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Magical Waters

A relaxing soak in a hot spring can not only ease your mind but is also great for your physical body – thanks to the various types of beneficial minerals and algae found in the magical waters

Writer Danielle Parla



and the specific therapeutic benefit will depend on the mineral composition of the water. Hot springs can be described by their predominating element and/or pH value like Radium Springs or Carbonic Acid Springs. While pure water is neutral (pH7), acidic mineral waters with a pH1-6 are particularly beneficial for tired muscles, aches and pains, circulatory conditions, arthritis and rheumatism; while alkaline or basic waters with a pH8-14 (high in sodium silicate, carbonates and chlorides) have a soothing, moisturising and antiseptic effect on the skin and can calm skin conditions like psoriasis, beautifying the skin. Throughout history, humans have

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tended to bathe in hot springs and drink the mineralised water of cold springs. Some hot springs are also suitable for drinking like the clear and sweet water of carbonic springs or the sour water of ferric springs.

In a spa environment, hot spring waters are usually maintained between 38 degrees Celsius and a maximum of 42 degrees Celsius and it is generally advised that bathing should not be taken too frequently, for too long or at too high a temperature. Some special springs (carbonic, alkaline and sulphide springs) should be maintained at a maximum of 37 to 38 degrees Celsius in order to prevent vaporisation of the gases and some loss of therapeutic benefit.

A typical soak for around 15 to 20 minutes is adequate, although this may depend on your comfort level. If your



THIS PAGE: The Naruko onsen is rich in iron. OPPOSITE PAGE: Enjoy a soak in one of the pools at Polynesian Spa

The profound healing effects of water are naturally understood and celebrated by us all, whether we are soaking in a bath, swimming in a lake, oceanside listening and watching the waves roll in, or enjoying a quenching glass of water on a hot day. Inspired by the natural world, spa culture also celebrates the benefits of water in the form of hydrotherapy treatments that use varying temperatures, colours and motions in showers, baths, Jacuzzis and pools. Perhaps the inspiration and birth of such therapies came from Mother Nature's own soul-soothing gift to us – the powerful and therapeutic mineral-rich natural hot spring.

Hot springs are referred to by different

names – geothermal, mineral and natural hot springs, and they can be found in locations around the world. In a process that can take hundreds or even thousands of years, the restorative mineral water we are familiar with begins as rain that seeps deep into the earth's crust, is geothermally heated and re-emerges to the surface as a spring of hot mineral-rich groundwater. At temperatures higher than our body, geothermal water can hold more dissolved solids than cold water and vary greatly in temperature (36-98 degrees Celsius) and mineral content depending on where it originates. When the water escapes the earth's surface, it may be in the form of a geyser (erupting water jet), fumarole (steam vent) or mud pot (mixed

with clay or mud).

The high mineral content of hot springs have made them popular tourist destinations for both their beauty and medical values. And we aren't alone in our appreciation. The iconic image of macaques relaxing in the steaming hot springs of Nagano, Japan, attests to the broad appeal of the therapeutic and warming benefits of natural hot springs. Some of the most common minerals found in hot springs are salts, magnesium, calcium, sulfur, silica, selenium, radium and iron.

Historical baths have attested to the popularity and the attributed healing properties of hot springs since Roman times, and today's rehabilitation centres,

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resorts and spa towns can be found built around therapeutic water sources all over the world. While medical hydrotherapy can refer to a wide range of approaches, the health benefits derived from mineral-rich hot springs are called balneotherapy and typically include hot baths, mud application, natural vapour baths and consumption.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, balneotherapy was seen as a cure-all; however, nowadays most agree that the health benefits contribute to physical and mental relaxation, muscular and joint pain relief, increased circulation, metabolism and toxin elimination, skin soothing and anti-inflammatory effects. All hot springs are not created equal

while soaking.

The most popular thermal spas offer something for everyone and can range from simple natural pools to luxury spa resorts that are a tribute to these mineral-rich healing waters within beautiful architectural spaces.

