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from a Mountain Flying Course

FLYING TO  
AND TOURING  
Hot Springs National Park

# COPA<sup>®</sup> Pilot



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**COVER PHOTO**

COPA Member Bob Larson's SF50

Vision Jet at the Sedona Airport

(KSEZ).

(Credit: Cirrus Jet Regional Sales

Director Al Waterloo)

# TRAVELOGUE

» Places to Fly and Explore

## Valley of Vapors

### Flying to and touring Hot Springs National Park

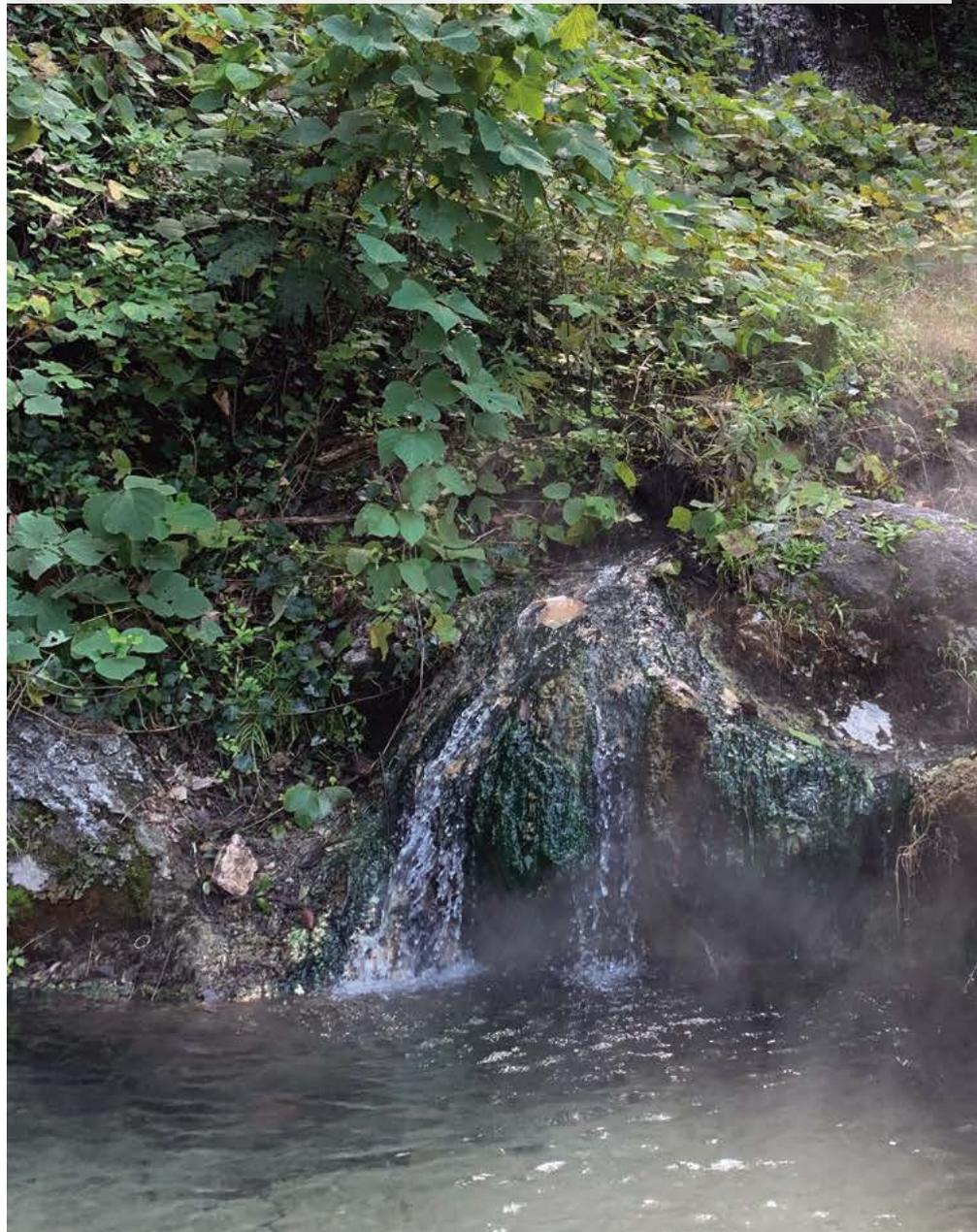
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unless stated otherwise

**Gazing up the Hot Water Cascade from  
Arlington Lawn** as vapors rise towards Hot  
Springs National Park's Grand Promenade.

