

The options for soaking at Dunton Hot Springs in Colorado include everything from a restored 19th-century bathhouse to outdoor springs with magnificent views.

Sublime Soaks

Worldwide hot springs resorts offer not only natural mineral pools for soothing sore muscles, they also set the scene for romance with upscale accommodations, couples' spa treatments, fine dining and more

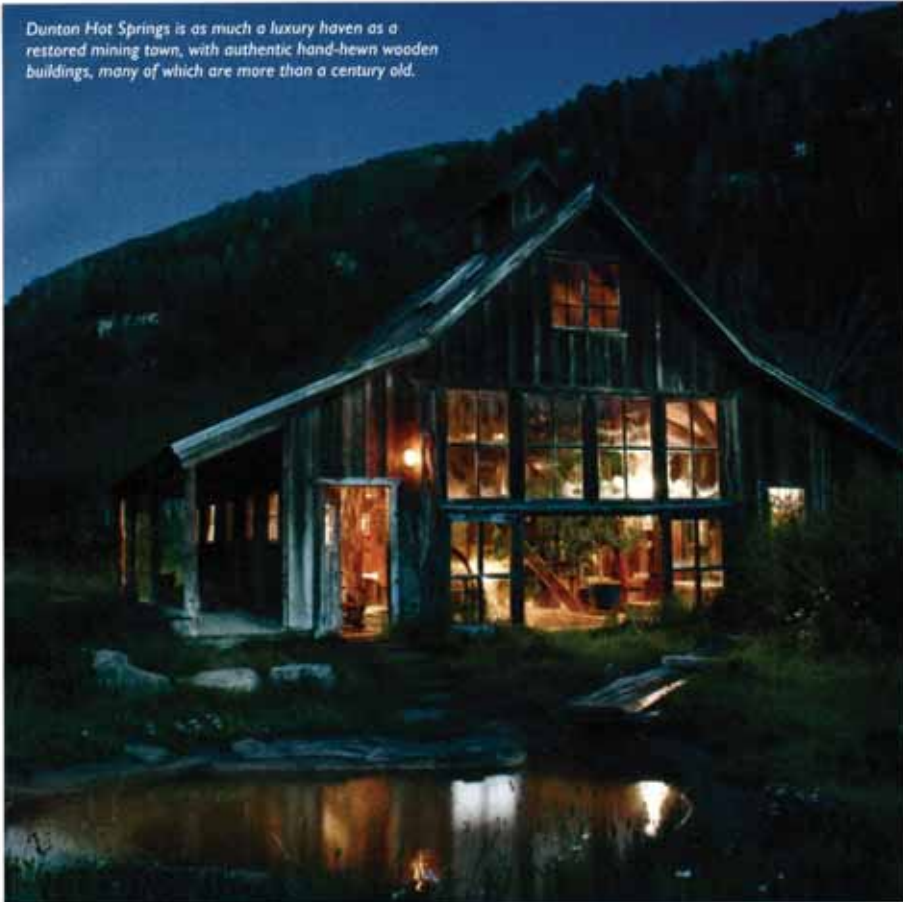
BY KARA WILLIAMS

It sure feels good to soak in a hotel hot tub after a day of skiing. Same goes for a relaxing aromatherapy bath at a spa after a particularly hectic travel day. What's even better? Kicking back in natural hot springs — geothermally heated groundwater, made possible by Mother Nature. And the ultimate indulgence? Booking a vacation at a luxury hot springs resort, where you can soak to your heart's content for the duration of your stay.

Mineral springs have long been used for their healing properties among cultures around the world — from the ancient Roman Baths in Bath, England, to onsen (hot springs) in Japan, to gurgling pools on riverbanks in Colorado that Native Americans believed cured a variety of ailments. Indeed, a long soak does wonders to refresh the mind, body and spirit.

These upscale resorts make it easy for guests to “take the waters” with their on-site steamy spots. Pampering spas, gourmet dining, stellar service and stunning scenery add to the romantic ambiance at these posh retreats.

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DUNTON HOT SPRINGS, COLORADO

On the approach to Dunton Hot Springs, tucked into the San Juan Mountains in southwest Colorado, I admit my first thought was, "Really? Is this it?"

