
Stop 8. Hot Springs National Park

Arrival datetime: Thursday April 11, 3:30PM
Sites visited: Hot Springs National Park, Lake Catherine State Park
Accommodations: The Arlington Hotel
States traveled: Tennessee, Arkansas

Tractors plowed fields and crop dusters soared overhead as we left Tennessee. As we moved into Arkansas, the landscape changed to car dealerships and superstores. Retail outlets grew closer and closer together, signifying our approach to a big city. The Little Rock skyline popped up on the other side of the Arkansas River, and we pulled off the highway in search of lunch. We followed the water to the River Market, a collection of independently operated fast-food stands under one brick roof. It was like Faneuil Hall in Boston, but one tenth of the size and one tenth the number of gift shops. Michael decided it was the right place to try shrimp etoufee and Jennifer tried some turkey chili with cornbread. We ate outside in a bandstand with tiers overlooking the water. Rollerbladers circled the stage, jumping up on concrete barriers in suicidal aerobatics. There was an Arkansas history museum near the River Market, but we did not go in. Then on the way out of town, Michael wondered aloud why Arkansas was not pronounced “R-Kansas.” But it was too late to ask anyone.

We had no idea what to expect from the National Park at Hot Springs. As is our habit, we started with the Visitor Center. A Ranger at the desk offered that a tour

would start in five minutes. So we picked up a brochure and waited. Our tour guide was dressed in turn of the century period style. She explained that she was a volunteer who liked to dress up. She also explained that the jewel of the National Park was the building we were standing in. It turned out to be a bathhouse that first opened its doors in 1915. The tour took us through the ladies’ and men’s dressing rooms, bath halls, pack rooms, cooling rooms, and shared areas as well, though ladies and men did not occupy them at the same time. One was a chiropody room, where someone would work on your feet. One was a large wood paneled gym, with turn of the century gymnastic equipment like rings, ropes, parallel bars, and free weights made of wood. A few were for hydrotherapy. One had a tub big enough for exercising in. Another had containers, nozzles and hoses of various shapes to treat various parts of your body to various forms of hot and cold water. The guide explained that the ladies and men went to their separate dressing rooms while an attendant poured their baths. The bather would soak in the bath alone for a bit, then an attendant came in and washed him or her with lufa. The bath was followed by some combination of sauna, steam, and or sitz bath depending on the bather’s preference or a

doctor's orders. The bathing was followed by a warm shower. An attendant would then ask the bather where it hurt, and pack on up to four hot water soaked towels on various body parts. The water treatment was followed by a massage.

Our hotel was one of the few establishments left that had its own source for the Hot Springs and offered baths. We checked into our hotel and signed up for one. Our bath followed to the letter the guide's description. Relaxed and happy, we dressed for dinner and wandered around the dogwoods and rosebud in the Arlington Lawn, a garden-like setting across the street from our hotel that boasted one of the few remaining exposed Hot Springs. It was called the "Hot Water Cascade," but it was actually more like

multiple trickles. A horizontal trickle produced a steady puff of steam at the top of a thirty-foot high exposed rock wall. Protruding rock was densely covered with moss. Here and there, cracks in the rock wall let other trickles escape. Irregular gushes from these trickles produced steam puffs that floated away like little clouds. A few large trickles near the bottom had more of the fountain-like gurgles connoted by the term "spring."

We were one of four tables in the "jackets-required" Fountain Room at the Arlington, where the very elegant atmosphere and service created the correct expectation. The Fountain Room menu rivals the best restaurants in New York, and the food was perfectly prepared. The breakfast buffet was also a



The Hot Water Cascades.

surprising gourmet treat, every dish was freshly made, and contained an excellent variety of flavors and spices. Nothing was cold that should not have been. Nothing was stale. The fruit was fresh at the height of its season. The next night, a seafood buffet in the Venetian room was again a chef's triumph.