(Photo Credit: Norah K. McDaniel)



**MATTHEW MCDANIEL** is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 30 years of flying, he has logged over 19,000 hours total, over 5,600 hours of instruction-given, and over 5,000 hours in all models of the Cirrus family. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC ([www.progaviation.com](http://www.progaviation.com)), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and glass cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is also an Airbus A-320-series captain for an international airline, holds 8 turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 90 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 15 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for 9 consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at [matt@progaviation.com](mailto:matt@progaviation.com) or (414) 339-4990.





**Seeking a smoother ride, we had descended out of our lofty cruising altitude before crossing the northern border of Arkansas.**

To increase arrival options, I'd canceled our instrument flight plan in favor of VFR flexibility. The first smooth altitude we found was relatively low. Thus, 10 miles northeast of Hot Springs, Arkansas, the airport was still out of view, obscured by the low lying mountains which surround the city. But as the sun began hanging low in the west, the sky was quickly reddening and casting a magnificent glow across the shallow valley. As we overflew the airport and entered a left downwind leg for Runway 23, the cabin flooded with softening light and I heard my son's voice over the intercom, "Wow, we should just circle right here and watch the sun set." His sister added, "It's so beautiful."

## Aviating Arkansas

Flying to Hot Springs is in no way difficult, regardless of the direction from which you approach. Arkansas, in general, is anything but a flat state, but does not contain high elevations or mountainous terrain (at least not by the Federal Aviation Administration's definition). Nonetheless, much of the state is covered with rolling hills, high bluffs, low lying mountain ranges (2,000 vertical feet or less), sculpted river gorges and picturesque vistas. This is especially true in the northwestern half of the state. The southwest to northeast line that roughly bisects the state passes just south of Hot Springs and just north of Little Rock; southeast of that line, Arkansas is a bit flatter. While northwest is where you'll find Arkansas' two largest mountain ranges, the Ozark Plateau with more dramatic views between the Boston Mountains to the northwest and the Ouachita Mountains

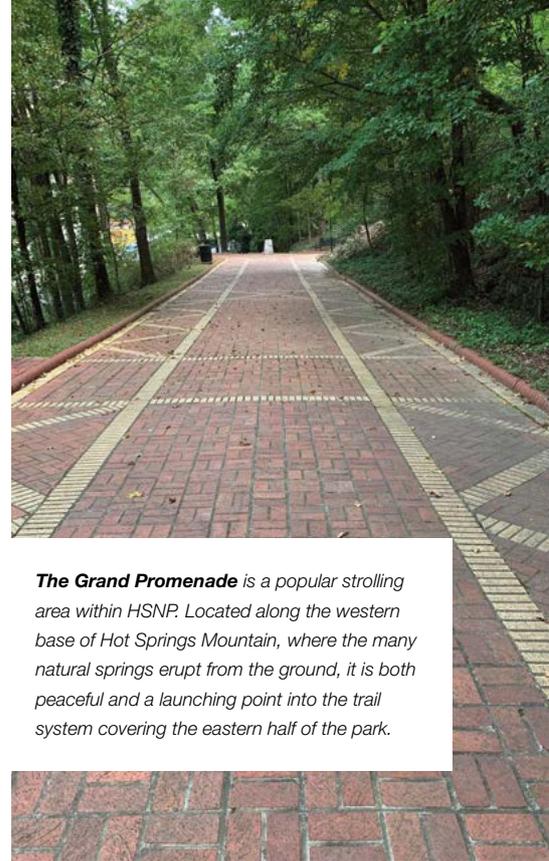
to the southwest, is Arkansas' highest point – Magazine Mountain, topping out at 2,753 feet above sea level. From an aerial sightseeing standpoint, none of Arkansas is boring.

I cannot in any way consider myself to be an experienced Arkansas aviator or tourist, but my flying has taken me to the state many times over the years. In my days as a regional airline pilot, my company had a Milwaukee to Kansas City to Little Rock route that I flew many times. That same airline used a facility in tiny Mena, Arkansas, located on the western border, for heavy maintenance. The few times that I was selected to operate those ferry flights gave me a deep respect for Arkansas' terrain. Mena Intermountain Municipal Airport (MEZ) is surrounded by rising terrain on all sides, some of it 1,500+ feet above the airport elevation. The area's valleys are prone to persistent fog and the terrain doesn't allow approach minimums consistent with low IFR conditions. I recall being shocked, upon breaking out below the overcast, to find rugged hills surrounding me and a valley airport ahead. I also recall sitting out multiple delays (sometimes hours, sometimes days), waiting for fog to dissipate from the valley to allow a legal departure. My airline adhered to our FAR-121 Operating Specifications, even on FAR-91 ferry flights.