I spotted more than a dozen log cabins on the rolling property, where a few inches of fresh snow had just fallen. Not a soul was in sight, save for two anglers fishing on the river below the narrow bridge at the gated entrance. "It's so quiet," I whispered to my husband. "Like a ghost town."

And that's the point. Dunton Hot Springs is as much a luxury haven as a restored mining town, with authentic hand-hewn wooden buildings, many of which are more than a century old. Back in 1905, when the population of Dunton peaked somewhere between 300 and 500, the settlement was home to miners prospecting for gold and silver ore in the mineral-rich mountains, plus their families and the folks running the post office, brothel and bars.

Today, those cabins (whose relatively plain exterior bely the beautifully appointed furnishings, fine art and cozy accents inside)

house visitors who seek an exclusive, outdoorsy escape from everyday life. It's where cell phones don't work, and the biggest decision of the day might be, Should I hike or horseback ride, go skiing or snowshoeing, fly-fish or mountain bike, get a massage or sit in the springs?

The options for soaking at Dunton Hot Springs are divine. Join other guests in a restored 19th-century bathhouse, where you can alternate between a large 103-degree pool and a cold plunge (if you're brave). Outdoor pools have a magnificent view of jagged snowcapped peaks; the toastiest spot is the open-air "Source," which you access below ground by descending a ladder. There's even one cabin with its own on-demand, indoor spring that feeds into a giant tub. (Note: The rustic pools at Dunton are rich in iron, so the water is a murky copper-red color; I advise not packing white bathing suits.)

With a maximum of 44 guests "in town" at any given time, the service from attentive staff is excellent. And it's easy to get to know other visitors, too -- whether you're chatting in the communal pools or dining together for

three included meals daily at a long farmhouse table in the Saloon. Gourmet meals are outstanding, focusing on farm-fresh, locally sourced ingredients. House wines from nearby Sutcliffe Vineyards, as well as beer and well drinks, are also included in the nightly rate.

The resort welcomes visitors year-round, with sister property Cresto Ranch, featuring luxury tent accommodations, open in the summer months. By air, guests can fly into one of four southwest Colorado airports: Cortez, Montrose, Telluride or Durango, while Denver is a good seven-hour drive from this remote spot. www.duntonhotsprings.com

NAYARA SPRINGS, COSTA RICA

Set amid lush vegetation in the foothills of Arenal Volcano near La Fortuna, Nayara Springs is Costa Rica's most intimate, luxurious hot springs resort. The small property, which opened to guests in December 2013, has just 16 modern villas, each of which features its own plunge pool fed by the mineral springs that originate from Arenal, the third most active volcano in the world. Imagine unwinding in your own private outdoor pool, surrounded by giant ferns, bright flowers and chirping birds after a day of rafting, ziplining or hiking in the jungle nearby.

The décor in the villas is notable, as it was sourced from all over the world: handmade rugs from Morocco, furniture from Bali, marble from Turkey, brass lamps from India and floor tiles from Mexico. Accommodations come with full butler service, as well as a private garden with open-air shower. All villas are steps away from a yoga pavilion, large lap pool and piano bar. The on-site spa offers body treatments using ingredients inspired by nature, including locally grown organic coffee beans, known for their detoxifying properties. Each spa treatment room also has its own plunge pool fed by hot springs, and the couples' services include side-by-side massages and private rose-petal Jacuzzis.

At Amor-Locho, the poolside restaurant, guests enjoy Latin American inspired sushi, fresh grilled fish and vegetables grown at the hotel's organic garden. Sister property Nayara Hotel, Spa & Gardens is just a five-minute golf-cart ride away. (Your butler will be happy to drive you next door, upon request.) Here, dining options include international cuisine at Altamira Restaurant and local Costa



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Rican fare at Mi Sodita. Sample Latin American wines at the Nostalgia Bar from self-dispensing machines, or book a five-course, wine-paired dinner served on a secluded balcony.

