



THE TOWN THAT WATER BUILT



Escape to Eureka Springs, Arkansas for a taste
of a true American Victorian mountain village.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERALD TOLER

Eureka Springs, Arkansas, has been a tourist destination from the day it was founded in 1879. Between 1888 and 1904, several trains each day brought visitors from across the country to take the waters of the sixty-three mineral springs from which the town takes its name. Today, tourists come to enjoy the charm of Victorian houses built into the side of a mountain, the strong arts community, and what innkeeper Faryl Kaye describes as the town's "wackiness".

The town's history and architecture are closely tied to its geography. Built on twenty steep hills and the deep ravines that separate them, Eureka Springs is astonishingly vertical. Locals claim that there isn't enough flat land in town for a football field. Terraced building lots are held in place by more than fifty miles of dry-stacked rock retaining walls. (Not surprisingly, stonemason was one of the most common trades listed in the town's first census.) Many houses are built from the street level down, with a small pedestrian bridge connecting front porch to sidewalk and exterior exits at every level.

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The town's extreme topography also affects the way its streets are laid out. There is no four-way intersections, because no two streets meet at a right angle. Instead of a grid, streets follow the contours of the hills to form circles, figure eights, and “M” shapes. Public stairways, with names like Jacob’s Ladder, provide direct access between the different levels of the town for pedestrians with strong knees and healthy hearts.

The limestone hills on which Eureka Springs is built are riddled with caves, sinkholes and natural mineral springs. Long before Europeans arrived, the Native American peo-

ples of the area believed in the healing powers of the springs—especially Basin Spring, the large spring that became the center of town.

Eureka Springs’ development as a spa town began when pioneer doctor Alvah Jackson discovered the medicinal properties of Basin Spring on a hunting trip in 1858. For years Jackson used water from the spring in his medical practice, selling bottles of it as “Dr. Jackson’s Eye Water”. In the spring of 1879, Jackson brought Judge L.B. Saunders to the spring to treat his painful skin disease that several doctors had been unable to cure. The waters

improved the judge's condition so dramatically that he moved his family to a camp by the spring in May 1879.

Others soon followed. By summer, hundreds of people had come to the camp town around Basin Spring, drawn by reports of miraculous cures. Named on the 4th of July and incorporated in August, the newly formed town grew quickly. Within a year, Eureka Springs had 4,000 permanent residents (twice the current population) and as many as 15,000 transients.

Retired Civil War general and former Arkansas governor Powell Clayton saw the potential for an elegant resort

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in the rough boomtown. A civil engineer by training, he founded the Eureka Springs Improvement Company; the Eureka Springs and North Arkansas Railway; and the Crescent Hotel, which was considered America's most luxurious resort hotel at the time. By the 1890s, Eureka Springs had a permanent population of 10,000. More than 35 luxury hotels, as well as boarding houses and cottages, were built to house the thousands of visitors who came to take the waters each year. Hundreds reported cures, thanks to the benefits of fresh mountain air, clean spring water, and a regimen that included walking several miles each day up and down the hills of the town.

The heart of Eureka Springs was built between 1882 and 1910, and during that period the city was forced to rebuild several times as a result of fires that devastated the business area in 1883, 1888, 1890 and 1892. The commercial buildings on Main, Central and Spring Streets are mostly brick and limestone, finished with turned wooden trim. The residential neighborhoods of the town include an eclectic collection of Victorian period styles, from

Queen Anne and carpenter Gothic to Arts and Crafts.

The best-known builder in the town was W.O. Perkins, who moved to Eureka Springs in 1891. Perkins worked from a portfolio of designs that he adapted to fit the often-challenging building sites of Eureka Springs. The master builder's most distinctive and often repeated design includes an octagonal-shaped, two-story front corner tower next to an entry porch. Thanks to the Perkins lumber mill, which produced finely detailed wooden trim, the Perkins touch was felt on many more houses than Perkins himself built.

Around 1910, Americans lost their belief in spa cures and Eureka Springs entered a long period of economic decline. With the exception of some in-fill housing built

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after World War II and motor courts built along the new US Highway 62, building in the town came to a halt. The town's Victorian buildings remained intact, if uncared for.

Eureka Springs became a tourist attraction again on a small scale in the 1950s when American families embraced the road trip. Motorists who came to see natural attractions like Blue Springs and the newly opened Pea Ridge battlefield found themselves enjoying Eureka Springs' eccentric Victorian style.

Eureka Springs took its first step toward active preservation of its Victorian heritage in 1970, when the town became a designated historic district on the National Register of Historic Places with the largest collection of Victorian architecture in the upland south. In 1978, in anticipation of the town's centennial, a group of artists and preservationists pushed through local legislation regulating the historic district.

Today Eureka Springs has an active preservation community. A seven-member Historic District Commission, appointed by the mayor, approves new building and exterior changes to existing structures within the two square miles of the historic district. The not-for-profit Preservation Society encourages continuing maintenance efforts with programs, annual awards and a festive Christmas Tour of Homes. The town was named one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Dozen Distinctive Destinations" in 2002 and declared a Nationally Significant Historic District in 2005.