Aside from those occasions, my experiences with Arkansas has been limited to fuel or training stops on general aviation cross-country flights, at airports such as Pine Bluff (PBF), Jonesboro (JBR), and West Memphis (AWM). Of course, overflights of portions of Arkansas have been common over the years, as well. If visual conditions prevail, the state never fails to draw my nose to the glass to watch the beautiful countryside go by. It was



*Hot Springs as seen from the exterior viewing platform atop Hot Springs Mountain Tower (looking southwest). On the right side is West Mountain, while the foreground displays Hot Springs Mountain. Between them is Central Avenue and Bathhouse Row.*



*The Grand Promenade is a popular strolling area within HSNP. Located along the western base of Hot Springs Mountain, where the many natural springs erupt from the ground, it is both peaceful and a launching point into the trail system covering the eastern half of the park.*

not until 2020 (after 31 years and nearly 20,000 hours of flying) that I had a reason to visit Hot Springs. The reason was twofold: to check another national park off my list and a family escape from our Wisconsin home climate during the chilly last days of autumn. While some trees had already become barren and brown at home, they were still in the early stages of fall color in central Arkansas.

Hot Springs Memorial Field (HOT) is a pilot-controlled airport, yet is one of only six commercial airports in Arkansas. It has approximately 100 based airplanes and scheduled airline service via the small Southern Airways. They operate nine-passenger Cessna Caravans daily to Dallas-Ft. Worth (DFW). For us general aviation operators, the City of Hot Springs FBO offers a full array of standard services, including full-service Jet-A and both full and self-service 100LL fuel. Their facility is small, but well maintained and comprehensive. On the field, Hertz car rental has a small facility that will leave your rented vehicle right at the FBO (inside the perimeter fence) during

***“Many public drinking fountains and bottle filling stations, plus the historic bathhouses, all utilize the roughly 700,000 gallons of spring water collected by the park per day.”***

off-hour pickups. During normal business hours, the Hertz facility is only a two-minute walk across the FBO parking lot. Enterprise rental cars can also be arranged.

The “air side” of HOT is adequately equipped for most operations. The main runway (05/23) is 6,595 x 100 feet, with Runway 5 being primary. Its three Instrument Approach Procedures (IAPs) consist of a standard ILS, a GPS (LPV) approach, and an old-school VOR approach. The opposite end (Runway 23) is VFR only. Traffic patterns to this runway need to be flown fairly tight to maintain a standard glide path inside

the surrounding terrain. Runway 13/31 serves as the secondary or crosswind runway. While it is not served directly by individual IAPs, circling procedures exist from both the ILS and VOR approaches to Runway 5. At 4,098 x 100 feet, Runway 13/31 is sufficiently long for any Cirrus operations, but beware of the surrounding terrain/obstructions and the descent slopes required to clear them. Runway 13’s “slope to clear” is far-steeper-than-standard 10:1, while Runway 31 has a whopping 24:1 slope. All runway surfaces are in excellent condition with clear markings and parallel taxiways. Transient parking space is plentiful and parking/

overnight fees are quite reasonable. Like with any single FBO airport, calling ahead and needs will likely make your visit both smoother and more pleasurable. When time comes to depart, be sure to check HOT's Obstacle Departure Procedures (ODPs). While the terrain isn't extreme, much of it is up to 1,000 feet above field elevation and rises in every direction from the airport. Non-standard takeoff minimums and ODPs are published for every runway.

