



BUBBLING UP: ***the source of Spa***

Virginia Muzik visited a tiny Belgian town that gave its name to an industry.

In the mid-east of Belgium, the town of Spa has a little known, but all-important place in the beauty and wellness industry. The thermal waters of the area's hot springs have been used for centuries for their health-giving properties.

The sulphur-rich springs of Spa were reputedly discovered in Roman times by famed writer and philosopher, Pliny the Elder. And it is thought the city's name comes from the Latin 'espa' (fountain) or 'sparsa' (from spargere = to bubble up). By the 14th century, the healing properties of the waters were being sought by rich Belgian, French and Flemish families. The original resort was built in the 16th century, putting Spa on the map as an exclusive European resort destination and playground, attracting the rich and the royal.

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Modern day Spa still flaunts the 'grandeur' of its past. The town centre is in a valley of the lush Ardennes mountains; a diverse woodlands with birches and service trees, spruces and firs, and broad-leaved trees such as beeches and oaks. A tiny ville in the French-speaking part of Belgium, Spa's expensive brasseries rub shoulders with modestly priced pizzerias and cafes. The town has also played host to the Formula 1 Grand Prix of Belgium.

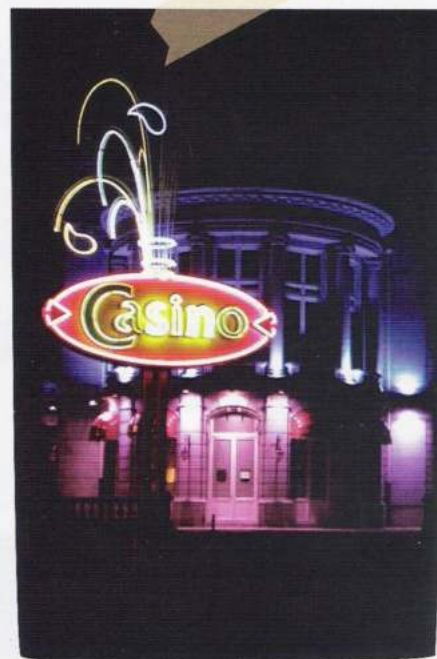
Taking pride of place is the casino, a grand, glitzy 18th century building with over-the-top chandeliers in the lobby. Across the street, and set amid the Parc de Sept Heures at Place Royale is the Radisson SAS Palace Hotel, where we stayed. The hotel has direct access via funicular to the Thermes de Spa 250 metres above.

Spa's numerous fountains, springs and wells have different properties and mineral content. The most famous spring is Le Pouhon Pierre Le Grange, named after Russian czar, Peter the Great, who visited Spa, which is housed in a pump room that offers tours and tastings of its reputedly iron-rich waters.

Other waters around Spa include:

Clementine, sourced from a geological formation called the "Fenêtre de Theux". Here, rocks of the Carboniferous and the Devonian period (350-400 million years ago) formed with limestone, dolomite, sandstone and schist. The bi-carbonated, calcareous Clementine water is beneficial for digestion, liver detoxication and balneotherapy (bath therapy).

Reine is sourced from a fissure of demineralised Cambrian bedrock, "quartzophylladeux" (500 million years ago). The mineral water comes from a deposit lying at around 575m altitude of the demineralised zone. The slightly mineralised Reine water is said to be beneficial for the kidneys, rehydration and for those on a salt-free diet.



Marie-Henriette is sourced from an area with rock faults. The faults allow the ascent of the water by emulsion of dissolved gas. The origin of this gas is mainly the result of the decomposition of sea carbonates, deep in the earth. The bi-carbonated, iron and manganese-rich Marie-Henriette is used in the Thermes de Spa's carbonated baths and thermal showers.

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The Thermes de Spa centre is considered to be the largest medical and recreational spa in Europe. In 2000, Eurothermes; a management and development company that oversees various European spas, fitness and wellness centres, and Spa Monopole; the group that manages and markets the waters of Spa and the famous SPA brand bottled drinking water, approached Sothys for exclusive use of their products at the centre. They then went a step further and commissioned Sothys Research & Development Laboratories to create an exclusive range of spa products and treatments based on the waters from the Marie-Henriette spring. The result is Sothys' Eau Thermal Spa skin care range.

"We chose Sothys because of its popularity and professionalism," says Gerard Andre, Director of the Thermes de Spa. "Their products are scientifically [proven] and Sothys continually do their own research and development to find new products, combining beauty and wellbeing treatments."

"It is important for Les Thermes de Spa to uphold the quality of their beauty treatments which is why we decided to entrust our clients' skin to our beauty specialists with their excellent know-how of Sothys products. Sothys dedicates its knowledge to your wellbeing and it's a wonderful additional trump for your beauty."

In 2001 renovations began to upgrade the Thermes de Spa's facilities to accommodate modern spa therapies, and these were completed in 2004.



"The old building could not offer enough comfort and the products requested by guests such as pools, saunas and Turkish baths," Mr Andre explains. "Now [the centre offers] natural light and possibility of dreaming, and travelling in the mind while bathing in the mineral water. That's one step to the wellbeing."

Mr Andre describes the centre's philosophy as illness prevention and quality of life through wellbeing. Most visitors come from Belgium and the Netherlands seeking popular water cures such as the "bain carbogazeux" with Marie-Henriette water in a copper bath tub, along with beauty treatments and massages. According to Mr Andre, clientele has increased three-fold since the renovation, and the centre now attracts much younger visitors, and those from around the world.

