

# Floating free in Europe's many spas, baths



**Rick Steves**

With my intense travel schedule, I savor detours where I put away the schedule and notes and simply enjoy the moment. And for me, there's no better detour in Europe than visiting a public bath or spa for a relaxing, good soak.

Some Americans are prudish when it comes to enjoying public baths in Europe — especially when the dress code is just a towel. I understand the hesitation; my first time was awkward, too. I was with friends — a young, good-looking German couple. As they got naked in the changing area, I felt like the Road Runner just beyond the cliff's edge. Then I eased up and got naked as well. It wasn't sexy, it was simply open and free.

One of my favorite bath experiences is in the German town of Baden-Baden. It's said that the Roman Emperor Caracalla may have soaked away his rheumatism here. Today the town has two very different baths. The Roman-Irish Bath (Friedrichsbad) is traditional, stately, indoors, contemplative and relaxing — it's just you, your past and your body. The Caracalla Spa (Caracalla Therme), with both indoor and outdoor areas, is more perky, modern and social.

I prefer the Friedrichsbad. It's a steamy world of peaceful pools, exquisitely tiled sauna rooms and complete nudity — where, for the cost of a good dinner, you get the works. Multilingual signs lead you from room to room. Highlights include the soap-and-brush massage (rough, slippery and finished with a good Teutonic spank); the central pool, where women and men glide like swans under a divine dome; and after



Budapest's Széchenyi Baths has stunning outdoor facilities — and hosts local residents of all shapes and sizes. **CAMERON HEWITT**

all that hot water, the cold plunge (don't wimp out; it's invigorating). Then you lie in a silent yellow room, swaddled in warm towels. After the Friedrichsbad, they say you'll feel five years younger — or, at least, no older.

In Germany, baths aren't just a Baden-Baden thing. This country loves its spas, and you'll find a public bath in many towns. Another one of my favorites is in the Bavarian valley town of Schwangau, where the Royal Crystal Baths (Königliche Kristall-Therme) offer just what a body needs after a day battling crowds at Neuschwanstein Castle. As you soak, enjoy the poolside view that's as grand as King Ludwig's — or even better, considering it includes his

inspiring, fairy-tale castle.

Like Germans, Hungarians enjoy a good bath. Hungary has more than a thousand hot springs, and Budapest alone has about two dozen mineral baths. Of these, the most accessible and fun is the Széchenyi Baths. Located in the middle of City Park, Széchenyi is one of the biggest bath complexes in Europe. It has stunning indoor and outdoor facilities, including a fun pool with jets, bubbles and circular rapids. You'll see local residents of all shapes and sizes in swimsuits, babushkas floating blissfully in the warm water, and the Speedo-clad old boys' club gathered around chessboards.

One of my strangest spa experiences was in the

Czech town of Třeboň.

Home to a peat spa, it attracts patients from all over the world, who come for weeklong stays to get naked and buried in the black, smelly sludge that's thought to cure aching joints and spines. I had to give it a whirl.

After climbing into a stainless-steel tub, the attendant pulled a plug. I quickly disappeared under a rising sea of peat broth, my toes poking out of the hot brown and glassy-still sea. After my peat bath, I showered off the sludge and was ushered into the massage room. My attendant laid me face-down for a full-body massage (despite my insistence that I had to go). I walked out with a mucky massage cream causing my shirt to stick to me, and

without a clue what soaking in that peat soup was supposed to accomplish. Still, the experience was worth it, if only to experience the surreal "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" atmosphere of Czech medical institutions.

Another memorable spa experience is the Finnish sauna, which has particular appeal during the long, cold winters. Finns say the sauna is a great equalizer — there's no hierarchy when you're wearing nothing and slapping your back with birch twigs (which supposedly enhances circulation). Everyone's equal. Just inside the door, there's often a big cooler stacked with frozen bundles of the twigs and miscellaneous beverages (it's B.Y.O.B). I'll never forget sitting there — the

only foreigner in a woody world filled with steam and naked people, blond hair plastered wet on their faces. It occurred to me that, from my view, I had no idea what century it was ... but it was clearly Finland.

Whether in a German spa, a Czech peat bath, or a Finnish sauna, a fun part of travel can be getting naked with strangers. Let go of your inhibitions. You'll likely enjoy a fun time and warm acceptance — and have a great story to tell when you're home.

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## CELEBRITY TRAVEL

### Grazzini's dream film location in Thailand

By **Jae-Ha Kim**  
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Marco Grazzini says filming "Virgin River" near his home in Vancouver is a treat.

"I was born and raised in Toronto, so it always feels special when I shoot there (and Vancouver)," he said. "I've filmed a couple scenes at the University of Toronto — my alma mater — and also the street where I grew up on. Pretty cool! Montreal can feel like a quick trip to Europe. The food, nightlife and people are my favorite in Canada. Ottawa and Victoria are both government towns, but have amazing food scenes. Both offer an immense variety of outdoor activities."