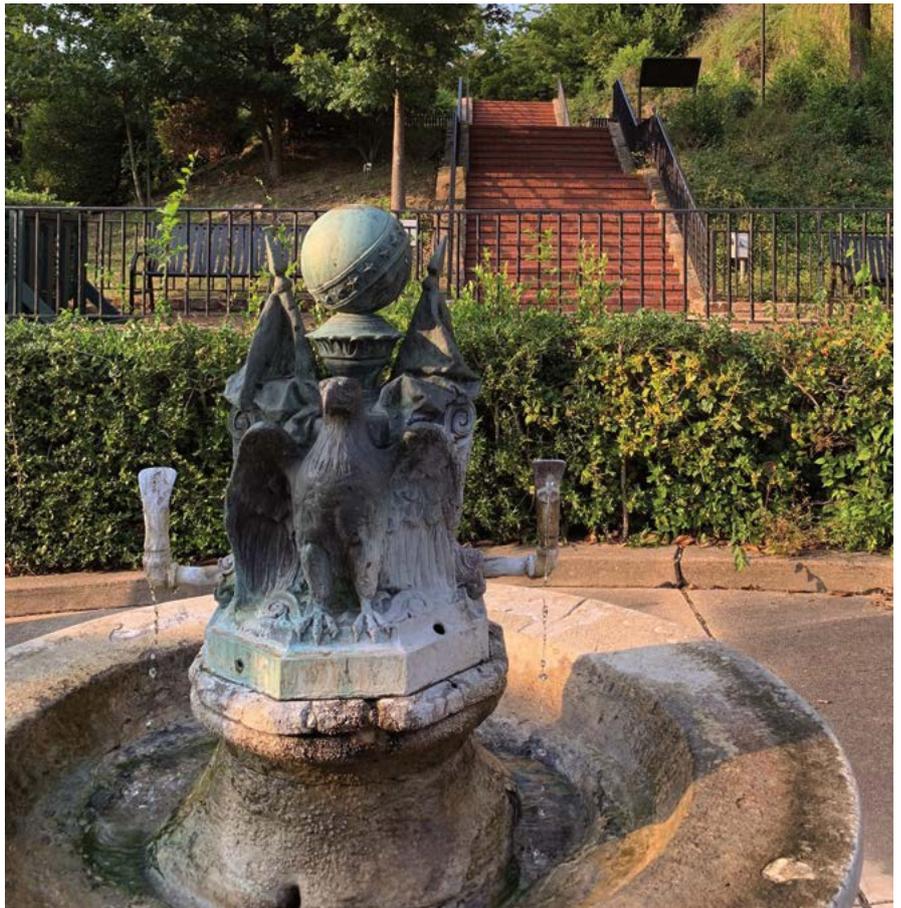
If you are seeking out a larger airport with more infrastructure and service options, Little Rock's Bill & Hillary Clinton National Airport/Adams Field (LIT) is only 45 miles northeast of HOT (closer to 55 ground miles). This makes it a great primary choice if visiting Arkansas' capital city is on your agenda. LIT can also simply serve as an excellent alternate airport if, for any reason, arriving directly into HOT is not ideal. LIT is equipped with multiple ILS approaches (including Cat. I, II, and III), as well as several GPS approaches with LP or LPV minimums. Two large FBOs at LIT offer all the amenities and services any pilot or passenger might require.

## The Heat is On

The primary attraction to HSNP is water – naturally heated, mineral rich, plentiful spring water. While two of the natural springs in the area are actually cold, most are not just warm, but genuinely hot. This heating process is accomplished as rainwater descends through porous rock, percolating via gravitational compression. When the water eventually surfaces through the lower west slope of Hot Springs Mountain, it flows out at an average temperature of 143°F (62°C). Many public drinking fountains and bottle filling stations, plus the historic bathhouses, all utilize the roughly 700,000 gallons of spring water collected by the park per day. Historically, the hot water (and

(continued on page 52)

» **One of the many public thermal water jug fountains** within Hot Springs and HSNP. This one is situated at the base of the Grand Promenade staircase, on the south end of Bathhouse Row.



» **The Fordyce was the premier bathhouse in the early 1900s** and now serves as the HSNP Visitor Center. It is an excellent example of the glory years of these facilities, filled with fine tile work and historic medicinal bathing equipment.



the minerals it contains) were thought to have healing properties. This attracted bathhouse patrons from all over the U.S. for more than a century. Included among those travelers was my grandmother, who under doctor's orders, spent time in Hot Springs in the 1930s and early 1940s to treat what ailed her.

