

A Painless Getaway at Calistoga's Therapeutic Mud-Bath Spas

The northern California town of Calistoga has a long tradition of ache-relieving mud baths—a bit of filthy fun that's good for you



BATH TIME | Geysers fill the pool at Indian Springs Resort & Spa. PHOTO: IAN SHIVE

By PERRY GARFINKEL
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IN THE BEGINNING, there was mud. And geothermal water. Eons ago, these were the sum and substance of man's prescription for pain relief.

Long before ibuprofen, aspirin, prednisone and morphine, humans soaked in a compound of earth or clay and warm mineral-rich water that gurgled up from underground to assuage suffering from what today's medicine men would call rheumatic disorders—a cluster of arthritic diseases that turn joints into throbbing epicenters of hurt.

The Wappo Tribe was one of many early civilizations that discovered the benefits of this healing muddy mix. Circa 2,000 B.C., they had the good fortune to settle at an outpost that we know as California's Napa Valley, surrounded by close to 100 geysers spitting up hot water full of traces of minerals including sodium, magnesium and sulfur. To that they added rich local soil, high in volcanic ash, creating a salubrious and pleasurable treatment. They were still indulging in it when the first Europeans arrived on the scene in the early 19th century.



The author blisses out. PHOTO: DR. WILKINSON'S HOT SPRINGS RESORT

Not long ago, I was struck with a condition that leaves one's joints nearly frozen. Speaking of good fortune, however, I live a mere 65 miles from Napa, which is how I ended up literally chin-deep in mud at Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort in Calistoga, the northern Napa Valley town of just over 5,000 people that takes its mud baths very seriously.

"People come to Calistoga when they want Napa Valley without traffic and pretentiousness," said Anne Ward Ernst, the editor of the Weekly Calistogan, who told me that about 1.2 million people visited Calistoga in 2014.

Sure, many come to stroll the pointedly cowboy-style main street of hitching posts and wooden storefronts that include souvenir shops, olive-oil purveyors and wine retailers. They also come to sip and sample from the 50 local wineries, to dine at the very good restaurants and to check out the nearby geyser and Petrified Forest. But the town's biggest draw since at least the mid-20th century has been its mud and thermal springs. About two dozen hotels and motels offering mud baths and hot mineral water pools are sprinkled along the main and back streets.



Dr. Wilkinson's mud bath is made with a secret recipe. PHOTO: DR. WILKINSON'S HOT SPRINGS RESORT

The man who is arguably most responsible for putting Calistoga's mud on the map in modern times was John, aka "Doc," Wilkinson, a chiropractor and all-around health nut who was convinced that the local mud was magic medicine. In 1952, he and his wife Edy opened Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort, using his own self-proclaimed "secret" recipe of volcanic ash and hot mineral water.

The resort is still family owned and steeped in old-school, homey unpretentiousness, with the late Mrs. Wilkinson's colorful, handmade tile mosaics scattered around the property.

In simplest terms, a mud bath involves sinking into a large tub filled with a glop so dense you need someone to shovel it on top of you as, wriggling back and forth, you settle down into the brown elixir. Eventually only your head extends above the brown goo, rather like a garden cabbage.

Wallowing in the mud for just 10 to 12 minutes is quite enough time, the attendant at Dr. Wilkinson's explained, as he placed cool cucumber slices on my eyes. "Any longer and you'd become too dehydrated. You'd feel dizzy, headachy and have some...problems," he said, with disturbing vagueness.

"Call me if you need anything. I'll be just down the hall," he told me before I heard him walk away.

"You bet I will," I mumbled, sweat already trickling down my face, tickling my nose and wetting my lips.

It took a few minutes to accept that there was nowhere I could go. But suspended in the mud, with no weight on any of my limbs, I experienced a sensation I hadn't felt for a long time: the absence of pain.

'As the mud hardened and caked on my body, I felt as though I were a human sweat lodge.'

The attendant soon returned, dabbed my face, fed me water through a straw and then slowly uprooted me from the depths. My body felt like a soggy noodle and it took me several minutes to shower off the mud that had lodged in every crevice.



JASON LEE

Having tried the no-nonsense, traditional mud cure at Dr. Wilkinson's, I was ready for some of the mud modernity offered at other spas in town. I chose a three-part detox treatment called a Mudslide at nearby upscale Solage Calistoga.

By the end of my few days in Calistoga, I was without a single pain—even when I was not soaking in mud. Alas, the ache returned about a week later. Until Doc Wilkinson's makes house calls, I know where to go.

Lying on a slab of stone, I was slathered by an attendant with a thin layer of warm mud and essential oils that included mint, lemon grass and lavender. As the mud hardened and caked on my body, I felt as though I were a human sweat lodge. Later, after sitting in a tub full of warm mineral water in a secluded outside area, I dried off and settled into a vibrating zero-gravity recliner while listening to harmonic tones meant to induce "acoustic relaxation."

THE LOWDOWN // PLAYING IN THE MUD IN CALISTOGA, CALIFORNIA

Getting There: Calistoga is 74 miles north of San Francisco and 80 miles due west of Sacramento.

Staying There: Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort is immaculate but relatively no-frills (from about \$195 a night, mud and massage treatments from \$139; drwilkinson.com).

Indian Springs Resort & Spa has one of the state's largest outdoor natural hot Sulphur water-fed pools (from about \$250 night, mud treatments from \$95; indianspringscalistoga.com). **Solage Calistoga** is an intimate luxury (from about \$370 a night, signature Mudslide treatment \$110 for 60 minutes, \$160 for 90 minutes; solagecalistoga.com). **Calistoga Ranch**, set on 157 acres in a forested canyon overlooking Napa Valley, has 50 free-standing accommodations that blend seamlessly with the surroundings (from about \$645 a night; calistogaranch.aubergeresorts.com).



SPRING AWAKENING | The Auberge Spa at Calistoga Ranch. PHOTO: CALISTOGA RANCH

Eating There: Earlier this year, chef Brandon Sharp, who collected a Michelin star 6 six times at Solage's **Solbar**, opened **Evangeline**, a French-cum-Creole bistro worth the long wait for a reservation (evangelinenapa.com). At Calistoga Ranch, the **Lakehouse** has views of Lake Lommel. Chef Bryan Moscatello delivers complex layers of tastes using local produce, fish, game and meat (calistogaranch.aubergeresorts.com/dining). Chef Kory Stewart at Indian Springs Resort's **Sam's Social Club** turns out consistently flavorful and inventive dishes (samsocialclub.com).