-plus mineral baths annually.



A MATTER OF TASTE

Aime Trent Millet, a local water expert, runs a regular “Walk, Talk, and Taste Tour,” a gentle, two-hour hike that takes in the 12 mineral springs of Saratoga Spa State Park.

Visitors bring water bottles and jugs to take home the water, and many are surprised when they drink naturally carbonated water straight from the earth for the first time. The strong taste—which people liken to a salty seltzer or a “metallic” tonic—is due to the high sodium content, mixed with the natural carbonation.

Millet likes to share anecdotes about the water’s healing properties, such as the time a spa-goer was so mystified that soaking in the mineral bath had helped her carpal tunnel symptoms that she showed off her new finger flexibility to strangers in the waiting room!

DEEP AND MEANINGFUL

The spa’s most popular bath service is a signature mineral bath (40 min./\$30) followed by a massage, but the menu also encompasses body treatments, facials, and wellness services such as acupuncture, ayurvedic consultations, meditation, luminous healing and yoga. “We find that when guests are on vacation and have more time, they want to try things that will help them, and that they can incorporate into their day-to-day lives,” says Rossi. People come for different reasons: “There are those who are curious and who want to do something connected to the town and its history. Then there are those looking for a spa treatment that’s affordable. Some come regularly, others as part of an annual ritual.”

Taking a mineral bath can be a transformative experience. Each oversized cast-iron tub is set in a private,

candlelit room. “The water comes out of the ground at a chilly 55 degrees, and it’s naturally effervescent, with a high content of sodium and other minerals,” explains Rossi. “We mix it with warm water only to make the temperature more comfortable, but it doesn’t appear to dilute the effects at all.”

Guests are encouraged to disregard the color of the water, which is reminiscent of chicken broth or dark ginger ale, and instead focus on the bath’s benefits. “The elements (carbon dioxide and minerals) in the water are structured in a way that it stimulates the circulatory system so the heart and lungs start to work harder, but not to the point of exhaustion,” says Rossi. The effect is relaxing—ultimately.

“You get in and your mind is racing. You think, ‘How am I going to spend 40 minutes in here?’ But after several minutes, your body just surrenders,” she adds. While soaking, guests see bubbles dancing on the water; depending on the water table, there can be a lot of bubbles or just a few. “Some people say it brings them back to the state of being in the womb. Many magical things can happen, physically and emotionally.”

Rossi says her favorite part of the job is facilitating an experience that impacts people’s health and wellness. She takes advantage of the mineral baths weekly and is a firm believer that they can improve one’s health and maybe even extend one’s life. “I’m actually 103!” she quips.

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