That first night, after dinner, a little dance band played in the lounge. We love to dance. Michael is an excellent dancer. Before our wedding, Jennifer persuaded him to accompany her to dance lessons so she could learn to follow his lead. The Arlington lounge atmosphere was lively but there were just a few couples dancing. We stuck to a jaunty fox trot. We had such happy smiles that, as we left the floor, a man stopped Michael to tell him how lucky he was.

In the morning, we realized that we had left our camera in the car. So we decided to do the park's two scenic drives first thing in the morning. As we waited for the Hot Springs Mountain Tower to open, we realized that morning may not be the best time to visit the overlooks. Though the town directly below was clearly visible, cloudy horizons stretched out in every direction. We were able to get a picture of our hotel, and the morning mist on the green slopes to the north.

Hot Springs National Park does not much emphasize its hiking or outdoor activities. It is so concerned with baths that its newsletter contained no description of its trails. Nevertheless, we found a short hike to an overlook, Gulpha Gorge Trail to Goat Rock. The dogwood and redbud were in full bloom.

For the first time in our trip, we were wearing shorts. The wildflowers were peeking out in purple, white, and yellow from the forest floor. Views from the overlooks were lush and green. We had broken the spring barrier and finally arrived at summer.

To continue our quest for outdoor summer activity, we had a picnic lunch on the beach in Lake Catherine State Park, a few miles away. Our only company was a few hungry ducks. We went for another short hike. A sign at the trailhead warned of Arkansas' venomous snakes. We spent the first ten minutes of the hike inspecting every root across the path before stepping over it. After three false alarms, we got complacent and only inspected things that moved. The state park was also blossoming with dogwood, redbud, and wildflowers. There were even some wild orchids. Our hike was along a beautiful stream that had several baby waterfalls and then one very large one right as the stream approached Lake Catherine. We saw no one on the entire hike except when a powerboat sped by on the lake about a half-mile from the shore. The whole experience would have been quite serene were it not for the power plant at the dam on the opposite shore. The rushing stream had covered the sound until we reached the lake. It hummed so loudly that the speeding powerboat did not drown it out.

Back at the hotel Michael dropped the camera in the parking garage. It's case was cracked and wedged open and he was unable to fix it because he lacked an appropriately small screw driver. Not only was our chance to capture our memories in pictures threatened, so was our web page. But we were calm. We

called a local camera shop, which told us that they could not fix digital cameras and that Walmart was the only merchant in town that even carried them. At Walmart, Jennifer priced features of digital cameras while Michael set off in search of tools with which he might fix the broken one. On this mission, he arrived at Walmart's optical shop. Jas, the eyeglass salesman, loaned him a screwdriver small enough to take the camera apart. To our great relief, Michael fixed the camera.

Jennifer abandoned her mission to price digital cameras, but ended up buying a few small towels for the car. Now that we had arrived at summer, the leather seats of the Cadillac had become somewhat uncomfortable until the air conditioning kicked in. As no Cadillac seat covers were likely to be in sight for the next several stops, the towels would do.

The Arlington had charged extra for a room that had real "Hot Springs mineral water" in the bath. So even though we were running late for our dinner

reservation, we took a bath. It was very hot. After dinner, we decided to check out the pool area. The pool was also very warm, and though it did not carry a sign to the effect that it was fed by the Hot Springs, the water seemed very heavy. The Jacuzzi did carry a sign advertising that it was fed by the Hot Springs. It was most certainly the hottest Jacuzzi that we had ever experienced. We enjoyed the pool and Jacuzzi so much we went there again before breakfast, then also took another bath in our own Hot Springs fed tub. We had a room service breakfast while packing, then strolled again around the Arlington's lawn before checking out. This time, Rangers were posted in strategic locations around the Hot Water Cascade, making us think that perhaps it was after all part of the National Park. The spa and the park had become synonymous in our experience. It would not have been much of a National Park had we not been able to experience the baths whose history it so vigilantly preserved.

Miles traveled:	241
Departure datetime:	Saturday April 13, 10:00AM
Departure weather:	Sunny 75°