Nightly rates at the adults-only Nayara Springs include breakfast, complimentary mini bar and Internet access. The resort is a two-hour drive from the international airport in Costa Rica's capital city, San Jose. www.nayarasprings.com

SOLAGE, CALIFORNIA

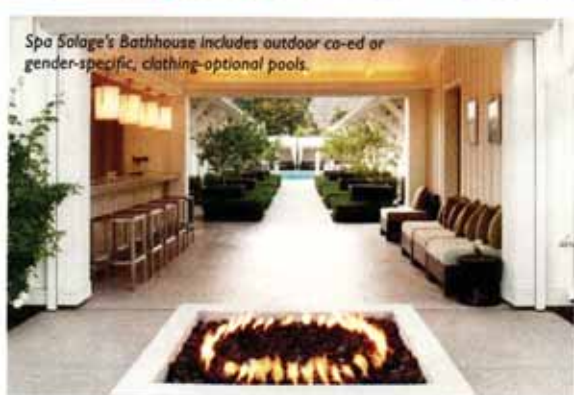
Mineral pools and mud baths are found throughout Calistoga, Napa Valley's legendary hot-springs destination. And one of the most discerning spots to stay in the area to fully indulge in Calistoga's beloved mud-centric traditions is Solage, with its signature Mudslide spa treatment.

This indulgent service can be taken alone or with your sweetheart at the resort's Spa Solage. First, get slathered in a mud made of mineral-enriched clay and volcanic ash, customized with an essential oil of your choosing. After resting in a heated mud lounge, settle into an oversized tub drawn with geo-thermal mineral water from the on-site spring. Finally, close your eyes and kick back on a vibration lounge chair, which will likely put you right to sleep.

Still more options for soaking at Spa Solage's Bathhouse include outdoor co-ed or gender-specific, clothing-optional pools. Also worth checking out: the resort's "regular" swimming pool which is quite striking, since it's an incredible 130 feet long. Other nice, on-site resort amenities include complimentary fitness classes at a modern yoga/movement studio; two bocce ball courts; and bicycles parked in front of each free-standing cottage for guests to use at their leisure to explore downtown Calistoga and nearby biking trails.

Contemporary accommodations here are either cozy studios -- some with gas fireplaces -- or suites with private patios and outdoor hot tubs. Book a suite and you'll enjoy complimentary access to the geo-thermal pools at Spa Solage's Bathhouse.

Michelin-starred SolBar, the resort's fine-dining restaurant, focuses on organic, sustainably farmed ingredients for dishes the chef calls "time-honored soul food recipes with an inventive twist." I love that the menu offers healthy, as well as hearty items in two specific columns: on the left, find lighter fare, like endive salad or sautéed red snapper, and on the right, more indulgent dishes, such as potato gnocchi or New York strip. www.solagecalistoga.com



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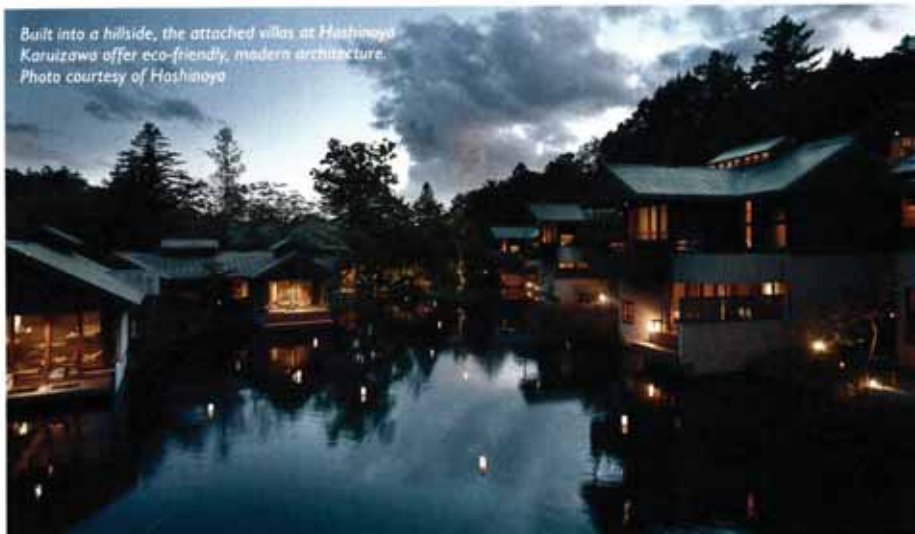


The term onsen is used to describe the bathing facilities built on or next to the myriad of natural geothermal pools in Japan.



