

Travel Lady Magazine

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You'll Probably Find a Chapter in Bath By Marilyn Loeser

Surrounded by the Somerset countryside, Bath is a city with many personalities and parallel histories — its Roman Baths, the Abbey, and Georgian architecture have attracted visitors for centuries.

A mere 100 miles west of London, Bath's an easy destination to reach on BritRail or by car; a city I've visited twice.

Although the city is definitely on-foot-friendly, which is how I explored during my first visit nearly a decade ago, during my most recent visit I boarded a double-decker Bath City Sightseeing tour bus to see the sites.



With on and off privileges, and either an on-board tour guide or recorded narrative, you'll get a wonderful overview of the famous city. You also can choose to explore a specific interest such as the Romans, Georgian and Edwardian architecture or the life and writings of Jane Austin. Individual walking tours, attractions and shops cater to each interest and many subgroups of each.

Roman Baths

One of the most popular attractions is the Roman Baths.

For nearly 400 years England was occupied by the forces of the Roman Empire which stretched from Babylon around both sides of the Mediterranean and up through France to the British Isles.

From the Roman invasion 43 - 60 AD to the 5th century when the Roman Empire was in decline, the invaders would forever change the English landscape.



In Bath, around Britain's only hot spring, the Romans built a breathtakingly beautiful temple and bathing complex where the naturally hot water still flows.

After paying admission and picking up the audio guide provided to every guest in a grand, high-ceilinged Victorian reception hall, I began the well-planned and educational self-guided tour.

The often-photographed terrace overlooks the Great Bath and is lined with statues of Roman Governors of Britain, Emperors and military leaders. The statues date to 1894, carved in advance of the grand opening of the Roman Baths in 1897. The Roman Baths weren't re-discovered until the late 19th century.

This view from the terrace is the first area you'll visit. A lot of the Roman Baths extend beneath adjacent streets and squares. The Great Bath is about one fourth of the entire historic complex.

The Roman Baths — one of the best-preserved Roman sites north of the Alps — is at the very heart of the Sacred Spring. Hot water at a temperature of 460 Celsius (854 degrees Fahrenheit) rises at the rate of 1,170,000 liters (240,000 gallons) every day and has been doing so for thousands of years.



Believed to be the work of the gods, the Romans built a temple next to the spring dedicated to the goddess Sulis Minerva, a deity with healing powers.

The mineral rich water supplied an ornately-decorated bath-house which attracted visitors from across the Roman Empire.

Many objects were thrown into the Sacred Spring as offerings to the goddess including more than 12,000 Roman coins. Curses, messages inscribed on sheets of lead or pewter, were rolled up and thrown into the spring where the spirit of the goddess dwelt.

Metal pans inscribed with the letters DSM or the words Deae Sulis Minerva, thought to have been used for making offerings of holy water, were salvaged from the spring. These treasures were preserved and are now presented to the public in such a way that history literally unfolds itself before you.



The temple is one of only two truly classical temples known from Roman Britain.

Other items in the museum collection help explain the people who lived and worked in the area at the time and those who visited the great Roman religious spa.

The Roman plumbing and drainage system, still largely in place, shows the ingenuity of the Roman engineers and is fascinating especially considering it was designed and built nearly 2,000 years ago.



Lead pipes carried hot spa water around the site using gravity flow. The spring overflow, not needed for the baths, travels out to a Roman drain where the water is plumbed from the site to the River Avon 1,300 feet away.

Now on the level of the pool, shadowed by the terrace where the tour begins, guests learn the pool is lined with 45 sheets of lead and is still filled with hot spa water at a depth of 5 feet with steps leading down on all sides. It once stood in an enormous barrel-vaulted hall that rose to a height of 130 feet.

Before leaving the Roman Bath area, make sure and make a stop

in the gift shop and walk through The Pump Room, regarded as the social heart of Bath for more than two centuries.

Hot spa water is drawn for drinking in the neo-classical salon which is filled with its own history including the Tompion clock, given to the city in 1709 by Thomas Tompion, England's best known clockmaker.

Admission to The Pump Room is free and refreshments are offered throughout the day.

Bath Abbey

The Roman Baths are literally in the shadow of Bath Abbey.

Construction of the Abbey began in 1499 and is the last of the great medieval churches in England. The West Front depicts the dream that inspired the Abbey's founder, Bishop Oliver King, to pull down the ruined Norman cathedral and raise the present building on its foundations.



Over the past twelve and a half centuries, three different churches occupied the site of today's abbey.



An Anglo-Saxon Abbey Church dating from 757 was the first house of worship here, pulled down by the Norman conquerors of England soon after 1066.

Construction of a massive Norman cathedral began about 1090. Because it was larger than the monastery could afford to maintain, it was in ruins by the end of the 15th century.

The present Abbey church was founded in 1499 and subsequently ruined after the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 by order of Henry VIII. It was restored, however, and has been supported ever since by generations of worshipers and generous benefactors.

In 1999, the abbey celebrated its 500th anniversary.

If you go:

There is so much to explore in Bath. Although the Roman Baths and Abbey are but the tip of the iceberg, this is a great place to begin your acquaintance with the city of Bath.

The Bath City Sightseeing bus tour takes approximately 45 minutes if you don't exit the bus at any of the numerous stops. Tickets are valid for two days.

For more information check the website www.bathbuscompany.com.



Guided tours also are offered at the Roman Baths. After touring the Roman Temple courtyard and the museum, come to the Roman baths section of the complex. Guided tours are provided by staff members every hour, on the hour.

For more information check the website www.romanbaths.co.uk.

The Pump Room accepts reservations Monday through Friday. E-mail: carolyn.brown@searcys.co.uk.

Bath Abbey is open for tours Monday through Saturday all year round and on a limited basis on Sunday.



If the Abbey has a special services or event, there will always be a notice on the door to inform visitors when the Abbey will again offer tours.

For more information check the website www.bathabbey.org.

For information on other Bath attractions, restaurants and accommodations check the website www.cityofbath.co.uk.

For BritRail information consult the website www.britrail.com or call 1-866-BRITRAIL. Passes are the most convenient. One ticket is good on more than 18,000 daily train departures in England, Scotland and Wales and can be purchased for different increments of time.

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