

Daytripper with Chet Garner: Mineral Wells

Something's in the Water

Written by Chet Garner.



In Mineral Wells, something is definitely in the water—something "Crazy" that once turned this north-central Texas town into an international tourist destination. Feeling a bit crazy myself, I set out for the day to immerse myself in Mineral Wells.

9:00 a.m. My first stop was Lake Mineral Wells State Park & Trailway. The park is full of fishing, hiking, and camping opportunities, and the 20 miles of trailway follow the old railroad line connecting Mineral Wells to Weatherford. I explored the park's Penitentiary Hollow, an unusual rock crevice surrounded by towering walls of sandstone. I descended into the hollow via the rock staircase and spent the rest of my time attempting to rock-climb out, a task that proved quite difficult and confirmed (for me) the legend that law enforcement used to hold prisoners captive within these walls.

12:30 p.m. Next came lunch at Woody's Bar & Grill. Housed in an old military quonset hut, Woody's is a true greasy spoon serving up delicious hamburgers and

cheeseburgers with no frills and no sides (well, you can get a bag of chips). I devoured my burger and was ready to take on the town.

2:00 p.m. My first stop in downtown Mineral Wells was an inconspicuous brass marker hidden in a corporate parking lot that memorializes the location of the first well in Mineral Wells. Dug by James Lynch in 1880, it unearthed the area's groundwater and its "healing powers." Following the discovery, Mineral Wells attracted travelers from far and wide hoping to cure everything from sore eyes to paralysis. Elaborate resorts were built to accommodate visitors, but none more lavish than the Baker Hotel, a 14-story refuge complete with bathhouse, pool, gymnasium, and bowling alley. Today, the abandoned building remains a looming reminder of what once was, but a group of investors hopes to someday restore it to its original beauty.

3:00 p.m. To sample the water that made Mineral Wells famous, I dropped by the Famous Mineral Water Company, started in the early 1900s by a pharmacist healed by the water who thought he had only months to live. These days, the company bottles "Crazy Water," so named because it could reportedly "cure you of your crazies"—a legend that might hold some truth as the water naturally contains trace amounts of lithium. You can buy water labeled from 1 to 4, depending on the concentration of minerals. Number 1 tasted like familiar drinking water, but by Number 4, the water's natural combination of minerals hit my tongue like a liquid multivitamin.

I liked the water's flavor, but it tasted even better mixed up as a cherry limeade "crazy soda."

4:30 p.m. The town's other claim to fame, Fort Wolters, was the Army's main training facility for helicopter pilots during the Vietnam War. The base is now closed, but the fort's iconic gate and the National Vietnam War Museum remain to honor the soldiers who trained here and those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

Walking beneath the blades of a complete Bell UH-1 "Huey" helicopter put things in perspective, as did reading the names of lost soldiers on the museum's half-scale replica of the Vietnam Wall in Washington, D.C.

6:00 p.m. For dinner, I popped over to the nearby town of Cool (yes, it's really a town) and stepped into Dee's Hometown Diner. Hidden among the traditional menu items like chicken-fried steak and fried okra are dishes like "cusa" and "kibbe," the Lebanese classics owner Denise Tabner grew up with. My kibbe tasted like a scrumptious home-cooked meatloaf with the delicious addition of pine

nuts, and my side of homemade mashed potatoes couldn't have been more appropriate in this small-town café.

While the glory days of water tourism may have dried up for Mineral Wells, there is still plenty here to make for one crazy-fun day trip. So, whether you follow my footsteps or forge your own path, I hope to see you on the road.

From the January 2012 issue.