

THE FRENCH SPA

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**by
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In what has become virtually an annual pilgrimage to France during these past 30 years, I have always been fascinated by the maniacal fixation the French have for "taking the waters". While every Frenchman drinks bottled mineral waters of some ilk, nearly 400,000 of them travel to springs in France alone to undergo, for several weeks, a medical cure based on the therapeutic effects of the waters found there.

Even in our country imported French mineral waters have become increasingly popular albeit not necessarily for the same reasons they are in France. One often gets the impression there is some latent snob appeal to drinking a Perrier, a Vittel, an Evian, or a Vichy just because these waters are tapped at mineral springs in France. Certainly, most of the American customers, no doubt in perfect health, are unaware of the degree to which Europeans, and particularly the French, believe in the therapeutic effects of these waters rich in trace minerals.

The discovery of mineral waters, and their application for medicinal uses, probably occurred before the beginning of recorded history; for it is known that mineral waters were used for remedial purposes from the earliest days of Greece and Rome. About 400 B.C. the Greek physician Hippocrates wrote a book entitled Airs, Waters, and Places, in which the watering places of his time were described in detail. Some 500 years later in 77 A.D., Pliny wrote about the mineral springs in various parts of Europe. It was the Romans who discovered the thermal springs in Italy, and as the empire expanded they found many other celebrated European springs, including the hot sulphur springs of Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) and Baden-Baden in West Germany, Spa in Belgium (from whence the word spa itself is derived) and Bath in England.

A few springs have been known since Celtic times, and a good number were enjoyed by the Romans during their occupation of Gaul. The Romans liked public baths, and in several places, ruins of the facilities they constructed around mineral springs are still visible. At Evaux, in the Auvergne region, for example, vestiges have been found of a caldarium or pool for hot water, a tepidarium, or pool for luke warm water, a frigadarium or pool for cold water, and a pulvarium or steam room. Too, the names of many of the French spa towns often indicate the long-known presence of springs, for example: Aix-les-Bains, Ax-les-Thermes, Aigues-Chaudes, Challes-les-Eaux, and Les Eaux-Bonnes all are derived from the Latin word aqua for water.

Several years ago during a summer stay with a French Swiss dairy farm family near Geneva, I took full advantage of my close proximity to one of the most strikingly beautiful towns on lake Geneva, Evian-les Bains. Evian-les-Bains is a bit of French paradise if there ever was one. This quaint little town of 4500 is located on the eastern edge of Lake Geneva (Leman in French) in the departement of Haute-Savoie right across the lake from my favorite Swiss city, Lausanne. It has a mild climate and the best spa I know. A caution here: Evian-les-Bains is the only one I have ever had the good fortune to try. The town is famous not only for its thermal spa but also for its waters which are bottled and widely exported in the name of Evian. Having drunk Evian water and finding it extremely pleasing to the taste, I was curious about its therapeutic properties. The therapeutic value of waters is attributed to several properties. One is the high content of trace minerals, among them sulfphur, calcium, sodium, iron, manganese, magnesium, potassium, and arsenic. Evian and Vittel are rich in magnesium, which makes them slightly laxative. This no doubt contributes to the general sense of well-being of the people who drink them. During my 2-day stay at Evian I drank a good bit of the water, took several hot showers,

steambaths, and was massaged, all with the natural spring waters of Evian. Although I did not take the full 2 and 3 week "cure", I was told that patients essentially follow today the same treatment available at Evian 300 years ago. Patients at Evian-les-Bains, in addition to undergoing their primary treatment, usually stop several times a day in the great hall for a glass of water from an adjacent spring rich in magnesium. The waters are not surface waters, but pour forth from deep in the earth under tremendous pressure. Often, the mineral elements like sulphur are present in the form of dissolved gases, like Hydrogen Sulphide, and the related Hydrogen and Sulphide ions. As the water surfaces and is no longer subjected to such high pressure, the gases escape from the liquid into the surrounding air, and their related ions recombine to form gases, which likewise escape. The beneficial effects of the waters are often greatly reduced in this process, and since it is desirable for the minerals to be absorbed by the body rather than be lost, the patient must travel to the spa itself for the cure. Even piping from springs to faucets is kept to a minimum. Some waters contain gases like nitrogen and the rarer helium and argon.