The spa offers medical and health assessments, with trained physiotherapists



and doctors on staff. Their hydrotherapy treatments include carbonated water baths, hydromassage in a water jet tub; which has analgesic effects and stimulates blood circulation, and a peat bath, in a mix of peat and carbonated water; which helps ease muscle tension and treats rheumatism and chronic osteoarthritis.

There are various styles of massage on offer, from shiatsu and hot stones, to synchronised (four-handed) and sports massage.

Beauty treatments include facials, body wraps and peels, mud and seaweed packs, and anti-ageing treatments. Also on offer are waxing, and aesthetic manicures and pedicures, as well as medical pedicures to treat corns, ingrown toenails and calluses.

A fully equipped gym, with trained staff, enables clients to improve their fitness, mobility and general health.

The centre recently added Reiki, reflexology and "revitalization of the chakras" to its services, all of which Mr Andre says reflect current trends and fit in with their philosophy.

Food at the centre is French-influenced Belgian, so it includes meats and cheeses along with salads.

On entry to the complex, you swap your day clothes for a white bathrobe and slippers, with only your bathing suit underneath. A wrist tag gives you access to most areas of the spa, as well as your locker.

Exploring the Thermes de Spa, you find yoga rooms, saunas, hammams, Turkish baths (with hot and cold water), a "naturalist" bathing area for those who prefer to go sans clothes, and the Wood light (black light) room. Here, you can lie on a deck chair in complete darkness except for the black light, which highlights the white towelling bathrobes and slippers of patrons. Tranquil forest sounds of twittering birds and breezes through trees lull you into a semi-conscious, meditative state.

The décor of the treatment areas is minimal, with wooden floors and wood-pannelled walls, alluding to the fact this is a place focussed on health and wellbeing rather than pampering and preening. While the pampering facials, body scrubs, mud baths and massages are an important adjunct to treatments, the main emphasis seems to be on restoring wellbeing with the health-giving properties of the local thermal water, through hydrotherapy and physiotherapy.

FOCUS TWEEZERS **focus** Italy

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“Surprisingly, wine is available for purchase. It seems at odds with the health-oriented approach of the centre, but then, this *is* the French part of Belgium.”

Some staff speak basic English, but their warm, patient and professional manner makes communication relatively easy.

The main indoor baths are housed in a large, circular “glass house”; with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a leafy outlook to the autumnal red, orange, yellow and green of the lush woods. The main pool, with thermal waters from the Clementine spring, heated to 32 degrees Celcius, has little alcoves with water jet/jacuzzi features, along with two separate jacuzzi pools.

To “sun” yourself indoors, you can laze on deck chairs under infra-red lamps, or for the game, the outside baths offer the juxtaposition of a dip in the warm waters in biting chilly air. Something so many Europeans are fond of.

Our “jour plénitude” (which loosely translates to Day of Plenty) begins with the 20-minute Bain Carbogazeux—soaking in a copper bathtub filled with lightly carbonated Marie-Henriette water, in adjoining rooms. Within seconds of immersion, the skin is covered in tiny bubbles and it’s almost like bathing in lukewarm slightly flat soda water! Still, it’s very relaxing.

After a half-hour wait and cup of herbal tea, we are led to separate rooms housing what could be termed the “fun park” adventure bath: Bain Niagara. Sinking into the deep white tub filled with Marie-Henriette water, I didn’t know what to expect until the water jets started up, set to massage different points of the body in sequence: back, shoulders, buttocks, thighs, calves. Then the sequence is repeated for an exhilarating 20 minutes.

Invigorated, we take the stairs to the café for lunch, which was included in our programme. A bountiful buffet of cold meats and pastas, salads and cakes are displayed. And surprisingly, wine is available for purchase. It seems at odds with the health-oriented approach of the centre, but then, this is the French part of Belgium. We settle for the local, much-touted SPA brand of bottled water. The Ardennes mountains are considered to be one of Europe’s most renowned conservation areas. The land around the area’s springs has been protected from pollution for centuries and the Spa natural spring water sourced from here is sodium-free and lower in total mineral salts than all leading European bottled waters. Throughout the day, we sample the three varieties on offer: slightly sparkling, still and sparkling.



In the afternoon, we separate and I am led off to a beauty treatment room for a Sothys Soin Visage facial, a basic rejuvenating facial using Sothys Hydra-Protective range. My companion is escorted elsewhere for a Thermal Spa body treatment, including a body exfoliation and wrap.

It feels decadent to spend the entire day indoors, wearing nothing but a bathrobe and bathing suit, while it is a gorgeous bright sunny day outside, but then it’s all about relaxation and rejuvenation here and by the end of the day, I am at once soporific and energised.

Following my facial, I spend an hour at the pool, wading and waiting for my friend. My skin does not become as prune-textured as I expected it could from lazing around submerged in the waters for so long. It must be something to do with those minerals. A group of mothers with their babies are in a small, shallow pool nearby. The babies seem at ease in the water; not a cry, not a struggle. The Thermes de Spa is known for catering to new mothers and their babies. Their Mother and Baby Institute offers five-day programmes to help new mums regain their figure, with specially trained staff, a fully equipped nursery, play room – and even baby massage. Mr Andre says that this institute simply caters to a demand. “It is a logical wish of any new mother, thinking again about her body and beauty,” without being far from their baby.

As I watch these water babies and future spa-goers splash about in the pool, I wonder if “start them early” could also be part of the Thermes de Spa philosophy. ■

For more information, visit: www.thermesdespa.com