

LITTLE ROCK: HOT WATER, COOL TOWN

Bathhouse Row, a gangster-filled history, hot springs and beautiful scenery beckon you to this Arkansas town

Photos and story by Mary Welch

TO HEAR THE LOCALS TELL IT, HAD then-Governor Winthrop Rockefeller not destroyed the illegal gambling backrooms, the bootleg whiskey and houses of ill repute, Celine Dion and Britney Spears would be doing their residencies in Hot Springs rather than Las Vegas.

“Many say that Hot Springs was Vegas before Vegas became Vegas,” says Tom Hill, museum curator at Hot Springs National Park.

And, there is some truth to that. Nestled in the Ouachita Mountains, Hot Springs is a hamlet where 143-degree water pops out of the ground from Hot Springs Mountain. Thanks to the perceived healing powers of the water, Hot Springs became a bustling town for those who came for “treatments.” The town attracted a variety of visitors — rich people who enjoyed the peace and quiet, gangsters, entertainers, athletes — and everyone in between. Tony Bennett first sang, “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” here.



Top to Bottom: A spring at Hot Springs National Park; View from Lake Hamilton; Bathhouse Row

GANGSTERS GALORE

From 1927 until 1967, Hot Springs hosted the largest illegal gambling racket in the country and, up and down Central Avenue, Park Avenue and Lake Hamilton, 103 establishments operated without any hassle. In fact, despite all the “bad boys,” the only serious gun violence was between two law enforcement entities fighting over their share of the graft.

Al Capone rented out the fourth floor of the Arlington Hotel, which allowed him to see who was entering his favorite hangouts, the Ohio Club and the Southern Club.

Also calling Hot Springs home (at least during part of the year) were Frank Costello, one of the most powerful Mafia bosses who headed up the Genovese crime family, Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky (who brought his son for treatment of cerebral palsy). And when The Stork Club and Cotton Club (and the illegal gambling operations) were shut down in New York City, owner Owen Madden moved his operations to — you guessed it — Hot Springs. Alvin Karpis, America’s last official “Public Enemy No. 1” came to Hot Springs where his common-law-wife, Grace Goldstein, managed a house of prostitution.

These gangsters were much loved, and they loved Hot Springs. Lansky built the largest Boys Club in Arkansas and regularly paid for the high school’s band uniforms (including those worn by hometown-boy-made-good Bill Clinton). Capone had a reputation of being a big tipper, while his enforcer Tommy Nitti and his wife adopted a baby from America’s first Spa Town.

You don’t have to be a gangster to love Hot Springs. There are plenty of legal reasons to visit this city, about an hour’s drive from Little Rock. First off, the scenery is spectacular. The air is fresh; there’s very little industry around. Even more striking is that, in the heart of Wal-Mart country, franchised operations and touristy shops don’t dot the downtown streets spoiling the mood. At heart, it’s still a small town that appreciates nature, its history and loves its water.

PURE, FREE, HOT WATER

Yes, the water. Unlike many towns with springs, Hot Springs’ water doesn’t have a sulphur smell. It is pure and hot. And, free. There are public spigots where people fill jugs with the magic liquid. Otherwise, the best way to experience the healing waters is with a treatment.

Before getting a must-have treatment, walk down Bathhouse Row on Central Avenue and spend some

>travel near: **hot springs, arkansas**

time in the Lamar Bathhouse, a 1923 structure that offers a glimpse into what the men and women experienced back in the day, and is now a National Park Service museum. There was a well-equipped coed gymnasium and a separate relaxation area for women, so the fair sex could enjoy music and write in their journals before or after a treatment. The treatment centers featured a range of tub sizes as well as box-like saunas where you would sit, head poking out, and soak in the thermal waters.

Sound familiar to you spa-going travelgirls? In fact, the treatments haven't changed much over the decades. I experienced one at the Arlington Hotel where I soaked in a tub with enthusiastic jets twirling around 90-something-degree water for about 20 minutes and drank warm water as to not shock the body. After that, it was time in the steam room, followed by an attendant tightly wrapping my body in hot towels like a mummy. After 20 minutes, a cold shower and massage finished the process. Other treatment centers, such as the Quapaw Baths, a 1922 bathhouse, feature pools of various temperatures where men and women soak and relax. A session in the thermal pools is \$20 while a private mineral bath is \$30. The treatment I had with the wrap and massage is called "The Works" and costs \$85.