Another important property is the water's temperature. This quality gives the entire spa industry its name -- le thermalisme. Some springs are cold, some hot. The hottest springs in France are those of Chaudes-Aigues at 82 degrees Celsius. Some hot waters are poor in mineral content and bring relief by virtue of their heat alone. In others, the therapeutic effects involve heat and minerals together. Motor disorders, like rheumatism and gout, are usually treated at springs with high water temperatures, but other ailments benefit from such treatment as well.

Radioactivity is yet another quality shared by many therapeutic waters. Some waters contain radioactive minerals, such as radium and thorium. While springs are found throughout France, they are most numerous in the

Auvergne (mention Jeannie France at the C.C.), the once volcanic region of central France. The geological origin of this region helps explain their mineral and gas content, their temperature, and their degree of radioactivity.

Depending on the specific qualities of their waters, French spas specialize in the treatment of different illnesses. This allows for a more efficient use of the equipment needed for a given therapy and a maximizing of the waters' pharmaceutical properties. Metabolic and urinary disorders are treated with waters rich in sulphur and calcium. Evian and Vittel, although rich in magnesium, also contain sulphur and calcium and are used in the treatment of metabolic and kidney ailments. Other spas specializing in diseases of this type because of a high sulphur and calcium content are Eugénie-les-Bains and Capvern in the Pyrénées, Contrexville in the Vosges, and Lons-le-Saulnier in the Jura. Many such spas treat not only metabolic and urinary disorders, but digestive problems as well. Frequently, the waters found there are bicarbonated and fizzy. The best known is no doubt the widely distributed Vichy water.

The treatment of respiratory ailments also relies on sulphur-rich waters. These treatments often come from hot springs, in particular those at Eaux-Chaudes and Ax-les-Thermes which have very hot waters with a high sulphur content. Radioactivity is another quality of the waters used to treat respiratory disorders.

Bone diseases are treated at spas whose waters are often radioactive, too, and rich in sulphur, calcium, and chlorine. Other health problems that can be treated at specialized French spas are circulatory, dermatological, gynecological, and some nervous disorders. Therefore, a person suffering from a liver ailment might go to Vichy, for respiratory or skin allergies to La Bourbole, for the heart to Royat, to Evian-les-Bains for the kidneys, to Aix-les-Bains for rheumatism, to Divonne for nerves, and to Brides-les-Bains for obesity.

The benefits described in all the brochures I have collected from the spas' tourist offices sometimes sound quite marvelous. Divonne, near Geneva, offers relief from nervous tension characterized by fatigue, anxiety, and insufferable insomnia resulting from the many demands and hectic pace of modern life. Unfortunately, nothing is mentioned in the brochure about the anxiety it claims to cure after losing handily at Divonne's famous casino. Aix-les-Bains has a "cure toute nouvelle de récupération vitale indispensable à l'homme d'affaires" (completely new revitalizing cure indispensable for the business man). Brides-les-Bains assures its overweight patients that "l'appétit diminue comme par enchantement!" (Appetite declines as if by magic). Fortunately, this "magic" is reinforced by diet foods chosen from menus listing calories, lots of exercise, and by general and localized baths and showers for general and localized fats.

Of course, the equipment these spas use varies according to the treatment specialization of the individual spa. This is because the waters differ not only in mineral content, but in ways they are used. At many spas, the patient drinks and is given hot baths and showers, while other spas rely on aerosol steam inhalation, enemas, douches, and injections.

