

## Soaking It Up

*For a stress-free tour of the spa towns of Europe, hop on a train. By Carole Rosenblat*

I GAZED OUT the train window at perfectly straight rows of grapevines rising up the slopes beside the Rhine River, and pictured knights on horseback riding toward the hilltop castles. A waiter stopped by, asking if I'd like something to eat or drink. A cold beer and a bowl of hot chili arrived a few minutes later.

This was so much better than flying. Not only does train travel usually generate fewer carbon emissions, it's also a scenic and relaxing way to explore the less-visited small towns of Europe.

That's one of the ideas behind the **European Route of Historic Thermal Towns**, a nonprofit association started in 2009 by six spa towns to promote their cultural heritage. The association now has 50 members across Europe, with many sites that are easily reached by train.

I began my trip, naturally, in the eastern Belgian town of Spa, whose name is now synonymous with taking the waters. Known for its mineral-rich

springs, it is one of 11 Great Spa Towns of Europe named by UNESCO in 2021. Only two hours by train from Brussels, this favorite of Czar Peter the Great of Russia quickly became a favorite of mine, too.

Strolling through this idyllic town, I saw cafés, cheese shops, and bakeries selling meringue cookies. Locals offered a friendly "*Bonjour*" as they passed. Colorful statues of Pierrot the clown, who is the logo for the town's namesake brand of bottled water, dotted the streets. And an 18th-century casino—one of the world's oldest gambling parlors—sat in the center.

I took a funicular up to **Les Thermes de Spa**, a complex that dates back to 1868 and sources its water from three springs. The mineral composition of each determines its use: the least salty water is for drinking, the sparkling one is for bath treatments, and the spring rich in calcium and bicarbonate is for the thermal pools. I luxuriated in water of varying temperatures, from polar-plunge cold to *Aah, I'm never getting out*. After trying every pool, shower, and sauna, I checked in to **Hôtel La Reine** (doubles from \$92) and had dinner at its fine restaurant, La Cour de la Reine.

The following morning, it was a short walk back to the train station for the 4½-hour ride to Bad Ems, in Germany. I soon discovered another benefit of rail travel. Two and a half hours into the trip, I stopped in Cologne, to change trains. The 40-minute connection gave me

**BELOW**  
*Les Thermes de Spa, in Spa, Belgium.*



DAGMAR SCHWELLET/ISTOCK



**FROM LEFT**  
Rudas Bath, a Turkish-style spa in Budapest;  
Cologne Cathedral, in Germany.



enough time to visit the **Cologne Cathedral**, the 775-year-old masterpiece across the street from the station.

I reached Bad Ems in the early afternoon. Sometimes called the Imperial Spa, it was one of Germany's most illustrious bathing resorts from the 17th to 19th centuries, drawing royalty, politicians, musicians, and writers. I walked along the promenade to the historic spa district, which has a casino and several theaters, including the ornate Marble Hall, where gold chandeliers hang from a coffered ceiling.

It was cold and rainy, so I skipped the town's funicular—an engineering marvel that climbs up a steep mountain to a scenic overlook—and instead went straight to the **Emser ThermenHotel** (doubles from \$214), a modern resort on the Lahn River with a sleek spa facility. To reach the thermal pools, however, I had to pass a series of wet and dry saunas where, to my surprise, the men and women were naked. Nudity, I soon learned, is common in German sauna culture.

Trying to play it cool, I hopped into a shower for a quick rinse and made a beeline for the pool area, where swimwear is required. Each pool offered a different bubble jet, and after exploring the various baths—my favorite was the outdoor pool with loungers that massaged my entire back with pulsating bubbles—I worked up the courage to visit the dry sauna, which overlooks the riverbank. I stripped down and took my place in the coed room. Nobody took notice.

The next day I woke early for a hearty German breakfast at the hotel before catching the 8 a.m. train to Baden bei Wien, in eastern Austria. It was a long journey—nine hours—but enjoyable. I passed the time reading, napping, working (yes, there's Wi-Fi), and enjoying the fantastic scenery. The train went through the

Upper Middle Rhine Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage region, past fairy-tale villages, hilltop towns, and the storied Lorelei rock, which has inspired many poems and songs.

Arriving in Baden bei Wien, the largest of the spa towns I visited, I checked in to **At the Park Hotel** (doubles from \$136), which sits on the edge of the Kurpark, a 200-year-old green space with formal gardens, fountains, and monuments. I joined a walking tour the following morning that explored the town's wide streets, narrow tunnels, and the **Beethoven-Haus**, a modest two-story building where the composer spent many summers. I learned that he wrote the "Ode to Joy" section of his Ninth Symphony in the second-floor apartment, with its restored pastel-pink and green walls. The tour also stopped at the **Arnulf Rainer Museum**, housed in a 19th-century bathhouse, where paintings by the contemporary Austrian artist hang in former changing cubicles and above sunken marble tubs.

It was getting late, so I boarded another train—this time just a three-hour ride to my home city of Budapest. The Hungarian capital has 123 thermal springs that fill a multitude of baths. After a dinner cruise on the Danube with traditional Hungarian music, I stopped by Sparty, a party held every Friday and Saturday night at the **Széchenyi Thermal Bath**. With DJs, lasers, and revelers dancing and drinking in the enormous outdoor pools, the scene was a bit young for me, so I moved on to **Rudas Bath**.

The five underground pools at this 450-year-old Turkish-style institution have domed ceilings and a strong sulfur smell. After trying each, I wanted one last soak with a view, so I headed to the modern pool on the roof. It was packed with partiers and couples, but seeing the lights of the city's skyline reflecting off the Danube was stunning. After three days of hot baths, it was time for bed. ☺