

Montecatini Terme

One Of The Great Spa Towns Of Europe

BY JIM SANO



PART I

Montecatini Terme is a stunning town nestled among renowned art cities such as Florence, Pisa, and Lucca, conveniently located in the picturesque Pistoia Province of Tuscany. Designated as one of Italy's UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Montecatini Terme boasts a strategic position near the Pistoia mountains, offering favorable weather, especially in winter, thanks to protection from harsh north winds. Montecatini Terme's worldwide recognition stems from its abundant, unique thermal springs. These springs have drawn European nobility, celebrities, and notable figures seeking rejuvenation and relaxation from Roman times to the present. Montecatini Terme represents the European international spa culture that thrived from the early 18th century until the 1960s.

Montecatini Terme developed gradually throughout the 19th century, reaching its peak with the establishment of several iconic landmarks. Large international resorts emerged during this period, shaping the urban typology centered on spa-building complexes. These complexes, including the "Pineta" spa park, the Excelsior and La Torretta spa buildings, and the Kursaal complex, were central to the area's growth. The spa complexes in Montecatini Terme were comprehensive establishments designed to cater to the diverse needs of visitors seeking



therapeutic treatments and leisure activities. They comprised specialized therapy buildings and rooms dedicated to various spa treatments.

Additionally, these complexes included amenities such as gardens, meeting rooms, casinos, theaters, hotels, and villas, providing a complete hospitality experience. The layout of these spa complexes was carefully planned to maximize the use of natural mineral water resources. They featured refreshment areas, drinking rooms, colonnades, and galleries, all strategically positioned to facilitate access to the therapeutic waters for bathing and drinking. Moreover, the architectural design of these complexes was integrated into the surrounding

urban context, blending seamlessly with the picturesque landscapes of Montecatini Terme. These sites symbolize the significant exchange of human values and advancements in medicine, science, and balneology.

These structures, including private villas for medical professionals and tourists, reflected the prevailing architectural styles of eclecticism and Art Nouveau. Architect Giulio Bernardini played a significant role in shaping the town's architectural landscape by designing numerous thermal buildings and integrating them harmoniously into the surrounding landscape.

Engineer Ugo Giovannozzi also made notable contributions, working on various town projects. Montecatini Terme became a desirable destination for treatments and leisure activities during this period. People visited the city to enjoy the healing waters and a rich cultural scene, including artistic and entertainment events.

Montecatini Terme holds the prestigious designation as one of the Great Spa Cities of Europe, joining a select group of 11 cities across Europe recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2021. This honor underscores Montecatini Terme's significance as a representative of Italy during the European spa phenomenon.

HISTORY

Montecatini Terme's history extends back to the Paleolithic era. As early as the 8th century BC, the Etruscans used these springs. The Romans also recognized the healing properties of Montecatini's thermal springs, as evidenced by votive statuettes from that period found near the current crater of the Terme Leopoldine. The first written record of the spa dates to 1201, when the springs are mentioned in a parchment from Lucca. A 1370 document describes the extraction of salts from mineral waters for food use.

Since the 14th century, the town's warm saline springs have been appreciated. A few centuries later, in the 15th century, Ugolino Caccini, the founder of modern hydrology, wrote in his treatise on balneotherapy that the Montecatini Baths were of enormous benefit: they could cure bone and joint pain and even heal scabies. In the 16th century, the first basic bathhouses were built in Montecatini Terme.

However, it was in the 18th century that the baths achieved their present-day fame, thanks to the efforts of Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo of Lorraine. Under his reign, from 1747 to 1792, Grand Duke Leopoldo of Tuscany oversaw the channeling of the area's thermal mineral waters and the construction of the first public baths. Leopoldo's efforts laid the foundation for Montecatini's evolution into a modern spa town and established Montecatini Terme as Italy's leading spa destination. Grand Duke Leopoldo's vision for



Montecatini Terme led to the construction of several landmark establishments funded by the public treasury. These included the Bagno Regio, Terme Excelsior, Terme Leopoldine, and Terme del Tettuccio, all of which were initiated in 1771. Connected by a well-developed road network to neighboring towns like Lucca and Pistoia, these baths became easily accessible and attracted visitors from far and wide. The Terme Leopoldine was completed in 1775 and was Grand Duke Leopoldo's favorite. It contains a thermal crater over 20 meters wide and the Bibite Gratuite building, which provides free water to the poorest residents.

