

Self-guided Tour to The Hot Springs at Ojo Caliente

Throughout the years, Ojo Caliente has been steeped in myth and legend. Long before the Spaniards described the "hot eye" of a subterranean volcanic aquifer, and even before the early native peoples gathered at these ancient springs, the waters have been steadily flowing to the surface. These ancient people, believed to be the ancestors of today's Tewa Pueblos (Nambe, Pojoaque, San Ildefonso, Ohkay Owingeh (formerly San Juan), Santa Clara, and Tesuque), built large pueblos and terraced gardens overlooking the springs. Posi, or Poseuinge—"village at the place of the green bubbling hot springs"—was home to thousands of people.

In 1535, Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca wrote (in Spanish, of course), "The greatest treasures that I found these strange people to possess are some hot springs which burst out at the foot of a mountain . . . so powerful are the chemicals contained in this water that the inhabitants have a belief that they were given to them by their gods. I have named them Ojo Caliente."

Zebulon Pike, while under arrest in 1807 for exploring New Spain without permission, was marched to Santa Fe and passing through Ojo Caliente he observed, "the greatest natural curiosity is the warm springs."

In 1880, Antonio Joseph, New Mexico's first territorial representative to congress, opened the first health spa with overnight lodging. Joseph's Ojo included a post office and general store, and was a center of activity. Historical ledgers show that Kit Carson purchased supplies at the store. Ojo Caliente hot mineral springs is one of the oldest health resorts in North America, and is the only natural hot springs in the world with the remarkable combination of five geothermal mineral waters, each at a different temperature. The recently restored Round Adobe Barn and the hotel are on the National Register of Historic Places.

The thermal waters discharge along a northeast trending fault zone that has Precambrian rocks juxtaposed against Tertiary basin fill. The discharge rate, as measured in 1965, is about 100 gallons per minute. The waters almost certainly gain their heat by circulating deep (4500 to 6000 ft) into the fractures of the fault zone. In their journey through these rocks, they dissolve different materials by taking different paths. As they emerge, these waters have from 3000 to 3700 milligrams per liter (mg/L) of dissolved material, or usually referred to as TDS (total dissolved solids). (For comparison, the World Health Organization uses these standards: drinking water with 300 to 600 mg/L is considered good; drinking water with greater than 1200 mg/L is unacceptable.)

The modern version of these springs has a separate pool for each of five different springs, the temperatures of which range from 95° F to 111° F. These are labeled Iron, Sodium Sulfate, Soda, Arsenic, and Lithia. In addition, there is a large swimming pool filled with hot waters from the springs. You need to shower between the muddy hot springs and the pool.

The proprietors recommend that you make reservations for lodging, private tubs, massage, spa treatments and dinner. Reservations are not necessary for the use of the mineral pools and steam & sauna (M-TH \$16, F-Sun \$22). To make reservations, call 800-222-9162. They take reservations between 7:30 AM and 8:00 PM Mountain Standard Time. Their other telephone number is 505-583-2233. Their website is: http://www.ojocalientespa.com/General_Information/.

Driving Directions:

Getting around in Santa Fe is tricky because the streets represent cattle and wagon trails. To go north from the north side (main) entrance to La Fonda, go east on San Francisco toward the Cathedral to the first intersection, turn left. Go to the next intersection, Palace Ave., and turn left again. Continue about 3 blocks to Grant Ave. and turn right. Continue for several blocks and turn left on Paseo de Peralta, which curves around until it meets St. Francis Dr. This is Hwy 84 & 285. Turn right, or north, and you are on your way. Continue through Española. North of Española, at the junction of hwy 84 & 285, take 285 to the right about 16.5 miles to Ojo Caliente. You'll have the broad terraces of the Rio Ojo Caliente on your left. In the village of Ojo Caliente, watch for the sign for the hot springs on the left side of the highway. Hwy 84 goes northwest to Abiquiu and Chama.

On your return, retrace your steps, turning left on Paseo de Peralta, BUT you can't get to the La Fonda the way you came out. So, continue on Paseo Peralta clear around to the east side of central Santa Fe. Cross Palace Ave. and at Alameda Ave. turn right. At Old Santa Fe Trail turn right again until you run into the back of La Fonda at Water St. Turn left and immediately right to go around the block containing the La Fonda, and right on San Francisco and you're back at the La Fonda parking garage.