

SPA

“Pearl of the Ardennes”

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The word “spa” traces its origin to a town near Liege in southeast Belgium in the Ardennes near the German border where a spring of chalybeate (iron salts) water is found. Its fame dates from the year 1326 when an iron master of the town of Collin le Loupe, having heard of a fountain in the woods with the health-given properties, went there in hopes of finding a cure for his ailments. His hopes were rewarded; he was cured. To show his gratitude for this miraculous restoration of health, he founded at the spring or fountain as it was called, a health resort which has since become one of the most fashionable watering places in the world. The place was called Espa, which is the old Walloon word for fountain. From that has come the word spa as we know it in English. The original Espa has since become so popular that the word spa is now used to designate all similar health resorts (Swanner, 1988).

Spa is often referred to as the “Pearl of the Ardennes,” a town in a wooded valley surrounded by undulating hills and countless rivers and springs. It was also described as “The Cafe of Europe” in the 18th century due to its noteworthy flow of cure-seeking visitors. The history and understanding for the attraction to Spa centers around its springs.

The topography surrounding Spa was initially formed around 500 million years ago. In the 250 million years that followed the imposing mountains began to erode, gradually creating a gentler landscape. The tops of the mountains eroded followed by an accumulation of marine deposits. This in turn was followed by a succession of ice ages, with centuries of melting snow washing away the deposits and accumulated rocks. These rocks became highly de-mineralized and as a result the waters that filter through the region of Spa today contain very few soluble elements. As this clean water filters through the ground, it reappears several hundred meters lower down in a multitude of sparkling springs.

Spa has long been famous for its waters and their therapeutic benefits. The idea of protecting the water started in 1889 with Le Pouhon Pierre-le Grand (Peter the Great Spring) was the first area to be placed within a protection zone. At the same time Leopold II of Belgium declared the spring to be of public benefit. The protected area then covered 3,409 hectares. Protection for the main springs was not introduced until 1937. The Spa Monopole company has held the exclusive rights to the Spa waters since 1921 with the mission of developing the economic benefits and providing ecological protection from pollution.

THE SPRINGS AND FOUNTAINS

An ancient description is at the source of the springs, stating:

“In Tongrie, Gaul country, there is a famous fountain, whence the water, all sparkling with bubbles, has a ferruginous taste, which cannot be experienced until one has finished drinking. This water purifies the body, cures tertian fevers and dispels calculus complaints. The same water, placed over a heat source, becomes cloudy and then turns red.”

The origin or the term “pouhon” used to describe the springs, is of Walloon origin defining ferruginous (iron bearing) water springs full of carbon dioxide. Three hundred springs or pouhons gush out in the Spa area where the soil is rich in iron minerals and deeper are carbonate rocks. The acid nature of the water dissolves the iron and reduces the carbonate rock to produce carbon dioxide. The largest and oldest springs have been given individual names. Based on data from Pouhon Marie-Henriette, the temperature of the springs are around 10°C (50°F) with the largest cations being iron (21 mg/L), calcium (12 mg/L), sodium (9.6 mg/L) and magnesium (8.0 mg/L). The largest anion is bicarbonate at 135 mg/L. The total dissolved solids are about 200 mg/L and the waters have a pH of 5.15. Carbon dioxide gas is 2,300 mg/L. When the water are used in a spa they are heated to 30 to 34°C (86 to 93°F).

Drinking the waters, was known in the olden day as the “Tour of the Fountains.” This practice has diminished in importance since the analysis of components of each of the springs. Today the specific properties of each spring has been identified, thus the most suitable cure can be determined. A description of some of the more popular springs is presented below (Connaître Spa, undated).

Le Pouhon Pierre-le-Grand (The Peter the Great Pouhon) is situated in the very heart of the city. The Tsar of Russia visited the city in 1717. He remained at Spa for five weeks, drinking the waters and taking the “kur”—he thanked this “magical” water which had restored his youth. The spring was decorated around the end of the 19th century with the “Livre d’Or (Visitors Book), a fresco which lists the famous guests

who helped give Spa waters their reputation. The Prince of Orange visited the fountain and donated 250,000 florins to construct a new building around the fountain. Built in 1820, it consisted of an adorned building with 18 columns in Tuscan style. It was marked “in the memory of Peter the Great.” This building was torn down and rebuilt in 1883 and now has a large open hall attached (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. *The Peter the Great Pouhon building (1908).*



Figure 2. *Interior of Peter the Great Pouhon (1910).*

Le Pouhon Marie-Henriette (The Marie-Henriette Pouhon) this water, collected close to the Warfaaz lake, is named in honor of the wife of King Leopold II, who died in spa in 1902. Rich in iron and manganese, a pipe almost 3,000 m (10,000 ft.) long links it to the Spa Thermal Baths establishment.

La Source de la Geronstère (The Spring of Geronstère) is situated closed to the fountain spring road and is well-known since the 16th century. Formerly know as “Enraged”, the spring was famous for intoxicating anyone who drank from it, even causing hallucinations! Although this spring water is not very ferruginous or carbonated, its sulphurous scent has been

retained intact. Housed under a dome supported by four red marble columns, it is indisputably one of the finest Spa springs.