Montecatini Terme is home to two noteworthy attractions. The first is the **Terme del Tettuccio**, dating to the 14th century and extravagantly renovated. Here, visitors can marvel at breathtaking masterpieces by renowned early-20th-century artists. The second is the **Terme Excelsior**, housed in a magnificent building from the same era. This wellness center is recognized as one of the town's best, offering exceptional services and facilities to visitors.

These public projects also spurred private investment. The Giusti family's appreciation for the hot springs led them to establish a nearby health center and hotel, further enhancing the area's appeal. In addition to the thermal baths, amenities such as a hippodrome, a golf course, and other recreational facilities were developed to cater to visitors seeking leisure and relaxation. The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century marked the Belle Époque in Montecatini.

This surge in tourism was marked by the emergence of numerous high-quality hotels and the establishment of fashionable nightclubs, theaters, restaurants, and even a casino. Culture and art flourished, influencing the architectural style. The Liberty style, also known as Art Nouveau, is evident in spas and hotels. An excellent illustration of this style is the Terme Tamerici, which features Art Nouveau interior decorations. The Tettuccio Thermal Resort, the oldest thermal establishment, is an exceptional example of Art Nouveau at its finest. The Florentine architect Ugo Giovannozzi transformed Montecatini Terme into a symbol of style and wellness by overseeing the expansion and renovation of many older buildings and the construction of beautiful new ones that still stand today.

The fame of Montecatini Baths reached beyond Tuscany's borders. Montecatini Terme became a hub for notable celebrities, including renowned composers like Giuseppe Verdi, Pietro Mascagni, Ruggero Leoncavallo, Gioacchino Rossini, and Giacomo Puccini. The city also attracted esteemed writer Luigi Pirandello, who won the Nobel Prize in 1934. These celebrities could often be found in the city's parks and bars, enjoying the peaceful ambiance and mingling with tourists. The city's valuable waters attracted distinguished individuals, whose presence added to the town's allure and elevated its status as a major tourist hot spot. Moreover, Montecatini Terme became a favored meeting place for businesspeople and politicians worldwide. Amidst the tranquil setting of a spa vacation, they could engage in discussions and negotiations. This burgeoning economic activity propelled the town's tourism industry to new heights, with the number of tourists reaching nearly 75,000, an impressive figure for that era.

During the mid-1950s and 1960s, Montecatini Terme reached its peak of allure and prestige as the preferred destination for jet-set celebrities seeking a tranquil spa

vacation. Renowned figures such as Spencer Tracy, William Holden, Rose Kennedy, and Audrey Hepburn were among the A-listers who flocked to the town during this time.

There are currently four historical springs that remain in use for treatments: Tettuccio, Regina, Leopoldine, and Rinfresco. In addition to traditional "drinking water" therapies, a variety of contemporary treatments are now available, including hydroponic treatments, mud baths, ozonized baths, massages, inhalation therapy, and beauty treatments. Despite these modern advancements, this Great Spa Town has retained the charming atmosphere of its early 20th-century heyday.



Montecatini Terme – Funicolare linking Montecatini Thermae to Montecatini Alta

Today, although not as popular as they once were, Montecatini's thermal hot springs remain an ideal destination for wellness, relaxation, and medical treatment. In addition to its renowned thermal spas, Montecatini Terme offers delicious cuisine, excellent wine, and elegant Art Nouveau and neo-Gothic palaces that frame the Thermal Park. Visitors should also visit the nearby medieval village of Montecatini Alto (the upper town), which offers a captivating glimpse of its rich history. Accessible via the world's oldest funicular



Terme del Tettuccio

railway from the lower town, Montecatini Alto provides panoramic views of the surrounding area. Wander through its charming streets and immerse yourself in its welcoming atmosphere, ideal for exploring and discovering hidden gems.