Just as it was 400 years ago, drinking and hot baths and showers are the methods primarily used at Vichy today. It is almost always at a doctor's recommendation that a patient undergoes a cure at Vichy. Once a patient establishes himself there, he is required to make an appointment with a physician affiliated with the therapeutic spa. Once the patient is thoroughly examined, the doctor prescribes a specific regime indicating how much water is to be drunk, from which spring, and at what time. Generally, the drinking dosage is small in the beginning and increases gradually. It is usually recommended that the waters be drunk about 30 minutes before mealtime in order

to maximize their beneficial effects on the digestive system. The patient might be directed to drink 40 grams of water from the Parc spring before breakfast and 30 grams from the Hopital spring before the noon and evening meals. It might also be recommended that every day he undergo mechanotherapy, a form of limbering and strengthening physical therapy administered manually or with special apparatuses, of which Vichy possesses over 90. Pedaling, bar exercises, and sit-ups might be included here. This might be followed by a hot water massage and then a mud poultice on the liver. The muds are considered therapeutic because of their high vegetable and mineral content. Finally, the patient is given a general shower. Such thermal establishments like Vichy have piles and piles of hot towels and robes for the various stages of such treatment. At Vichy, the patient has to buy a book of tickets which he will present to each therapist for the appropriate treatment. Each shower might cost the patient 2 tickets, each session of mecanotherapy 3, and so on. Restaurants are prepared, of course, to serve the patient meals in accordance with the diet prescribed by the doctor. Free time offers an opportunity to enjoy the French countryside and the provincial tranquility of these quiet little towns.

Aix-les-Bains also specializes in the treatment of rheumatism and motor difficulties resulting from other illnesses and injuries. There the waters are hot and are applied externally. Because its waters are rich in sulphur, calcium, and particularly silicon, the waters have a slightly oily quality that is particularly appreciated in massages. Indeed, I found this treatment to be the most appealing. Hot water massages there can be general in tubs or localized. For localized water massages, patients sit facing a wall, the affected limbs protruding through the wall in a row of stock-like holes. The therapist stands on the other side of the wall to massage the limb with water. In this way, the patient remains dry during the treatment. Aix-les-Bains

also utilize nine pools, three for underwater exercising to help patients regain their strength and flexibility, all with the assistance of therapists. There is also great reliance on steams for treatment. This may involve the entire body where the patient sits in a large steam-filled box with only the head protruding. Or he places his arms or legs in a small apparatus for localized steam treatment. By the way, the therapists, who may spend up to 6 hours a day in the water, are trained at the Ecole de Techniques Thermales under the direction of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Grenoble, the best such training of its kind available in Europe.

A rheumatism patient at Aix-les-Bains might begin his daily therapy by exposing his hands to steam treatment for 15 minutes and then having them massaged. This is usually followed by a 30-minute bath in hot mineral waters. An underwater massage would be part of the bath. Then the patient would dry off and rest under wool blankets in one of the over 500 rooms for perspiring. It is usually recommended that after lunch, the patient wait for an hour before resuming treatment. By the way, special diets are not part of the cure at Aix-les-Bains. The afternoon treatment resumes with the localized application of mud rich in minerals (particularly sulphur) and specially cultivated algae. The hot mud opens the pores, facilitating the passage of mineral ions into the body. Then the patient might spend 10 minutes in a hot pool, after which he would shower and slip into a warm robe. Again he would be made to rest and perspire as the last stage of his treatment for the day. As at Vichy, of course, this treatment would be prescribed by a physician.

At spas specializing in the treatment of ears, nose, and throat, water vapors are inhaled. This is not the only method of application used, however. The waters are also utilized in sprays, gargling, irrigating of the nose, sinuses, or throat, infrasonic aerosols, aquapuncture of the tonsils,

and pressurized insufflations of gases into nasal and aural passages. The thermal hospitals at such spas are equipped with many rows of sinks, humidifiers, etc. in little booths. The water treatments are sometimes supplemented by breathing exercises. Patients here seek relief from certain types of deafness, allergies, sinus and throat infections, asthma, and persistent coughs due to causes ranging from pneumonia to emphysema. Some spas, for example La Bourboule, treat not only respiratory allergies, but skin allergies as well. For such problems, waters are used both for drinking and in localized showers and water massages.

In a few spas specializing in dermatoses and motor difficulties, the waters have the same molecule concentration as blood serum. Uriage-les-Bains in the Pyrenees and Rochefort-sur-Mer use such waters, which are bacteriologically pure and injected directly into the body tissue. It is claimed that this method allows for more rapid absorption of the trace minerals, notably of sulphur.

