

Hot-springs towns bubble with attractions

BY ROCHELLE LASH, POSTMEDIA NEWS FEBRUARY 5, 2011

Spa life always has been part of Switzerland's zeitgeist. More than 2,000 years ago, the marauding Romans crossed the Alps and soothed their aching feet in several mineral-rich hot springs, coining the phrase "sanus per aqua" (wellness through water). In 1500, a business-savvy Swiss cardinal acquired the rights to underground springs and set about healing bodies as well as spirits.

For centuries, millions of visitors have travelled to Switzerland from around the world to take the "kur." But the institutional style of Old World clinics and bathhouses is fading. Today, the hot-springs towns bubble with creativity, gastronomy and a wealth of tourism attractions. And Switzerland is home to renowned spas that dispense pioneering beauty treatments and advanced medical programs.

Travellers with a penchant for five-star luxury head to such rarefied resorts as La Reserve Geneve, a classic haven of privacy in a city that welcomes the world's political leaders. In the Alps, the holiday paradise of Interlaken is home to the Hotel Victoria-Jungfrau, a 150-year-old beauty queen with a spa that has been modernized with stunning glass, granite and metal decor. Clinique La Prairie in Montreux is a regal establishment where elite clients are pampered with caviar facials and four-handed massages.

At these "haute-Swiss" hotels, a retreat with lodging and spa services can cost more than \$1,000 a day.

Towns with natural hot springs are a lot more affordable because their public baths are open to everyone at moderate rates. Switzerland is home to about 30 spa towns with natural hot springs including: the poshski town of St. Moritz and neighbouring Scuol; Yverdon-les-Bains on Lake Neufchatel, a rest stop for the ancient Romans; and Baden, a lively casino town on the outskirts of Zurich.

Leukerbad is the quintessential Swiss hot-springs destination, an Alpine village in the wine and ski country of the Valais region. Surrounded by snowcapped Alps, Leukerbad has it all, including downhill and crosscountry skiing, hiking, mountain biking and Swiss cuisine. It's a mostly car-free village with a charming tangle of streets that lead from the bus station to hilltop hotels, restaurants and shops.

Leukerbad's natural beauty and the largest thermal waters in Europe have inspired many famous visitors, including Goethe, de Maupassant, Tolstoy and Picasso. Today, 1,500 locals welcome the more than 250,000 people who flock here annually from about 60 countries. They come for the restorative powers and healing qualities of the natural hot springs, which are laden with calcium and sulphites and bubble and boil underground at more than 67 C. Cooled to between 28 C and 43 C, the springs are channelled into large pools throughout the town, including some hotels and the popular Burgerbad, or "peoples' bath."

With an open-to-everyone atmosphere, the Burgerbad is a complex of natural hot-spring pools, with locker rooms and moderate entrance fees. Bathers, young and old, spend hours soaking in the 10