By the 1960s, therapeutic and medicinal bathing had fallen out of vogue. This put nearly all of the historic (and often grand) bathhouses out of business. They became ramshackle and by 1985 only one (The Buckstaff) remained operational. With more recent appropriations of funds, many of the historic bathhouses have reopened as day spas, hotels, and even art museums (most with attractive décor restored from their original heyday and palate-pleasing dining options as well). Today, the HSNP Visitor Center

is housed in the fully restored Fordyce Bathhouse. The Fordyce was considered the best bathhouse in Hot Springs in the first decades of the 1900s and has not only been returned to its former splendor but remains historically accurate with furniture and medicinal bathing equipment from that era. Today, Bathhouse Row in downtown Hot Springs is a National Historic Landmark District and contains several bathing and dining facilities open to the public (Note: COVID limitations may apply, please inquire in advance). Bathing and spa services at the various bathhouses are regulated and inspected by the National Park Service (NPS), including the only remaining traditional therapeutic bathing experience offered at The Buckstaff, now in its 109<sup>th</sup> year of continuous operation. Modern medicine has little place in the thermal springs

today, but there is little doubt that some relaxation and a nice hot soak rarely does harm to one's health and disposition.

## Getting Out of Hot Water

While small, HSNP is far from one dimensional. Unlike most U.S. national parks, Hot Springs is a blend of urban and natural settings. The heart of the park is Bathhouse Row, which links the north and south sectors of the city of Hot Springs. This small section of the park has a decidedly urban feel and only the historic nature of the bathhouses hint at being anywhere other than a typical small U.S. city. Otherwise, the city is divided by Hot Springs Mountain and West Mountain, which both lie within the park boundaries. Clockwise around the compass, Sugarloaf Mountain lies west and north of the city and Stonebridge Mountain (north and east) closes the ring-shaped layout of the park. While this ring completely encircles Hot Springs, it is within these modest mountains that the more traditional national park feeling takes hold.

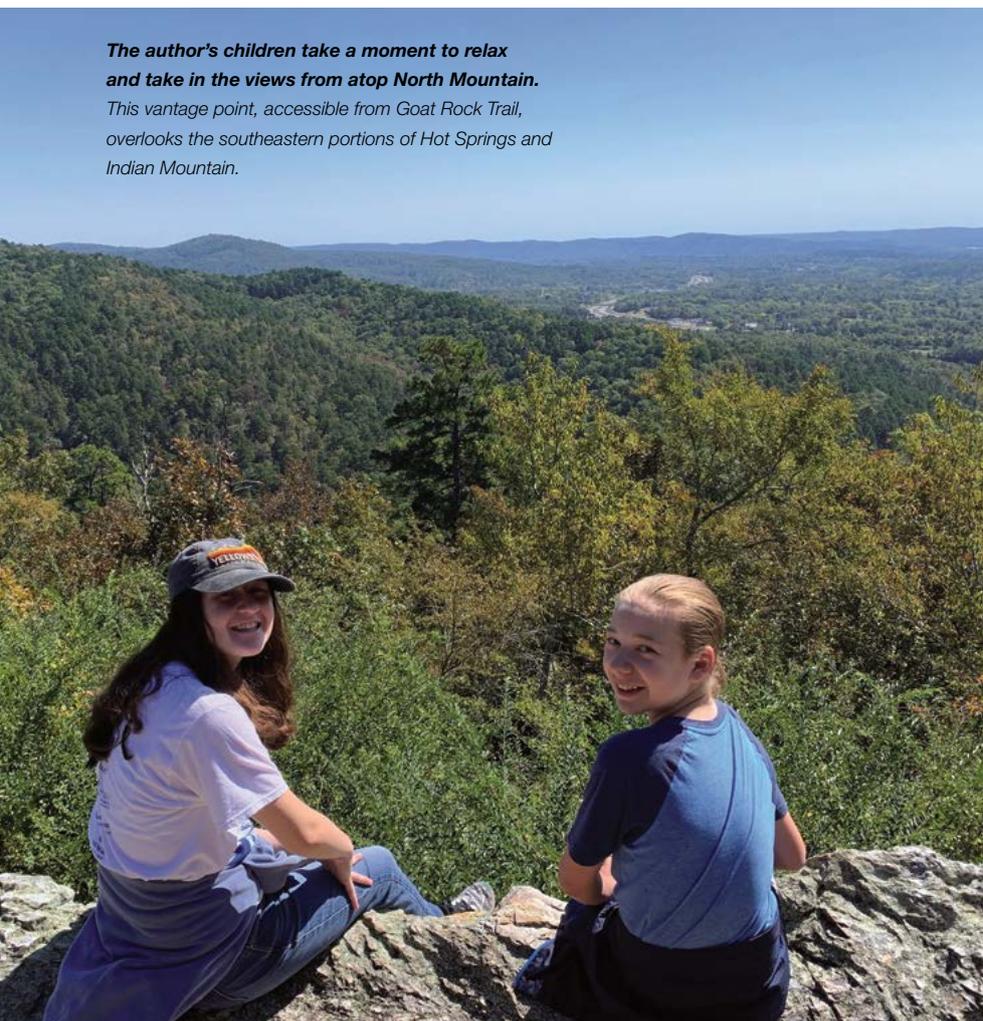
Hot Springs and North Mountains are the more touristy of the natural areas. The Hot Springs Mountain Drive is a loop. We began by driving up its switchbacks to reach its namesake tower, but one can also climb to the tower from town via Shortcut Trail. For a small fee, you can take the elevator to the top and get a 360-degree view of the park and city. This really brought the layout of the park into focus, allowing more targeted explorations later. A level below the exterior viewing area, an interior area provides the same views, combined with a great little museum detailing the history of the park.

