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Leukerbad is living proof the Romans knew how to relax

Guests to Leukerbad are inspired by the mountains and soothed by the thermal waters.

Leukerbad in upper Canton Valais has a strong Roman past going back to 400 BC. Fine local wines still come from the Rhone Valley below, and the village today boasts 28 bathing facilities fed with natural, 51-degree mineral springs. They say that wherever the Romans went, they did two things first: plant wine grapes and build a public bath. Today, water is still the mainstay of Leukerbad's economy, and has attracted well-to-do patrons from all over Europe and beyond. Notables included Goethe, Picasso, Mark Twain, and a more contemporary American author, James Baldwin, who went to Leukerbad several times.

But Leukerbad has become a truly public resort with something for everyone and for all ages. In 1959, the Rheumatic and Rehabilitation Clinic was built, and became renowned for its programme of water-based physiotherapy, which marries modern medical science with the ancient tradition of "taking the waters".

Probably best known and frequented of all of Leukerbad's spas is the Burgerbad. It's a landmark that's impossible to miss, located right on the main street in the village. A large stone fountain gushes continuously at the entrance to the Burgerbad, filling the air with clouds of steam in the colder months. There's a terrace too, where passers-by can observe the bathers below.

But the real fun is being in the water. There are several

different kinds of water facilities, including full-size and children's pools, North African and Turkish steam baths, water-treading according to the Kneip tradition, and whirlpools and Jacuzzis. Offering his waterproof calling card, the Burgerbad director, Daniel Leuenberger, says the trend today is away from the image of Leukerbad as a curative spa primarily for older people. "Today we have a very large number of young singles and families", he points out, "and there's nothing more pleasant than letting yourself drift away in thermal water after a long day on the ski slopes".

In summer, many hikers descend on Leukerbad from the Gemmi pass, which connects the Bernese Oberland with canton Valais, and head straight for the spas to massage their sore muscles.

The Alpentherme complex, Leukerbad's newest spa facility is an imposing Romanesque structure of greenish-coloured stone. Besides its thermal pools, it features a unique facility: an Irish-Roman bath. It's an 11-stage series of dry and wet rooms, brush-massage, and timed exposure to pools of varying temperatures. It ends with being wrapped in a warm towel. Alpentherme's Renata Stocker points out laughingly that "many people fall asleep during the final stage, and have to be awakened by the attendants!" This two-hour ritual takes places entirely in the nude, which, Stocker says, doesn't put people off. "As a rule we try to schedule couples together. It's all very natural, and people mind their own business. "Of course", she adds hastily, "singles are very welcome too!"

by Bob Zanotti SRI -Swissinfo.org.