Benefits of the hot spring waters

The Esalen® Hot springs* bubble forth at the cliff’s edge, a dry southward facing slope dropping into the Pacific. The new bathhouse rises directly over the springs. Accessed by a narrow walkway, these baths, and the springs on the southerly beach below, were prized by early native Americans, both for their comfortable warm water and also as a curative drink. More recently a visit to the baths is on the must-do list of hitch-hikers, governors, Tibetan monks, rock stars, and our fellow travelers at Esalen Institute seeking healing.

After slipping off one’s clothing in the dressing room and grabbing a towel, the first dip into the water is met with caution. It’s hot, cooled to 108º degrees as compared to the usual 104º hot tub temperature. More surprising, this water is silky. Once fully submerged one experiences a novel lightness of legs and arms. They simply pop to the surface. Waters splash on all sides—the ocean below, the plunge into the oversized tub, the swirling bath itself. This cacophony of sound is both ancient and familiar, perhaps harkening back to our pre-birth months. No wonder Europe, Asia, North and South America all have unique hot springs rituals. The mineral spa has cured both the Hapsburg prince and the farmer. There’s nothing to do but relax and let go.

The Esalen hot tub experience is based on more than magic. That silky but smelly water is rich with sulfur, as our tarnished silver jewelry will attest. Sulfur is anti-bacterial, useful in treating skin disorders. A major component in remedying connective tissue, joints, skin, and more, its heavy qualities mentioned above may account for the hot spring’s benefit to those with arthritis and muscle aches. Dead skin cells seem to slough away. The water may also contain lithium, used medically to reduce depression. Zinc, bicarbonate, and Sodium are also present. The naturally occurring chloride freshens the water. Just as a dip in the sea buoy us up, the sulfur delivers an even bigger lift. This water is heavier than the ocean. The bather is experiencing pounds of extra pressure exerted over his/her whole body, essentially the same effect as a light massage following his every contour. The circulatory stimulation encourages blood flow, whisking away toxins and depleted particles.

The water’s heat is supplied by tectonic movement deep within the earth, in this case occurring near the San Andreas fault line. Astonishingly this deep earth phenomenon oozes upward and supplies the hot water and minerals that we gratefully slip our bodies into at Esalen, Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, Paraiso hot springs, and other sought out hot springs in Central California. No wonder Grandpa Murphy originally purchased the Esalen land to develop a healing spa.

Once the bather indulges fully in overall sensory relaxation, he/she may choose to amp up the effect with a cold tub plunge, drawing the circulation deeper into the body, stimulating immune function. A quick glance at this grinning bather reveals the ruddy skin of heightened blood flow. Now is a good time to stretch out on a massage table and let the body have its way toward natural regulation. This is a naked experience, without resort to costume or social mask. For once the bather is stripped down to his /her essential nature. This could also be a moment to connect with other bathers without pretense, here at the source of hot springs diplomacy.
At Esalen, the sublime setting frames these steamy waters. The broad Pacific horizon inspires an expanded frame of mind. The Santa Lucia Mountains jag high behind. At night the bathers experience first-hand the rotation of the earth as the bright milky way slowly pivots the heavens. One becomes both very significant in essence and at the same time a small part of a very large schema. A journal entry might hail this as a spiritual awakening. The walk up the hill from the baths is often followed by a satisfying nap and a sense of personal renewal. *Let’s take a bath* vaults to a whole new meaning.

The historical lore reminds us that the indigenous peoples visited these waters, although perhaps not in their present site. A warm fall of water splashes on the beach just South of the baths. The bunker-style bathhouse was built in the present site in the 1930’s. According to one of the construction crew’s sons, a skeleton was found at the site, so it is probable that early baths existed down a similar narrow pathway. In the 1940’s another bathhouse stood near the site of the temporary baths below Fritz’s. Different tubs boasted different mineral content. In a true Big Sur twist, this bathhouse also stood as a stand in for a theatre, with short drama presentations, according to Helen Morganrath.

The spectacular storm of 1998 closed Route One and also closed access to the hot tubs when a mudslide blocked the stairway. The staff dropped a ladder down from bath rooftop and took advantage of the only heat to be found on property since the power was off. However, it became clear that the cracks in the floor were expanding, indicating the whole cement ledge was sliding seaward.

Esalen Trustees and maintenance staff pondered a new location, but then determined that the unique location of the baths, high on the cliffs above the ocean, had to be maintained. An earth engineer and a team of drillers sunk over 40 deep pillars into the hill above the baths to stabilize it. A cement base resembling the Parthenon was sunk beneath the baths, and more springs were tapped. The mission became the conservation of the hot water since other famed hot springs had been lost to excessive drilling. With the earthwork successfully completed, Mickey Meunig, famed local architect of the Post Ranch, designed the new bath-house and echoed his mentor Frank Lloyd Write with the use of arches and nature. The current baths re-opened in 2004.

~ Brita Ostrom 2020

- Named Slates Hot Springs on old maps, and Big Sur hot springs on others.