La Fontaine de la Sauvenière (The Fountain Spring of Sauvenière) is located on the old road linking Spa with Malmédy. In the Middle Ages, this spring was reported to increase fertility! This virtue was associated with Saint Remacle, who himself had the power to purify fountains and make holy springs gush forth! Saint Remacle is said to have left his footprint on a stone there. So, to ensure that newlyweds will produce fine descendants, the young wife had to drink the water at la Sauvenière and, at the same time, place her foot in the Saint’s footprint! La Sauvenière remains the oldest of the pouhons. Rich in iron, it has a particularly strong taste.

La Fontaine de Groesbeeck (The Fountain Spring of Groesbeeck) is located a few meters from la Sauvenière spring. Less powerful, it nevertheless retains a family “taste”. This spring bears the name of Baron de Groesbeeck, who, in 1651 has a small niche built in the wall bearing his coat of arms. This fountain spring is also called “pécquet” because, like juniper, it has diuretic (tending to increase the flow of urine) properties.

La Source de la Reine (The Queen’s Spring) is located inside the Baths. It draws its strength from the Fagne de Malchamps (a large forested park located south of the city). Low in salt and renowned, among other things, for its diuretic and toxin-eliminating effect, the Reine spring is above all know for being bottled under the name of Spa Reine.

Fountains in the Center of Spa. At a time when, unlike today, not all inhabitants had the luxury of running fresh water, the provision of drinkable water was a considerable problem. Water was necessary not only for humans to drink, but also for watering the domestic animals and washing clothes. Since there were not adequate wells, it was not always possible to find drinking water close to the houses. If this was the case, people would frequent the public fountains and pumps where they could have access to clean drinking water. In Spa a number of fountains were available in the downtown area for public use. **La Fontain du Perron** is located in front of the city hall where the water flows into four basins. In 1668, the magistrate of Spa sent a demand to the prince requesting that a fountain be built to serve the needs of visitors and those living in the area. There were severe fines for anyone who polluted the fountain, and it was forbidden to allow animals to drink from the water basin or to wash clothes in them. The fountain was in the form of a pyramid on top of which were three frogs of bronze with water flowing out of their mouths. On top of the frogs was found a pine cone and cross making the entire monument height approximately 5 meters (17 feet). In 1850 the fountain was found to impede traffic and was demolished. It was rebuilt in 1890 with the

original frogs and stones used in the construction. **La Fontaine Monumentale** was adorned with two nude children on top and along the sides with children riding a large fish. There was also, in bas-relief, a white marble statue of Queen Marie-Henriette, surrounded by a royal coat of arms. This fountain was established on the location of an old mill. According to the writer, Jean D'Ardenne in 1876, the millrace ran along the street in a stone tunnel and at times one was obliged to walk beneath the tunnel to enter some buildings. The door of the famous hotel Waldeck was nearby and sometimes a visitor would be drenched entering it. It was renovated in 1990 and the water is now furnished by a pump. **La Fontaine des Jardins du Casino.** A casino is located in the square opposite the Baths. In the center of the square is a fountain surrounded by benches and flowers, erected in 1925. It was removed in 1947 and reestablished in 1955 (Fig. 3). In 1956 it was adorned with engraved images depicting the fountains of Sauvenière, Geronstère, Baisart and Tonnelet. These engravings were the work of Frans Van Ranst, who moved to Spa in 1946 to head up the Art school and courses in sculpture. He is also the creator of the memorial in honor of the liberation of Spa in 1944 by the U.S. 1st Army.



Figure 3. *The Fountain of the Gardens of the Casino.*

THE THERMAL SPA

Les Thermes de Spa (The Spa Thermal Baths) was constructed from 1862 to 1868. The building, located in the center of town (Fig. 4) is in the French Renaissance style designed by Léon Suys. The construction cost 1.5 million french franks, an exorbitant amount for the times. The building today remains one of the most beautiful in Spa. The waters here are naturally iron rich and carbonated. The thermal waters are currently used for the carbonated baths to treat cardio-vascular ailments. The jetted waters are used to help rheumatoid arthritis. Sulphur inhalations are used to help respiratory problems and anemia. The water in this bath comes from the Marie-Henriette spring (Figure 5) and is heated to 33.8°C (92.8°F). Massages, hydrotherapy and exercises are also a part of the provided treatments.



Figure 4. *The Spa Thermal Bath building.*



Figure 5. *The Marie-Henriette spring source in the bath.*

Peat baths are also provided where oneself is immersed in a mix of Fagnes peat and carbonated water heated to 40°C (104°F). It combines muscular relaxation with treatment for rheumatism and arthritis. Local applications of warm peat - especially on the spring, make excellent poultices.

Showers are synonymous with a stay at the Spa Thermal Baths. By exposing specific parts of the body to high pressure jets of water, certain conditions can be treated. Warm showers for heart stimulation and sweating, cold showers for their toning effect.

REFERENCES

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