NATURAL BEAUTY

After treatments, Hot Springs' natural beauty is the biggest draw. Explore Lake Ouachita's Vista Trail that covers more than 40 miles of shoreline and is perfect for mountain bikers and long-distance runners to escape into the wilderness. The 7.1 mile-long Sunset Trail features beautiful wildflowers and stunning views.

If exercise is not your thing but nature is, a visit to the Garvan Woodland Gardens is a must. The botanical garden features fantastic photo ops at every turn. You can walk the paths, or take a ride on a golf cart through the gardens where more than 70 species of plants and shrubs and 160 different types of azaleas call home. Take time to admire the Anthony Chapel, a stunning 57-foot structure that features floor-to-ceiling windows, flagstone floors and pine columns. It's the perfect setting for a wedding or to take a minute and reflect.

Nearby lakes, such as Lake Hamilton, offer fishing, boating, swimming and jet skiing. For a sweet stay, try the Lookout Point Lakeside Inn, a luxury boutique hotel that has received national acclaim as one of the most romantic B&Bs in the country. Turning the romance factor up a notch is a flower-filled garden walkway that leads down to the lake. Book a ride on *The Lady*, a 24-foot Harris Solstice Tri-toon boat for a pre-dinner cruise, with wine, cheese and fruit.



L-R, Top to Bottom: Ladies Cooling Room at Fordyce Bathhouse; Statue of Hernando de Soto receiving thermal waters from a Native American at the Fordyce Bathhouse; Lake Hamilton from the Garvan Woodland Gardens; Patio at the Lookout Point Lakeside Inn; Anthony Chapel at Garvan Woodland Gardens



L-R, From Top: Chilled carrot soup with orange-scented cauliflower puree and candied nuts at The Avenue; Elvis is in the house at DeLuca's Pizzeria; Beer from Superior Bathhouse Brewery and Distillery; Raspberry coconut milk ice cream, curried granola, lime curd and minted raspberries from The Avenue. Bottom: Pizza from DeLuca's Pizzeria



A QUIRKY FOODIE TOWN

Hot Springs is a delightful town with its feet planted firmly in the past, but with its sights set on the future. Central Avenue has a variety of quaint shops, including jewelry shops with locally mined gems, antique stores and hip clothing boutiques. You'll also find the Gangster Museum of America, where you can learn more about the area's colorful past.

At least one day of any visit must start at the Pancake House, which has served breakfast exclusively since 1940. The portions are large and the meal hearty. Pancakes are the specialty and you can get them with blueberry, apple or bananas as well as buckwheat. The ham and sausage are so good they ship to customers across the country. You will hardly have your coffee cup filled before owner Keely Ardman De Salvo drops by your table for a chat.

Another culinary highlight is The Avenue, a southern artisan-style restaurant located in the newly renovated Waters Hotel, where award-winning Executive Chef Casey Copeland is a Le Cordon Bleu alumnus. He's introducing an elevated cuisine to Hot Springs that is as beautiful as it is tasty.

While on Bathhouse Row, stop at the Superior Bathhouse Brewery and Distillery and taste the world's first brewery to utilize thermal spring water as the main ingredient. Stay a bit and listen to Brewmaster Rose Schweikhart talk about her journey from being a classically trained tuba player from Connecticut to opening a brewery in a historic former bathhouse. The only thing better than the story is the beer.

Rolando's is another surprise. Rolando, a native of Ecuador, serves Nuevo Latino cuisine in an 1800's building with a delightful patio. DeLuca's Pizzeria, a local favorite, serves pizzas that are large, with fresh ingredients and a sauce that zings. DeLuca's is a family business and the pizzas reflect it with items such as Franky's Flatbush pie, Benny Briggs, the Gooch pie and Lori Lane. Vegan travelgirls will applaud the Beau and Wendy's Vegan pie. The staff is exactly what you would hope for in a New York-style pizzeria — complete with Owner Tony Valinoti's love of Elvis.

Bottom line? If you're looking for a touch of Americana at a reasonable price, Hot Springs should be on your radar. Enjoy the natural beauty, experience the treatments and come back home rejuvenated.

