

History of Spas

When we seek to define a 'Spa' most of us automatically think of the modern day spa, a luxurious place for relaxation and therapy, providing an array of treatments to soothe, calm and revitalise. However the original spas probably go back as far as prehistoric times when people took advantage of the naturally occurring resources of the landscape such as mineral springs and thermal muds, to improve their own health and wellbeing. Nomadic people were constantly travelling with no roots or permanent shelter, so to provide themselves with a warm place to bathe they would heat rocks and bury them in a hole in the ground, you could say it provided an early example of today's under floor heating!

The American Indians used sweat lodges, in small confined spaces such as a tent or small hut to cleanse their bodies and souls. They heated rocks and stones and then placed them inside the sweat lodge where they sprinkled them with water to create steam, similar to our modern day saunas. However to the native Americans there was a religious significance to these rituals.

In recent history man has taken advantage of the naturally occurring features and developed successful Spas around them. Many of these modern spas are based on the bathing rituals that the Romans and Greeks used as part of their daily lives, it provided the opportunity for social interaction whilst participating in the cleansing and bathing routines of the day. The Roman soldiers were often housed in garrisons surrounding hot springs, this allowed them to bathe their battle wounds and help them heal more quickly. In Greek mythology it was thought that some natural springs were actually blessed by the gods and would cure disease. They went as far as cutting into the hillsides where these springs originated to create special bathing chambers.

As far back as 2000BC the Babylonians believed that water had a purifying effect against sin and they also appreciated the therapeutic effects of applying cold and hot compresses whilst the Egyptians used water therapies and herbal remedies similar to many of the therapies provided in spas today.

According to the Koran washing is an essential part of Islam. It was traditional for Arabs to bathe only in cold water and they did not believe in immersing themselves in a tub of water as this would mean bathing in filth. They developed their own type of baths, which required them to move through several different steam rooms and only started using heated water after their leader Muhammad recommended them to do so. Their bath houses were called Hammams and were often attached to mosques.

In the 18th and 19th centuries it became fashionable with Europeans to 'Take the waters' to cure common ailments such as rheumatism, arthritis, over indulgence and respiratory disorders such as asthma.

The upper classes in England would travel to spa towns such as Bath to bathe and drink the 'curative' waters, however they also used it as a means to display their wealth and there were many social activities undertaken both during the day and at night.

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spa & beauty therapy in practice

There were two prominent natural healers who advocated strongly the healing effects of water. Vincent **Priessnitz** (1799-1852), was an Austrian who promoted the 'cold water cure' and Father Sebastian **Kneipp** (1824 – 1897), a German priest who claims to have cured himself of tuberculosis by bathing in the icy waters of the River Danube. He developed his own healing system that consisted of; hydrotherapy, herbs, physical exercise and a simple diet, simple but effective advice that is still used in spas today.

The 20th century saw the use of Spas in England for the rehabilitation of soldiers returning wounded during the First World War. The British Spas Federation was Established in 1917 and this became the Spa Business Association in 2004 the body that represents the Spa industry in the UK today.