Gases as well as waters are used extensively in the treatment of circulatory disorders, such as arteriosclerosis, at Royat. Here not only 2 million liters of water, but 4 million liters of thermal gases pour from the earth every 24 hours. A "dry bath" has been developed with the patient lying in a kind of plastic sack, which is inflated with thermal gases. Since 1931, gases have also been injected subcutaneously to dilate blood vessels locally. The gases have the effect of reducing blood pressure and slowing the heart beat. Royat is not only a center for cardio-vascular treatment, but also for research. In the Royat laboratories, doctors conduct scientific studies to understand better the beneficial effects of these springs which were already used by the Romans over 2000 years ago.

As for spa lodgings, they are almost as varied a types of treatment. The cheapest is no doubt a tent at the local campgrounds. Then there are rooms, furnished apartments

and houses, and, of course, hotels ranging from the simplest to the most luxurious. "Les Prés" at Eugénie-les-Bains is a 4-star hotel, with elegant rooms and suites. This particular establishment, listed in the famed Michelin Relais de campagne guide, boasts a superb cuisine, especially "cuisine minceur". The springs here were ordered tapped by Henry IV, and during the Second Empire, Empress Eugenie gave her name to the spa.

All French spas offer numerous opportunities for relaxation in addition to water cures. Many are small towns whose economy is based on their springs. They are therefore free of heavy industry and make deliberate efforts to create a pleasing appearance with parks, fountains, flowers, etc. Since many such towns are located in mountainous regions, the surrounding countryside is attractive and offers idyllic hiking opportunities. Most spas are open only from May through September or October. Sailing, swimming, golf, and tennis are among the sports for which they provide facilities. At Divonne, a swamp was made into a lake for sailing and swimming, and on Bastille Day it serves as a huge reflecting pool for a fireworks display. At Vichy, a lovely harbor was constructed for yachting. Those who prefer spectacular sports can watch horse racing at the huge hippodrome in Vichy. Certainly, all manner of recreational opportunities exist at the spas while taking the "cure". The skeptic might begin to suspect that it is the rest and relaxation, rather than the cure itself, that makes patients feel better after a few weeks at a spa. The French, however, take spas very seriously, as indicated by the fact that the health benefits of the national social security plan help cover costs for transportation and lodging as well as for the cure itself. Moreover, the spas at Aix-les-Bains and Vichy are run by the French government.

The French government views the use of waters for healing as a type of medical treatment, rather than as an

alternative to it. That and the fact that water cures depend entirely on natural resources appeals to the French people.

It is usually recommended that patients undergo at least 3 weeks of therapy at a spa to benefit fully from a cure. It is also felt that the cure should be repeated for at least 3 consecutive years. Many people try to prolong the benefits of their treatment after leaving the spa. At Vichy, patients with liver problems are encouraged to continue their cure at home. It is recommended that for 10 days of every month, they drink 100 grams of lukewarm bottled water from the Hopital or Grande-Grille spring before breakfast and again half an hour before lunch. Vichy, I might add, also markets digestive mints (Pastilles Vichy-Etat) and other products, such as toothpaste or powder containing natural minerals and fluoride. Other spas sell similar products. Enghien-les-Bains sells bottled water, sulphur-rich soap and beauty cream, throat lozenges, and a toothpaste. Under the tradename of Biotherm, Molitg-les-Bains markets a thermal soap a cleansing cream with plankton in them. Many of these products are exported to the U. S.

The tradition of taking the waters is thus alive and well in France today. Going back to Celtic times and never totally lost since then, it now involves highly sophisticated medical technology. Extensive research in this branch of medicine and its widespread acceptance by the public are phenomena hardly found in the U. S. America has had fashionable spas, like Cambridge Springs in Pennsylvania, frequented by Ulysses S. Grant, and Warm Springs, Georgia, where Franklin D. Roosevelt went for treatment. Some are still operating. But generally, Americans seem to be skeptical and have too little savoir-vivre to enjoy the benefits of the cure at a spa the way the French do. I tried it and liked it and recommend it to you.