Continuing the drive to the northern most point of the loop, we parked in one of the small parking lots and headed out onto Goat Rock Trail. If you are a hiker used to more expansive national parks, HSNP is refreshingly easy to hike. The trails

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### **The author's children take a moment to relax and take in the views from atop North Mountain.**

*This vantage point, accessible from Goat Rock Trail, overlooks the southeastern portions of Hot Springs and Indian Mountain.*



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are well marked and filled with beautiful vistas of both the city and the surrounding mountains and valleys. The hikes are not long and we ended up stringing several of them together before eventually returning to our car. After returning to Bathhouse Row for lunch, we decided to explore West Mountain on foot. We walked Central Avenue (Bathhouse Row) to Whittington Avenue, which we followed west through an urban park area that connected with Mountain Top Trail. From there, we made connections with the West Mountain and Canyon Trails.

Due to time constraints, we had to skip the only truly long trail in the park. Sunset Trail heads west to Music Mountain and the highest point in the park (1,405 feet) and then turns northeast, loops through Stonebridge Mountain and eventually returns to North Mountain. Sunset Trail covers the most remote areas of the park, allowing hikers to take in wildflowers during three seasons and wildlife year around. The full trail is slightly over 10 miles, however if combined with other trails to make it a complete loop, it would stretch 15-17 miles and include some strenuous sections. Doing so (in one thorough hike or broken into smaller day hikes), would take you through nearly all of HSNP's natural areas. Truly, HSNP can be easily taken in entirely on foot, for any moderately fit and motivated tourist.

Back in town, don't forget to casually stroll the Grand Promenade. This low-key walk provides nice views of the back side of Bathhouse Row from the hills above, where most of the hot springs originate. You'll walk past many of the 27 individual springs that have covers (each bearing



*We departed **HOT** in the mid-afternoon, allowing us to enjoy a beautiful sunset on our way northeast to Wisconsin.*

the spring's name) to protect their water quality. Several small side trails can be taken up the hillside, but most walkers take the Tufa Terrace Trail down past the gurgling Hot Water Cascade to Tufa Rock and Arlington Lawn. This public park area at the north end of Bathhouse Row is a popular relaxation spot. On the way back to your hotel, don't forget to fill a water bottle or jug from one of the thermal fountains. Be careful though, the water is often hot enough to make you jerk your hand back in surprise.

Whether your visit to Hot Springs is planned in advance or is more of a last-minute trip, you'll find plenty to do there to fill the time. A wonderful destination year around, Hot Springs can be a welcome escape to warmer weather for more northern dwellers during the fall through spring seasons. Even during summer, when Arkansas can get quite warm, it can also be a nice retreat for deep south dwellers looking to escape

their area's extreme heat. It's the perfect sort of park for a weekend sojourn, as it is diminutive enough to be explored in just a couple of days. Even day trips lend themselves well to HSNP, as the heart of the park can be enjoyed in just a morning or afternoon. If an overnight stay (or two) are on your agenda, I highly recommend picking a day to rise early and be out enjoying the natural aspects of the park as the sun rises. The Grand Promenade and the lower elevation hiking trails are where this experience is most striking. This is when and where you are most likely to be shrouded in the Valley of Vapors as the hot steam rising from the many springs collides with the cool morning air and gives the entire area an almost mystical feel. ⊕

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