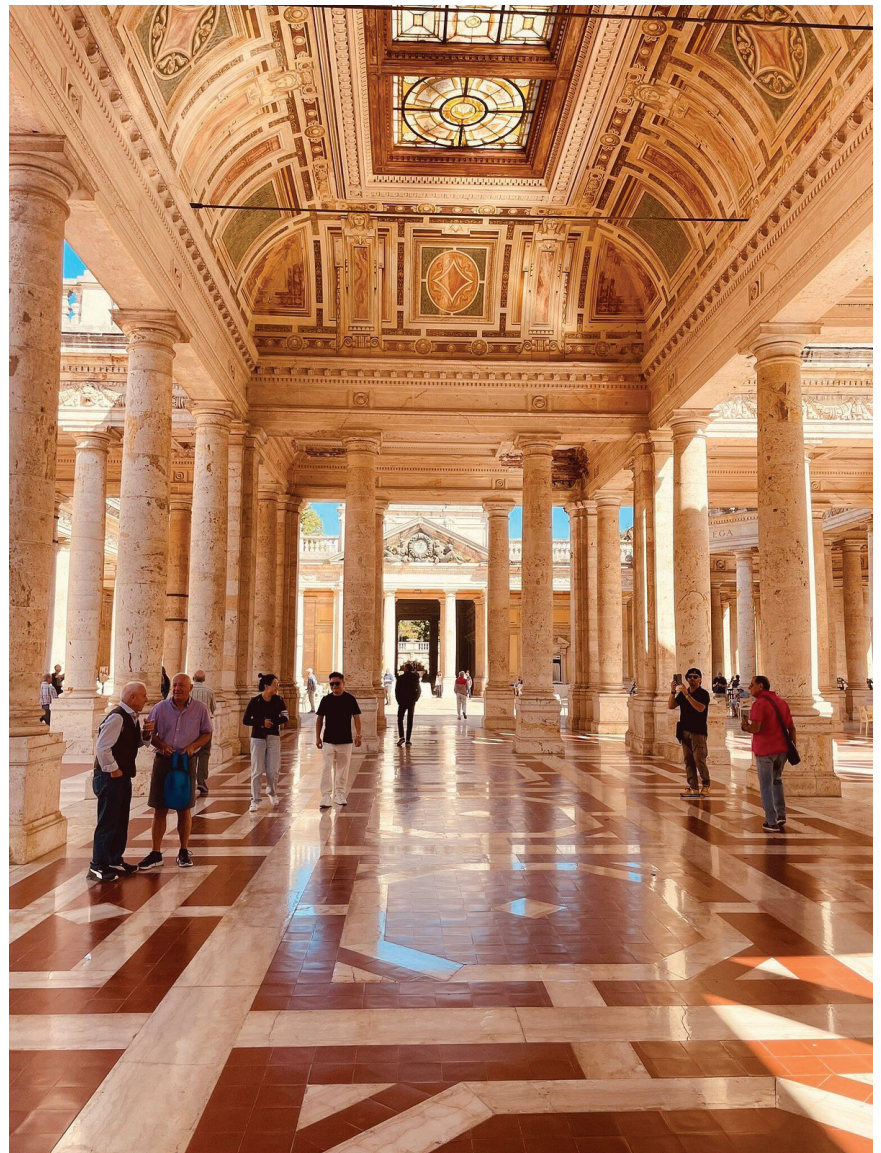
The Spas

Montecatini Terme is home to 11 thermal springs, with temperatures ranging from 24 to 33.4 degrees Celsius. These springs feed thermal baths in beautiful parks. The spas in the area use the mineral-rich waters from these springs for various treatments. The springs, including Rinfresco, Tettuccio, Regina, and Leopoldina, share a common source: an aquifer fed by meteoric waters at depths of 60-80 meters below ground level. As the water passes through Triassic-period calcareous stone, travertine, jasper, and limestone strata, it acquires a unique mineral composition believed to have therapeutic benefits. The springs in this area are known for their distinctive mix of sodium, bicarbonate, sulfate, and chloride, making them well-suited for therapeutic use. Recent studies confirm their healing properties. They're used in thermal baths to treat a variety of conditions. Local spas offer treatments for metabolic disorders, digestive problems, liver issues, biliary duct spasms, sensitive colon, dystrophic rheumatism, lipid metabolism issues, hepatitis, and constipation. These waters are also used for wellness treatments, supporting overall health and vitality.

