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A Beautiful Spa,
Thermal Waters at San Bartolo Agua Caliente, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

In San Bartolo Agua Caliente, a small rural town in the Mexican Volcanic Belt, a spa operates today amidst the ruins of a much larger, ancient complex that originally included an orphanage, hospital, and a hostelry for travelers. It is one of the first colonial spas in Mexico.

The spa was so well built at the very end of the 1700s that it is virtually unchanged today and uses the same system of outside and inside plumbing, and interior collection basins. The only change is the pipeline that circumvents the outside collection tanks, which remain in good working order. Locals enjoy soaking in thermal waters pouring from the same artesian spring that has always replenished the baths.

Story of the Spa

A small, isolated town in the north-central part of the Mexican Volcanic Belt, San Bartolo Agua Caliente lies about halfway between the Cities of Celaya and Querétaro (Figure 1). Described over 100 years ago as a jewel in the midst of the brown hills surrounding it, San Bartolo became famous for mineral waters and baths. Today in rural Mexico, it is a tiny out-of-the-way place with a dirt road winding at its heart and with the remains of a magnificent complex, announced by a sign at the entrance as the Antiguo Hospital de Baños Termales de San Bartolomé, or the Ancient Hospital of Thermal Baths of Saint Bartholomew 1599-1802.

The complex, dedicated to St. Bartholomew, patron saint of nervous and neurological diseases, was built next to ancient waters famous for hydrotherapy and cures.

Several structures once stood together here—a church, a home for Catholic orphans and homeless, a hospital for the sick and traveling, and thermal baths for all (Figure 2). Today most of the buildings are in ruins—except for the baths that remain open at this ancient, extraordinary spa.
For good reasons, the dates of the sketchy and mysterious story of the complex do not correspond exactly with the sign at the door reading 1599-1802, but they come close. In fact, the 203-year period noted on the sign is critical to the history of the complex. This is what happened.

On July 4, 1602, Doña Beatriz de Tapia died and left money in her will for the project’s construction. A lawsuit stalled the work until 1770—168 years later—and it was not until 31 years after this, in 1801, that the complex was finally finished. It is likely Doña Beatriz’s project was blessed by the church a few years before she died, perhaps in 1599—the first date on the sign. It is also likely the complex was dedicated formally in 1802, a year after building ended and use had begun of one of the first colonial thermal spas in Mexico—the second date on the sign.

I don’t know all the reasons for the ruins of today—earthquakes, war, neglect, or a combination—but this is what I learned of the spa’s history. In 1844, 43 years after construction, the site of San Bartolomé was occupied by the Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna, who was in and out of the presidency of the country at least eight times in the politically turbulent years between 1832 and 1855. He is best remembered in the United States for the attack on the Alamo.

The Departmental Assembly of the State of Guanajuato, where San Bartolomé is located, “vainly protested the sale of the property to him,” according to a history of Guanajuato written in 1860. Probably in 1846, the administration of General Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga annulled the contract, also in vain. General Santa Anna finalized the transaction in the year 1847. (From 1846-47, he was again President of Mexico.) Now, sadly predicted the historian, “This magnificent hospital will be ruined within a few years” (Noticias, 1860).

But parts remain. Of all the buildings in the complex, the spa was most unaffected by the destruction, probably because it is a solidly built, single-story building. And it is gorgeous. The spa is a large building of carved stone blocks laid out along a large, open interior patio in the Spanish style (Figure 3). Private, two-room suites for thermal bathers lead off from the breezeway around the patio and a different saint’s name is painted brightly over the doorway to each (Figure 4). This is important because anyone entering a suite, sick or well, would be under the patronage of this saint, who would receive the visitor’s prayers and act as a custodian.
The thermal waters, about 85° C, flow from an artesian spring on the side of a small hill above the spa to the south (Figure 6). A small stone chapel stands by the spring, and neighbors living next to the thermal waters plant corn and beans in the hot ground nearby, sometimes cooking their meals in steam.

Hot waters from the spring pour down to the spa through an elegant, stone aqueduct. Once the thermal waters reach the spa, they are still too hot to use and must be cooled before entering the bathing chambers, a process that occurred originally in two stages. As water left the aqueduct by the spa, it entered one of three stone troughs by slowly falling over a series of riffles, an air-cooling process that somewhat lowered the temperature but still left the water too hot. Next the thermal water was mixed with cold water in a fourth stone trough until a temperature was reached that bathers could enjoy (Figure 7). Today a pipeline circumvents this system, although the troughs and riffles are intact and interesting to see.

The author of the 1860 history writes that the mineral water is very hot at the baths of San Bartolomé, and that the waters issue abundantly from many hot springs. He writes that once the water is cooled, it is healthy to drink and good for fattening cattle.

Such multiple uses of mineralized hot spring waters are typical throughout the world. No one will ever know all the ways thermal waters have been used at San Bartolo Agua Caliente and all the ways they are used there today.

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Reference