



# The Grand Spas of Central Europe: A History of Intrigue, Politics, Art, and Healing

By David Clay Large

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## The Grand Spas of Central Europe: A History of Intrigue, Politics, Art, and Healing By David Clay Large

*The Grand Spas of Central Europe* leads readers on an irresistible tour through the grand spa towns of Central Europe—fabled places like Baden-Baden, Bad Ems, Bad Gastein, Karlsbad, and Marienbad. Noted historian David Clay Large follows the grand spa story from Greco-Roman antiquity to the present, focusing especially on the years between the French Revolution and World War II, a period in which the major Central European *Kurorte* (“cure-towns”) reached their peak of influence and then slipped into decline.

Written with verve and affection, the book explores the grand spa towns, which in their prime were an equivalent of today’s major medical centers, rehab retreats, golf resorts, conference complexes, fashion shows, music festivals, and sexual hideaways—all rolled into one. Conventional medicine being quite primitive through most of this era, people went to the spas in hopes of curing everything from cancer to gout. But often as not “curists” also went to play, to be entertained, and to socialize. In their heyday the grand spas were hotbeds of cultural creativity, true meccas of the arts. High-level politics was another grand spa specialty, with statesmen descending on the *Kurorte* to negotiate treaties, craft alliances, and plan wars.

This military scheming was just one aspect of a darker side to the grand spa story, one rife with nationalistic rivalries, ethnic hatred, and racial prejudice. The grand spas, it turns out, were microcosms of changing sociopolitical realities—not at all the “timeless” oases of harmony they often claimed to be. *The Grand Spas of Central Europe* holds up a gilt-framed but clear-eyed mirror to the ever-changing face of European society—dimples, warts, and all.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

[Clay Large's] account is spirited and entertaining. (*The New York Review Of Books*)

With scintillating wit and a storyteller's élan, David Large is the perfect guide to the colorful history of Europe's spa culture. This is serious scholarship leavened with delicious gossip about spa celebrities, from Beethoven and Tolstoy to Karl Marx and Mark Twain. (Adrienne Mayor, author of *The Poison King* and *The Amazons*)

In this learned, thoroughly researched, and elegant study, the distinguished Central European historian David Large begins our grand tour of spas with Greek and Roman bathing rituals, carrying his fascinating story into the turn of the twentieth century. (John Merriman, Charles Seymour Professor of History, Yale University)

There is no better, more mischievous, more companionable guide to German history than David Clay Large. Once again he has written a book that draws on deep expertise, deep research, a keen knowledge of social texture, and yet reads like a guilty pleasure. The history of the spas reveals modern Europeans wrapped only in towels. (David Quammen, author of *The Song of the Dodo* and *Spillover*)

This absorbing book is just as diverting and delightful as the places it chronicles once were. Large writes with verve and style, and he knows how to put vivid characters and vignettes to the service of important historical points. An altogether arresting and rewarding overview of modern European history through an unconventional and entertaining lens. (Peter Hayes, Northwestern University)

*The Grand Spas of Central Europe* leads an irresistible tour through the grand spas of Central Europe, tracing their history from classical antiquity to the present but focusing on the spas' heyday between the French Revolution and World War II. Noted historian David Clay Large vividly shows that fabled "cure-towns" like Baden-Baden, Bad Gastein, and Karlsbad were not just important centers of healing (or attempted healing), but also hotbeds of artistic creation, nests of social intrigue, and gilded venues for high-level politicking.

#### About the Author

**David Clay Large** is a senior fellow at the Institute of European Studies, University of California, Berkeley, and professor of history at the Fromm Institute, University of San Francisco. He has also taught at Smith College, Yale University, and Montana State University. Among his many books are *Berlin, Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936*, and *Munich 1972: Tragedy, Terror, and Triumph at the Olympic Games*. Large divides his time between San Francisco and Bozeman, Montana.

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