The bathing culture in Japan is renowned worldwide and the mere mention of onsen evokes a romantic image of steaming Zen-like pools of peace. The popularity of onsens grew significantly among the Japanese people during the Edo period (17th-19th century) and remains a tradition to this day. Situated on the Pacific Ring of Fire, Japan has many active volcanoes and thousands of indoor and outdoor onsens scattered throughout the country. Traditionally located in beautiful natural settings, open-air onsens or *roten-buro*, captivate and soothe bathers during all seasons. The most famous onsen resorts use tubs

of Japanese cypress, granite or marble to contain the healing mineral waters.

With more than 1,000 years of history, the Naruko Hot Spring Village in the Miyagi Prefecture consists of five hot spring areas, each with different mineral compositions and attractions. One of the springs, the Naruko onsen, is ferrous and rich in iron and is said to help with anemia. The waters are sour in taste and oxidised to give the water a reddish colour.

While bathing in an onsen is a natural, visitors can enjoy the mountain seasons and scenery outside of the baths wearing *yukata* (informal cotton kimono) and Japanese wooden sandals called *geta*. Onsen etiquette is very important to the Japanese and you may be surprised to learn that visitors with tattoos may be refused entry and *yukata* are worn with the left side over the right, with the opposite reserved for dressing

the deceased. To avoid embarrassment, visit the Naruko onsen's illustrated guide for visitors in English at www.en.naruko.gr.jp/onsen.

Drawing from 2,000 metres below the earth's surface, the geothermal seawater of the Blue Lagoon in Reykjavík, Iceland is famous for its intense colour and active healing ingredients, including minerals, silica and algae. The algae thrive in the saline waters, and high temperatures of the Blue Lagoon are said to offer anti-ageing benefits to the skin by stimulating natural collagen synthesis, as well as protection from UV-induced degradation of collagen. Furthermore, the unique mineral composition of the geothermal fresh and seawaters are said to be particularly beneficial for skin conditions like psoriasis. In fact, the Blue Lagoon psoriasis treatment is so effective that Iceland's Ministry of Health recognises it as a valid treatment for the

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condition. Spa guests can opt for three hours of private luxury in the Blue Lagoon Exclusive Lounge that includes entrance, spa products, robe, towels and slippers, lounge access, natural scrub or mask, and refreshments.

Frying Pan Lake in New Zealand's Waimangu Volcanic Rift Valley was born from an eruption in 1886 and remains the largest hot spring in the world. With temperatures between 50 and 60 degrees Celsius, it would be best to enjoy one of the destination spas in the nearby city of Rotorua.

The alkaline mineral waters of the deluxe private pools of Polynesian Spa offer a soft and soothing antiseptic

action of sodium silicate for the skin and panoramic views of Lake Rotorua. The bubbling mud pools and sulphurous waters of the aptly named Hells Gate Geothermal Park, or *Tikitere* as it is known by the indigenous Maori, have a long history and many beneficial properties. The geothermal mud contains silica, alumina, magnesium, calcium, iron, titanium, sulphur, phosphorus, sodium and potassium as well as trace elements, such as copper, zinc, selenium, cobalt, manganese and molybdenum. This mineral cocktail is said to assist with skin cell regeneration, purification, detoxification and acne treatment. The Ultimud Treatment includes a walk

through the Geothermal Reserve, a private mud bath, a one-hour body massage, NZ Ora Sulphur Spa, towel and robe and manuka tea in the private lounge.

The tradition of hot spring bathing has endured for hundreds, if not thousands, of years and continues to evoke wonder and awe in all who experience the healing waters sourced from the earth's core. Found on every continent from the Americas to Eurasia, hot springs are a place of comfort and relaxation whether found in nature or a luxury spa destination. 🌿

THIS PAGE: Macaques relaxing in a steaming hot spring in Japan. OPPOSITE PAGE: The Blue Lagoon in Reykjavík, Iceland