Hot tubs at Solage are built into a hillside, with some rooms' balconies overlooking a river. Photo courtesy of Hashimoto

Built into a hillside, the attached villas at Hoshinoya Karuizawa offer eco-friendly, modern architecture. Photo courtesy of Hoshinoya



The soaking pools in the Gainsborough Bath Spa's 14,000-square-foot, two-floor Spa Village Bath tap into ancient waters.

HOSHINOYA KARUIZAWA, JAPAN

The Japanese word for hot springs is *onsen*, and the term is also used to describe the bathing facilities built on or next to the myriad of natural geothermal pools that stretch from one end of Japan to the other, thanks to the country's volcanic composition. While many traditional Japanese *ryokan* (inns) feature mineral-springs bathing, there is one "ryokan-style" resort in the mountains northwest of Tokyo that is especially inviting: Hoshinoya Karuizawa.

The entire property is immersed in the forest: built into a hillside, with some rooms' balconies set directly above a river. The attached villas' eco-friendly architecture is modern and decor is simple. Beds are traditional futons, but unlike a *ryokan*, where futons are placed on the floor on top of *tatami* mats, here pillowy, comfortable futon mattresses are on raised wooden platforms (making them more easily

accessible for Western visitors who are not accustomed to sleeping on the floor).

In another nod to international visitors, breakfast is Japanese (grilled fish, steamed vegetables, rice, miso soup) or Western style. Sample traditional bento boxes at lunch; they are filled with fish, meat, rice and vegetables to enjoy in the privacy of your room or as a picnic outside. And dinner brings the opportunity to dine in the dramatic, high-ceilinged Kasuke restaurant, where you can indulge in an authentic, multi-course (*kaiseki*) Japanese meal featuring seasonal local specialties: wild edible plants in the spring, trout in the summer, mushrooms in the fall and game meat in the winter.

Of note is the resort's unique Meditation Bath. After showering, soak in a pool in a light-filled room, then make your way to another bathing area set in complete darkness (which, depending on your fear factor, could be more

creepy than calming; I'd like to think the sensory deprivation would be soothing). Also available are a sauna, cold plunge and relaxation room; the spa offers a hot stone massage using basalt and volcanic rock from the region's Mount Asama, an active volcano. Resort guests may also like to check out local hot springs open to the public: nearby Tombo-no-yu has indoor and outdoor soaking pools.

Hoshinoya Karuizawa is an hour northwest of Tokyo by bullet train. www.global.hoshinoresort.com/hoshinoya_karuizawa

THE GAINSBOROUGH BATH SPA, ENGLAND

Though it isn't set to open for another few months, The Gainsborough Bath Spa is on my radar since it will be the only hotel in the United Kingdom with an in-house thermal spa. The contemporary, urban property with Georgian-era influences is set squarely in the heart of Bath, England, home to the Roman Baths -- a magnificent temple and bathing complex that the Romans built 2,000 years ago and where hot water still flows.

The soaking pools in the property's 14,000-square-foot, two-floor Spa Village Bath tap into these ancient waters. Guests will enter the spa's Bath House to embark on a time-honored water ritual: soaking in three different natural thermal pools of varying temperatures beneath a glass atrium and under Romanesque columns. Still more ways to soothe and rejuvenate: traditional and infrared saunas, a steam room and even an ice chamber.

A deep, Japanese *Ofuro*-style tub is a featured design element in the couples' treatment rooms in the Spa Village. Made with a teak finish and overflowing into a basalt stone bed, the spacious tub allows guests to fully immerse in the natural thermal waters, with plenty of mobility for two. In this VIP treatment suite, couples can customize a playful "do-it-yourself" spa experience with mud, algae, exfoliating salts and moisturizers.

My guess is the most coveted accommodations in the 99-room hotel will be the three Spa Suites, located directly above the Spa Village and whose bathtubs have three taps: one hot, one cold and one thermal water. Dramatic draperies, 16-foot-tall windows, built-in wardrobes, marble bathrooms and heated floors are other highlights of the guest rooms that overlook Bath, a UNESCO World Heritage City just a 90-minute train ride from London. www.thegainsboroughbathspa.co.uk □