

THE CATALAN SPAS

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City-dwellers feel an ever-growing need to find somewhere where peace and quiet blend with the harmony and beauty of nature. What better place to satisfy this need than the spas?

In Catalonia, there are watering-places whose history goes back to the remote times of the Romans or the Arabs; places that have been remodelled in more recent times and are now fully up to the standards of those that exist in the rest of Europe. In fact, some of them are of a very high standard indeed, with installations that can boast an impeccable infrastructure, with pools and thermal baths and complete medical teams capable of treating those illnesses that require hydrotherapeutic attention.

These baths are distributed according to nature's own distribution of the streams: usually in fertile areas, in a landscape where the clean air one breathes and the purity of the water are possibly the best medicine our times have to offer.

There are about twenty establishments of this type in Catalonia. The most outstanding amongst them are those that, like the four in Caldes de Montbui, have been known since time immemorial and have always been a part of the life of the Catalans; these are regularly visited by large numbers of tourists, both national and from abroad.

This fact should not surprise us if we bear in mind that, amongst their many underground springs, there are some that flow at a temperature of 70°C (160°F) and are thought to be the hottest thermal waters in Europe. "Broquetas", in the town of Caldes de Montbui, mentioned above, is a typical spa: majestic halls with

decorated ceilings and colourful mosaic walls, chandeliers, plush armchairs and large mirrors, with well-tended gardens and summer-houses outside.

The other watering-places in Caldes de Montbui, open all the year round, have been rebuilt in some cases, and in others, restored along the lines of their original design. They receive an ever-increasing number of visitors.

Another characteristic of the spas is their versatility, as in the case of the one on the outskirts of the town of Arties, in the Vall d'Aran, not far from the Vaqueira ski-resort. Skiers go down there to take the waters, and it is for this reason that the establishment remains open all the year round. The baths, whose waters emerge at a temperature of 40°C (105°F) and are of a sulphureous composition, ideal for the treatment of rheumatic or congestive conditions, are set in a landscape of great beauty and enjoy a typically alpine climate, the perfect place to spend a few days of rest and solace of a kind which would be difficult to find anywhere else.

Another model of its type is the spa at Caldes de Boí, in the Alta Ribagorça region, in the Pyrenees of Lleida. Situated at the foot of the Cavallers dam, it is quite up to the standards of the most prestigious hydrotherapeutic installations in Europe. It consists of a well-equipped complex of hotel and thermal facilities, set in beautifully cared-for gardens that intensify the bucolic feeling that dominates the whole region.

There are two very different establishments in the town of Caldes de Boí: the "Balneari de Caldes", the original one, with all the flavour of the past, and the "Manantial", with four stars;

a modern, well-equipped four-story building.

There is one region of Catalonia, La Selva, which, amongst other things, is well-known for its spring-water, bottled and exported beyond the borders of Catalonia under the trade name of "Vichy Catalán". The water's source is to be found in the town of Caldes de Malavella, where at present there are two hotels with thermal baths: the "Balneari Prats" and the "Vichy Catalán".

The first of these, the Prats, is a flourishing tourist complex. The old building's interior has been redesigned and the premises have been enlarged with the addition of new installations of modern design. A therapy pool has been built and there are well looked-after gardens. The waters of the two establishments are known to be effective in the treatment of chronic conditions, asthma, neuralgias, ulcers, etc., since they are rich in sodium bicarbonate. The nearby sea allows the two spas' regular clientele to alternate sea bathing with therapeutic bathing. The "Balneari Prats" has been visited by well-known figures such as Josep Pla, Montserrat Roig (her book *L'hora violeta* was written there), the painter Joan Ponç, and others.

As well as the watering-places already mentioned, we must not forget others, such as "Vallfogona de Riucorb", in the province of Tarragona, now run by Hotels HUSA; the beautifully kept "Balneari Blancafort", in La Garriga; the "Balneari Montagud"; the "Orion", in santa Coloma de Farners, and those of "La Salut", "Victòria" and "Solà", in Caldes de Montbui, as well as others which are at present being restored and which would take too long to list. ■