

Travel

Going to a spa? Try the original one, in Belgium.



The Pavillon des Petits Jeux is one of several Belle Époque structures that combine iron and glass in Spa, Belgium, at the Parc de Sept Heures — so named because bathers would often stroll here at the end of the day on the advice of doctors. (Sylvie Bigar/For The Washington Post)

By **Sylvie Bigar**

February 1

“Thirsty?” asks the flight attendant as she hands me a blue bottle. I twist the cap and sip the crisp, slightly acidic water. One look at the label, Spa Reine, and I wonder if the advertising gods are tracking me. Spa. That’s where I am headed. No, not to the spa — to the Belgian town.

Last year, after several grueling weeks spent juggling teenagers, dogs and deadlines, I sat at my computer, bent on planning a spa break. Instead, I stumbled on that town in Belgium where, I learned, the common noun originated. A few clicks and I was hooked. Last

September, I flew to Brussels and took the train for an easy two-hour ride to Spa (population about 10,000), near Liege within the Ardennes forest, to discover where it all started.

Lulled by the rhythm of the train, I admired the late summer light streaming through the dense, peaceful woods, but I knew that in December 1944, those same trees became the site of one of the fiercest military battles. The Battle of the Bulge, Hitler’s last major offensive against the Allies, claimed about 19,000 American lives in just a few weeks.

“Thousands of soldiers are buried in military cemeteries in the area,” said Gaëtan Plein, a guide and raconteur, the next day as we strolled through the quaint town center.

[Antwerp, Belgium: A cosmopolitan port city that offers art, diamonds, ale, architecture — and chocolate]

Some say there are 25 springs, while others count as many as 300 sprinkled throughout the rolling hills. Their medicinal properties were already known locally in the 16th century, but when Czar Peter I of Russia (Peter the Great) arrived for a month-long stay in 1717 at the recommendation of his doctor and left seemingly cured of his liver ailment, he ignited the interest of aristocrats throughout Europe and Russia. Suddenly, Spa was the place to be.



ARMAND EMAMDJOMEH/THE WASHINGTON POST

“At the time,” said Marie-Christine Schils, the curator of the Museum of Spa, “doctors weren’t sure how the water helped but they prescribed it to combat anemia, depression and even infertility.”

Over the next decades, noble gentlemen and ladies, accompanied by their massive entourages, flocked to town to drink the healing waters. A 1734 guidebook of the springs would find its way to Marie Antoinette’s library at Versailles. To accommodate and entertain these travelers, who often stayed for weeks at a time, hotels and boardinghouses sprouted, promenades were constructed and the first casino (which would serve as a recreation center for the First United States Army in 1945) was built.

“Upon returning to England,” Schils said, “English doctors appended the name Spa to local springs with similar properties such as Scarborough Spa,” and that’s how the name became generic.



La Geronstere still spouts sulfurous spring water that is recommended as a treatment for respiratory ailments. (Sylvie Bigar/For The Washington Post)



Swimmers lounge in the outdoor pool at Les Thermes de Spa during what is known as blue hour in the town. (Alamy Stock Photo)

In the 19th century, Spa was stylish. European artists such as J.M.W. Turner and Gustave Courbet, and writers such as Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo visited. Even the American writer James Fenimore Cooper made the trip, as did the new bourgeois crowd. Bathing in the mineral water became fashionable, and the town reinvented itself as a “thermal city” not only focused on health but also on the new concept of well-being.

