



historic hotel, taking over an entire wing of the building, inviting both hotel guests and wellness seekers to experience aqua therapy.

Budapest is situated on a network of underground thermal springs on the Carpathian Basin, where the earth's crust is extremely thin. The thermal waters are bursting with the goodness of minerals like calcium, magnesium, chloride, sulphate, hydrogen carbonate and fluoride ions. Warmed by geothermal heat, they emerge on land as hot springs with elevated mineral content, which translates to enhanced health benefits. These spouting pools of water, spread across the region, form the basis of the city's thermal bath culture, particularly in the hilly Buda side in the west.

It's not just tourists who visit these thermal spas, locals too make the trip, often mandated by their doctors. The age-old belief in the relaxing and rejuvenating properties of warm water enriched with minerals draws visitors, including me, to these baths. From helping ease the pain of joint inflammation and intervertebral disc degeneration, to providing relief from asthma and bronchitis, and even promoting cardiovascular health, thermal baths have purported health benefits. In fact, the word "spa" is said to originate from an old Latin expression, "sanus per aquam", which means "health through water".

Curious to learn more about the history of this ancient institution, I find myself venturing to Szechenyi Thermal Baths one evening. The grand dame of Budapest baths, built in neo-Baroque and neo-Renaissance styles, turned 100 in 2013. But life for this hot spring bath actually began in the 1870s, when city officials started drilling at this very spot in City Park. Today, there are 15 indoor baths and three outdoor pools, one of which forms the beating social heart of Szechenyi. Since I've already got tickets to Gellert for the next day, I leave after a quick tour of the building.

At Gellert, there is a long line for tickets as I waltz by, feeling smug about having bought them in advance online. The lobby is a work of art in itself, with its high vaulted ceilings and stained glass windows. Once I hand over my ticket, I get a wristband strapped on, the magic key that will open

(both pages)
The neo-Baroque palace was built to host Szechenyi Thermal Baths, one of Europe's largest spa baths with 15 indoor baths and three grand outdoor pools

BATHE WITH ME, IN BUDAPEST

Situated atop thermal springs, this is one European city where all you need is your swimwear.

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

For the first time in my life, I have bought tickets to take a bath. No, seriously. It is my third day in Budapest, and I have devoted the entire afternoon to "taking the waters", local style. My chosen destination is Gellert Spa and Bath, one of the most popular thermal spas not just in Budapest but all over Europe. The thick rainclouds blanketing the city is all the enticement

visitors like me need to spend time indoors this morning. While some others might head to a museum to soak up the arts, I decided to indulge in some sybaritic soaking instead. According to popular legend, hot spring waters have been in existence here since the 15th century.

Nearly five centuries later, I find myself on a creaky tram that deposits me at the entrance of Danubius Hotel Gellert at one end of the moss green Liberty Bridge across from the Danube. This imposing Art Nouveau-style hotel is where visiting dignitaries, from American presidents to European princesses, past and present, have resided since it opened its doors in 1918. The spa takes pride of place at the

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES, BUDAPESTINFO, HU, CHARUKESI RAMADURAI





(both pages)
Opened in 1918, Gellert Spa and Bath offers medicinal water treatments; it is situated within Danubius Hotel Gellert along the Danube River

the doors to the deep interiors of the spa. Up and down I walk on somewhat slippery steps, through narrow passages and mysterious hallways until I finally arrive at the hall with dozens of tiny rooms, one of which is assigned to me. A quick change into my swimsuit and flipflops later, I decide to leave behind the map they've provided, choosing instead to wander around the maze-like interior in search of delightful serendipities.

I make my way past the massage rooms and Finnish saunas, and finally get to the main bath area. There are two heated pools with mineral-rich water on either side of the room: think colourful mosaic floors, stunning aquamarine Zsolnay tiles of Hungarian origin and fountains topped by chubby cherubs along the wall. It is a throwback to a glamorous and languorous time, an age where people

FROM HELPING EASE THE PAIN OF JOINT INFLAMMATION... TO PROMOTING CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH, THERMAL BATHS HAVE PURPORTED HEALTH BENEFITS

PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES, BUDAPESTINFO.HU, CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

ANTHOLOGY



BEYOND BATHING

Aqua Chess In the al fresco pools of Szechenyi, one of Europe's largest medicinal spas, chess games balanced on floating boards are particularly popular among locals. Feel free to make friends and join in the fun.

spent hours soaking in pools of water of varying temperatures, without having to think about work deadlines or text messages.

Indeed, the scene in front of me is similar: men and women lounging and laughing together — mixed bathing has been allowed since 2013 — in a pool heated to a bracing 38 deg C. I step in gingerly and move to a corner, finding a spot where I can sit and immerse myself neck-deep in the soothing warmth of the mineral water. As I look around me, I see couples, groups of friends and the rare solitary bather; some of them stay rooted to their spots while others, like me, move across the pool, float on their backs and crouch under the fountains to derive maximum pleasure.

Twenty minutes later, before I turn into a complete prune, I drag myself out of the water and head to the long swimming pool at the centre of the main hall. It is one of the most visually stunning parts of Gellert Spa, with tall Roman pillars, more fountains and a curved glass ceiling to let in natural light. This pool is maintained at 22 deg C, a comfortable temperature by any standard, but at the time it feels cold, frigid even. It comes as a bit of a shock to my system, which has grown accustomed to the heat of the thermal pool. But then, alternating between hot and cold is said to be the best way to experience aqua therapy.

So I soldier on, sitting in the steaming sauna for 10 minutes and following it up with a quick dip in the "icy" plunge pool: rinse and repeat, until my body signals that it is time to stop. I have spent nearly four hours at Gellert. By then, my skin is tingling with a thoroughly enjoyable sensation, my head feels light and clear, and my neck and shoulders thank me for relieving it of all that tension. Back out in the open half an hour later, I notice that the greyness has also lifted from the skies and the sun is shining gloriously. Just like how I am feeling inside. **A**



Spa Parties At the 16th-century Ottoman-era Rudas Baths, pool parties complete with music, disco lights, food and alcohol are all the rage throughout the year. Cheekily called sparties, they go on until 4am on weekends.

Therapeutic Massages A favourite among locals and those seeking relief from health problems, Lukacs Baths offers treatments such as physiotherapy and massages, as well as mineral-enriched water for drinking.