The elegant spa town of the 1890s is now a quirky arts colony, defined in large part by its unusual mix of architecture and topography. Visitors to Eureka Springs stroll along the limestone sidewalks, browse the art galleries, marvel at restored Victorian houses clinging to the side of a cliff and echo the town's earliest settlers in exclaiming "Eureka! I've found it!"



WHERE TO STAY in Eureka Springs—Victorian Style

It's not hard to find a Victorian hotel, inn or bed and breakfast in Eureka Springs. Many of the hotels and boarding houses built for visitors who came for the water in the 1890s have been restored for modern tourists. The following are only a few of the available Victorian lodgings:

The beautifully restored Crescent Hotel, and its on-site New Moon Spa, has regained its place as the premiere hotel in Eureka Springs. Even if you don't stay there, be sure to sign up for the nightly ghost tour. 75 Prospect Avenue, (877) 342-9766, www.crescent-hotel.com

In 1881, Crescent Cottage was built for Governor Powell Clayton and was one of the first houses on the Historic Loop to be restored in the 1970s. Two large verandas at the back of the house offer spectacular views of East Mountain. 211 Spring Street, (479) 253-6022, www.1881crescentcottageinn.com

Built in 1882, Harvest House is a newly restored Victorian home with an eco-friendly bias. If you're concerned about chemical-free cleaning or allergy-conscious furnishings, this is the inn for you. 104 Wall Street, (479) 253-8401, www.eureka-love.com

Daffodil Cottage, originally the Methodist parsonage, is a fine example of a Perkins house, complete with the distinctive octagonal tower room.

156 Spring Street, (866) 336-2001, www.allseason-luxuryproperties.com/daffodil

Lookout Cottages sit on a four-acre estate that was the home of Chicago Tribune columnist Marguerite Lyon, known to thousands of readers as Marge of Sunrise Mountain Farm. 12 Lookout Circle, (800) 738-9545, www.lookout-cottages.com

Award-winning Mount Victoria Inn is a 1902 Colonial Revival that was built as the rectory for St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church. In addition to breakfast, the inn serves lunch and dinner, and can provide picnic baskets. 28 Fairmont, (888) 408-7979, www.mountvictoria.com

Peabody House is a fastidious reproduction of an 1883 boarding house that burned in 1998, decorated in a style that evokes Victorian travel more than the Victorian parlor. The summer kitchen has been converted into a separate cottage. 7 Armstrong Street, (866) 253-5376, www.eureka-springspeabody.com

Piedmont House, built ca. 1880, is the oldest continuously operated inn in Arkansas. In keeping with its boarding house tradition, guests are served a three-course dinner on Friday nights. 165 Spring Street, (866) 336-2001, www.eureka-usa.com/piedmont



WHAT TO DO in Eureka Springs

🌿 Begin your visit to Eureka Springs with one of six self-guided walking tours published by the Preservation Society. If you'd rather ride, the Eureka Springs Transit System runs narrated trolley tours of the historic district twice a day from April to October.
(479) 253-9572, www.eurekatrolley.org

🌿 The Blue Spring Heritage Center celebrates the relationship of local native peoples to the largest natural spring in northwest Arkansas. Long a sacred spot for native tribes, its bluff shelter was a resting place on the Trail of Tears and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The center's 33-acre gardens are devoted to local plants and plant lore.
(479) 253-9244, www.bluespringheritage.com

🌿 The steam-powered Eureka Springs and North Arkansas Railway runs twice a day between April and October. The 4½ mile trip takes about an hour. Lunch and dinner are available in a real dining car.
(479) 253-9623, www.esnarailway.com

🌿 The Great Passion Play, performed from late April through October in an outdoor amphitheatre, presents the drama of the last days and crucifixion of Jesus Christ on a grand scale. The seven-story tall Christ of the Ozarks statue is an attraction in its own right.
(866) 566-3565, www.greatpassionplay.com

🌿 Opera in the Ozarks at the Inspiration Point Fine Arts Colony produces three classic operas under the stars every June and July. It's a great chance to hear promising young singers perform major roles.
(479) 253-8595, www.opera.org

🌿 Two popular family music and comedy shows feature a combination of country, bluegrass, gospel and high-energy comedy.
Ozark Mountain Hoedown, (800) 468-2113, www.hoedown.net
Pine Mountain Theater, (877) 253-9156, www.pinemountainjamboree.com

🌿 Thorncrown Chapel, built by architect E. Fay Jones, was voted one of the ten most important building designs of the twentieth century by the American Institute of Architects. Built in a style Jones described as "Ozark Gothic," the glass and wood structure is a masterful blend of setting, building and function.
(479) 253-7401, www.thorncrown.com

🌿 The Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge specializes in rescuing big cats, but is also home to bears, monkeys and more. The trained staff of biologists and zoologists conducts daily tours.
(479) 253-5841, www.turpentinecreek.org

Nearby Attractions

🌿 War Eagle Mill is a working water-powered grist mill. Its whole grain organic flours and meals and other Arkansas products are sold at an on-site store. The Mill hosts popular antiques and craft fairs in May and October. The Bean Palace Restaurant serves traditional Ozarks food.
(866) 492-7324, www.WarEagleMill.com

🌿 Pea Ridge National Military Park, the largest intact Civil War battlefield, has a small historical museum and a self-guided tour of the battlefield.
(479) 451-8122, www.nps.gov