The thermal spas operate year-round, with some adjusting their hours during the summer months. Many therapies are available at thermal spas, including physiotherapy, mud therapy, spring-water inhalations, hydroponic treatments, hydrotherapy, various massages, and beauty treatments. The diverse offerings of Montecatini's spas allow visitors to tailor their experience to their health and wellness objectives. The city center, particularly around Verdi Boulevard, has several thermal buildings, including numerous spas and the three main thermal water complexes: Terme Tettuccio, Terme Excelsior, and Terme Redi Thermal Complex. A few days here can provide comprehensive relaxation and rejuvenation, perfect for unwinding after a year of stress and tension.

The Terme Tettuccio stands as a historical gem and one of Montecatini Terme's most exquisite Art Nouveau buildings, dating to the early 20th century. Renowned for

its stunning architecture and intricate decorations, the Terme del Tettuccio represents the town's rich spa heritage. The Tettuccio establishment, also called "Bagno Nuovo" since the 14th century, was named after a canopy that covered the first spring. Leopoldo established the Tettuccio, the oldest bathhouse in Montecatini, featuring impressive halls and intricate designs. The architectural marvel, constructed between 1779 and 1781, underwent significant restructuring in 1928, further enhancing its grandeur. Situated within the Parco delle Terme, also known as the park of the baths, the Terme Tettuccio offers visitors a captivating blend of history, elegance, and therapeutic indulgence. The Tettuccio thermal complex in Montecatini is famous for its therapeutic waters, which originate from several mineral-rich springs, including Rinfresco, Leopoldina, Regina, and Tettuccio. Unlike other spa destinations, this complex does not offer treatments for external applications. Instead, it primarily focuses on treatments involving drinking thermal waters as a curative, due to their mineral properties.





Terme Excelsior

The Excelsior Spa is a highly esteemed establishment in Montecatini Terme, renowned for its rich history and elegant architecture. Built in the Liberty style, it originally housed the City Casino (Casinò Municipale) and the Grand Café (Gran Caffè). Its grandeur was unveiled at its June 27, 1907, inauguration. In 1915, a portion of the building was converted into a spa, recognizing the potential for wellness offerings. Over time, the complex expanded and was renovated, further transforming it into a luxurious spa facility. Under the guidance of architect Ugo Giovannozzi, the building was restored, including a stunning loggia and three arcades overlooking the picturesque south-facing garden. In 1968, Terme Excelsior underwent a significant transformation. A portion of the building was demolished to make way for a new structure designed by Sergio Brusa Pasquè and other talented architects. This redevelopment aimed to improve the facility by integrating modern wellness amenities with traditional water therapies.

Since 2002, the Excelsior has seamlessly combined its original Liberty style with contemporary elements, particularly noticeable on its southern façade. This area features expansive lounge areas where clients can relax, while dedicated spaces offer the latest beauty and wellness treatments.

Upon entering the grand interior, visitors are greeted by a vast hall featuring a sophisticated coffered ceiling masterfully decorated by the renowned Florentine painter Ernesto Bellandi. The walls, adorned with intricate bas-reliefs depicting floral and fruit motifs, contribute to the ambiance of luxury and refinement.

The Terme Tamerici was built in 1911 and consists of four separate buildings in the Montecatini Terme spa park. These buildings are designed in medieval-

inspired architecture with intricate details and polychrome windows that reflect oriental art. The Terme Tamerici has hosted significant cultural events, attracting visitors from far and wide. Its name pays homage to the tamarisk plants that once flourished in the area's marshy surroundings, adding a botanical touch to its historical significance. In 1843, the thermal water spring was discovered by the landowners, who used it for their first baths. The original building was humble, but Giulio Bernardini expanded it in 1906 and completed it in 1911. Terme Tamerici showcases works by Galileo Chini, an iconic figure of Italian Art Nouveau. Notable features include the high-quality panel surrounding the Giulia fountain, which depicts fish among leafy branches, pinecones, and

geometric decorations with peacocks and spirals. The entrance panels reflect Klimt's influence and are now covered with a whitish patina from salts in the source. The entrance portico floor is made of stoneware with cobalt blue decorations, featuring a central panel with cherubs holding a garland and the word "Greetings." The tap room has rich ceramic decorations along the floor and walls, including two benches for distributing thermal water.