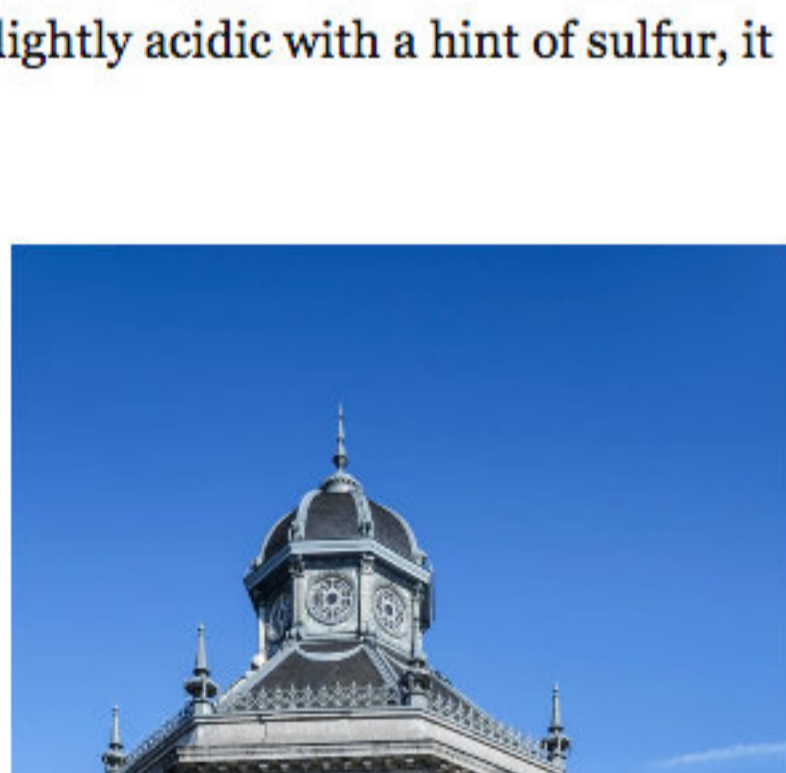
“Taking the waters was medicinal, yes,” Schils said, “but it also became social, it was important to see and be seen.”

Walking was part of the regimen recommended by the local doctors in the 18th century, so we strolled into the Parc de Sept Heures, one of three public landscaped parks. Inaugurated in 1758, the park is dotted with Belle Époque constructions, often melding wrought iron and glass. There are pavilions, kiosks and a covered promenade where patients were instructed to stroll several times a day.

I was sorry to miss the weekly Sunday flea market, but all this walking made me thirsty, so we went into Pouhon Pierre le Grand, a newly restored octagonal pavilion dating to the 19th century that serves as a monument to Peter I and also houses the main town spring. Under the towering glass rotunda, I helped myself to a paper cup and finally sipped the sparkling mineral water. Crisp, slightly acidic with a hint of sulfur, it felt invigorating.



A ride on the funicular line to Les Thermes de Spa, the new spa building on the hill, reveals a stunning view on the center of town. (Sylvie Bigar/For The Washington Post)



The Pouhon Pierre le Grand is a monument to Czar Peter I of Russia, also known as Peter the Great. (Alamy Stock Photo)

The next day, so that I might understand the underground path of that magical water, Plein drove me along country roads lined with historical mansions and villas to the high plateau that sits above the main water table. We followed marked trails (the area counts 200 of them) through meadows and groves toward the Forest and Water Museum of the Bérinzenne Domain.

“Here, it rains an average of 230 days a year,” Plein said as we watched a presentation about the decades-long process that starts with rain and ends at the springs through layers of moss, peat, clay, sand and quartz schists. Later, we hiked the four-mile Promenade des Artistes through the golden forest and along a river. Lunch on the terrace of La source de la Geronstere, near the spring of the same name, was restorative and delicious.

The next morning, I headed to the so-called “Laundry Museum,” unsure of what fell within that category. But Paul Jehin, the co-founder and a passionate sociologist, explained his mission simply: “We wanted to pay tribute to the beehive of unsung local workers who labored for decades behind the scenes, while their employers, most often foreigners, strolled, partied and took the waters.”



At the Laundry Museum, artifacts and photos such as this 1927 image of the staff of the Belle-Vue Hotel, one of the greatest hotels of the day, depict life behind the scenes in the resort town. (Laundry Museum)

Spa, with its hotels and casinos, swarmed with coachmen and cleaners, waiters, cooks and the laundresses who organized themselves in small ateliers. Jehin has amassed a treasure trove of objects and machinery: dozens of flatirons spanning several centuries; soap powder boxes with their first advertisements; fine sheets; ancient articles of clothing; even the first mechanical washing machines.

Finally, I was ready for the physical part of my research. The Renaissance-style Thermes building, dating to 1868, is no longer in use, so I hopped on the nearby funicular that leads up the hill to Les Thermes de Spa, a modern complex surrounded by nature. There, I chose to take a bath in one of the antique copper bathtubs filled with heated mineral water from the Marie Henriette spring. On my skin, myriad bubbles appeared, creating a deliciously relaxing aquatic shudder. A shower massage soothed my sore muscles; later, I went swimming in the gigantic pool. Surrounded by the forest, I fell asleep on the lounge chair and dreamed there was a czar taking the waters next to me.

Bigar is a writer based in New York City. Her website is sbigar.com. Follow her on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/sylviebigar) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/sylviebigar): @sylviebigar.

S.B.