BALNEOLOGICAL USE OF THERMAL WATERS

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PART 1: "TAKING THE WATERS" - INTRODUCTION TO BALNEOLOGY

Background

People have used geothermal water and mineral waters for bathing and their health for many thousand of years. Balneology, the practice of using natural mineral water for the treatment and cure of disease, also has a long history. Based on archeological finds in Asia, mineral water has been used for bathing since the Bronze Age, about 5000 years ago. Many hot springs have been used in connection with religious rites in Egypt and by the Jews of the Middle East. The Greeks, Turks and Romans were famous for their spa development and use from Persia to England. The word "spa" traces its origin to a town near Liège in southern Belgium near the German border. Here a spring of iron-bearing water was used by an iron master in 1326 to cure his ailments. He founded a health resort at the spring called Espa (meaning fountain in the Walloon language). Espa became so popular that the word know in English as spa became the common designation for similar health resorts around the world (Lund, 1996).

Great spas have a long history, often stretching back to Roman times. Bath in England, for instance, was originally known as Aquae Sulis, Baden-Baden in Germany as Aquae Aureliae, and Aix-les-Bains in France as Aquae Allobrogum (Rockel, 1986).

Today, especially in Europe and Japan, the use of medically supervised spas has long been accepted. They are used for both treatment and preventive therapy. The former Soviet Union had 3500 spas and some 5000 reconditioning centers all administered and run by the state. In the former Czechoslovakia, there are 52 mineral water health spas and more than 1900 mineral springs, which every year about 220,000 citizens are granted free spa treatment for three weeks, paid by the national health insurance program. The more famous ones are Karlbad in the present Czech Republic and Pieštany in Slovakia. Many of these spas are being privatized today, and are dependent on income from visits by persons from outside the country. In Rotorua, New Zealand, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital used various mineral waters and hot springs muds to help soldiers from the WWII Pacific wars recuperate from battle injuries. In Japan there are over 1500 spas that are used by over 100 million visitors every years. Some of these international uses have been documented by Hotta and Ishiguaro (undated), Lund (1992 and 1996,) in "Stories form a Heated Earth" (1999), and the Geo-Heat Center Quarterly Bulletin (1993).

The Indians of the Americas considered hot springs as sacred places and believed in the healing powers of the heat and mineral waters. Montezuma, the great Aztec leader, spent time at a spa, Aqua Hedionda, to recuperate from his strenuous duties; which was later developed into a fashionable spa by the Spaniards (Salgado-Pareja, 1988). Every major hot spring in the U.S. has some record of use by the Indians, some for over 10,000 years. These springs were also known as neutral ground, to which warriors could travel and rest unmolested by other tribes. Here they would recuperate from battle. Today, there are approximately 210 spas in the USA with 4.5 million persons attending a spa in 1997. Details on the U.S. use of mineral waters and hot springs can be found in Part 2: Balneological Use of Thermal Waters in the USA in this publications.

Improving your health and your appearance, and getting away from stresses to refresh and revitalize your body and your mind are the main reasons why people go to spas and why spas are becoming an increasingly important part of American life. The 7-day miracle, as some refer to a week's spa vacation, provides you with a necessary interlude to change your pace of life and your way of being, to lose weight, shape up, reduce stress, gain confidence, reassess your goals, recharge your vitality, learn new exercise and nutrition behaviors, reward yourself with time out for yourself--and have a good time, a carefree holiday (Van Itallie and Hadley, 1988)

What is a Spa?

The word "spa" is also used as a Latin abbreviation for: S = salud, P = per, A = aqua, or "Health through Water." In Germany, they refer to the "Kur," which does not mean just a cure, but instead is a series of treatments over time including baths, taking (drinking) water, massage, exercise, mud baths, etc.

For the sophisticated European of the nineteenth century, a spa was much more than just a health resort. The famous spas of France, Germany and Britain were elegant social and cultural centers. Most who took the cure ["kur"] did not do so primarily for medical reasons, but to see and be seen by high society (Rockel, 1986).

Other definitions include (DeVierville, 1998):

> "The spa is the social aspect of using water therapeutically."
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> "The spa is a natural space and place with a perspective on time."
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> "A spa is a space with a purpose, through a plan, by a purpose, for a period of time."