

# - A BEAUTIFUL SPA - THERMAL WATERS AT SAN BARTOLO AGUA CALIENTE, MEXICO

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## INTRODUCTION

In San Bartolo Agua Caliente, a small rural town in the Mexican Volcanic Belt, a spa operates today amidst ruins of a much larger, ancient complex that originally included an orphanage, hospital, and a hostelry for travelers. This was one of the first colonial spas in Mexico.

The spa was so well engineered that it remains virtually unchanged today from the time it was built at the very end of the 1700s. It uses the same outside and inside plumbing, and interior collection basins. The only change is the new pipeline that circumvents the original outside, hot-water collection tanks that remain in good working order and are interesting to look at. The locals still enjoy soaking in the spa's thermal waters flowing down from the same artesian spring that always has replenished the baths.

## STORY OF THE SPA

A small, isolated town in the north-central part of the Mexican Volcanic Belt, San Bartolo Agua Caliente, lies about halfway between the cities of Celaya and Querétaro (Photo 1). Described over 100 years ago as a jewel in the midst of the brown hills surrounding it, San Bartolo became famous for mineral waters and baths. Today in rural Mexico, it is a tiny, out-of-the-way place with a dirt road winding at its heart and with the remains of a magnificent complex, announced by a sign at the entrance as the Antiguo Hospital de Baños Termales de San Bartolomé, or the *Ancient Hospital of Thermal Baths of Saint Bartholomew 1599-1802* (Photos 2 and 3).



Photo 1. Location of San Bartolo Agua Caliente.



Photo 2. Welcome sign for the communal property owned and operated by an "ejido."



Photo 3. Sign with key historical dates. The name has changed over the years.

The complex, dedicated to St. Bartholomew, patron saint of nervous and neurological diseases, was built next to ancient waters famous for hydrotherapy and cures.

Several structures once stood here together—a church, a home for Catholic orphans and homeless, a hospital for the sick and traveling, and thermal baths for all (Photo 4). Today, most of the buildings are in ruins—except for the baths that remain open at this ancient, extraordinary spa.

For good reasons, the dates of the sketchy and mysterious story of the complex do not correspond exactly with the sign at the door reading 1599-1802, but they come close. In fact, the 203-year period noted on the sign in Photo 3 is critical to the history of the complex. This is what happened.



**Photo 4.** Church dome and arches decorated with paintings of the apostles.

On July 4, 1602, Doña Beatriz de Tapia died and left money in her will for the project's construction. A lawsuit stalled the work until 1770—168 years later—and it was not until 31 years after this, in 1801, that the complex was finally finished. It is likely Doña Beatriz's project was blessed by the church a few years before she died, perhaps in 1599—the first date on the sign. It is also likely the complex was dedicated formally in 1802, a year after building ended and use had begun of one of the first colonial thermal spas in Mexico—the second date on the sign.

I don't know all the reasons for the ruins of today—earthquakes, war, neglect, or a combination—but this is what I learned of the spa's history. In 1844, 43 years after construction, the site of San Bartolomé was occupied by the Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna, who wanted to buy the property, and who was in and out of the presidency of the country at least eight times in the politically turbulent years between 1832 and 1855. He is best remembered in the United States for attacking the Alamo.

The Departmental Assembly of the State of Guanajuato, where San Bartolomé is located, "vainly protested the sale of the property to him," according to a history of Guanajuato written in 1860. Probably in 1846, the administration of General Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga annulled the sales contract, also in vain. General Santa Anna finalized the transaction in the year 1847. (From 1846-47, he was again President of Mexico.) Now, sadly predicted the historian, "This magnificent hospital will be ruined within a few years" (Noticias, 1860).

But parts remain. Of all the buildings in the complex, the spa was most unaffected by destruction through the years; probably because, it is a solidly built, single-story building—and it is gorgeous. The spa is a large building of carved stone blocks laid out along a large, open interior patio in the Spanish style (Photo 5). Private, two-room suites for thermal bathers lead off from the breeze way around the patio and a different saint's name is painted brightly over the doorway to each (Photo 6). This is important because anyone entering a suite, sick or well, would be under the patronage of this saint, who would receive the visitor's prayers and act as a custodian.



**Photo 5.** Interior patio with church dome in background.



**Photo 6.** Entrance to a two-room suite—each painted with a different saint's name.

Each suite is designed somewhat differently and some are larger than others. But all have two rooms, an anti-chamber for changing before entering the inner chamber with the thermal bath itself, everything built of solid stone—massive, shadowy, peaceful, and cool (Photo 7). All thermal-bath chambers have domed ceilings with cupolas whose tops are open, allowing light and air to enter and steam to escape. Propelled by gravity, the thermal waters pour through original plumbing into the large, hand-carved thermal basins cut in the floor.

The thermal waters, about 85EC, flow from an artesian spring on the side of a small hill above the spa to the south (Photo 8). A small stone chapel stands by the spring, and neighbors living next to the thermal waters plant corn and beans in the hot nearby ground, sometimes cooking their meals in the steam (Photo 9).



*Photo 7. Chamber with a thermal bath.*



*Photo 9. Vegetables grown in the warm ground.*



*Photo 8. Thermal water from a spring flows to the spa.*



*Photo 10. The aqueduct.*

Hot waters from the spring pour down to the spa through an elegant, stone aqueduct (Photo 10). Once the thermal waters reach the spa, they are still too hot to use and must cool before entering the bathing chambers, a process that occurred originally in two stages. As water arrived, it flowed from the aqueduct into one of three stone troughs by slowly falling over a series of riffles, an air-cooling process that somewhat lowered the temperature (Photo 11). Next the thermal water moved to a fourth stone trough; where, it was mixed with cold water until a temperature was reached that bathers could enjoy. Today, a pipeline circumvents this cooling system; although, the troughs and riffles still are there to see.

The author of the 1860 history writes that the baths of San Bartolomé have very hot mineral waters, and that the waters issue abundantly from many hot springs. He writes that once the water is cooled, it is healthy to drink and good for fattening cattle.

Such multiple uses of mineralized hot spring waters are typical worldwide. No one will ever know all the ways thermal waters have been used at San Bartolo Agua Caliente or all the ways they are used there by the villagers today.



*Photo 11. Original water-collection troughs where the water is cooled.*

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#### REFERENCE

Noticias para Formar la Historia y la Estadística del Obispado de Michoacán, 1860. El Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato, p. 145.