Audiences might know Marco as Mike from the hit Netflix show "Virgin River." Beyond his acting career — which spans 20 years — he is also an avid photographer, chef in another life and is fluent in 4 1/2 languages. He enjoys stand-up comedy, basketball and chasing his 3-year-old daughter.

This interview with Grazzini has been edited for clarity and length.

**Q: Do you have a preference working on location versus on a set?**

**A:** Creatively speaking, I most definitely prefer working on location. There's something intrinsically unique to each and every place. There's a different light, air, energy that I believe impacts the performance and the aesthetic captured. No matter how authentically transformed and replicated, a set will always feel somewhat sterile and artificial. However, time is money, so



For "Virgin River" actor Marco Grazzini, Thailand can't be beat for the food or the beaches. **SARA MONTALBANO**

the controlled environment of a set offers you more reliability, creature comforts and about 75% less weird noises.

**Q: If you could pick a location to film a project, where would it be?**

**A:** Railay Beach in Thailand! It's a stunning car-free peninsula in the Krabi region in the south of Thailand. Turquoise water, white sand, towering limestone cliffs — it's the usual breathtaking landscape that Thai beaches have to offer, and that would drop jaws on film. I've been in and around Thailand numerous times over the past 20 years and Railay really stuck out to me for the serenity that it has.

**Q: Do you have any upcoming trips planned?**

**A:** Yes! A small trip to Los Angeles in June, which will stand out from the usual work-related trips spent in LA over my career. This time, I'll be there for a World Cup game. Being a lifelong soccer fan and player, it is a wonderful bucket list item to check off. I'm looking forward to soaking in the atmosphere of people from different cultures across the globe in one spot to watch some football and have some fun.

**Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?**

**A:** Thailand is my absolute favorite spot, be it for vacation or eventual retire-

ment. The warm weather is an obvious no-brainer, while the culture, food and people have ensured that Thailand remains in my heart as a place that feels like home. Yes, I just mentioned food, but wow the food! It's an extremely food-focused culture. The fact that I can step onto a main road anywhere in Thailand and find a food vendor hawking some scrumptious delicacies, that's a win.

**Q: Have you ever been asked to audition/read for a role while you were away on a vacation?**

**A:** Yes. Always. It's some actor-version of Murphy's Law. I've taped audition scenes in airport waiting lounges. I'm very familiar with MacGyver-ing a tripod out of an ironing board and books in my hotel room. Nothing takes the air out of a vacation balloon like, "Hey, babe, I got a nine-page audition due tomorrow morning, so we're gonna have to push the basket-weaving thing you booked."

**Q: What's the most important thing you've learned from your travels?**

**A:** People are the same everywhere. We just want to be around our friends and family, share a meal and feel like we're doing well with our lives.

For more from the reporter, visit [www.jaehakim.com](http://www.jaehakim.com).

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

### Frontier Airlines melts stroller but not paying for replacement

By **Christopher Elliott**  
KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

Frontier Airlines destroyed my child's stroller during a flight from Phoenix to Seattle. When we picked it up, the plastic frame was melted. It was completely unsafe to use.

I filed a claim with Frontier, but they rejected it, calling the damage "normal wear and tear."

I appealed and filed a second claim as requested, but after weeks of emails and follow-ups, I still haven't received a proper response.

The stroller cost \$179, and I just want the airline to cover the replacement.

Can you please help?  
— *Cheryce White, Sequim, Washington*

**A:** Wait, did you say that Frontier melted your stroller? How do you melt a gate-checked stroller? I mean, the cargo hold can't be that hot, can it?

Frontier should have kept your stroller safe and delivered it to you in good condition at the end of your flight. When it failed, it should have promptly investigated your claim and made a fair offer to repair or replace the stroller, especially since the damage was obviously not just "normal wear and tear."

Under the United States Department of Transportation rules and standard airline contracts of carriage, airlines are generally responsible for damage to checked baggage — including strollers — unless they can prove that the passenger failed to meet the reasonable packing requirements. Some airlines don't even accept liability for strollers, meaning you're at

the company's mercy.

Frontier says that it is not liable for a stroller unless it is packaged in a hard-sided case. (It's usually better to get a small, foldable stroller and take it on the plane as a carry-on than to surrender it to your airline at the gate.) Still, this policy doesn't excuse returning a melted and warped stroller without adequate compensation. The airline should have handled your claim quickly and transparently, rather than denying it without explanation and ignoring your follow-ups.

Filing a detailed claim immediately after discovering the damage is essential, which you did. You also escalated the situation appropriately by following up and appealing the denial. It's important to keep all your correspondence and documentation so that there's a clear paper trail.

If the airline stalls, consider escalating the situ-

ation to their executives. I publish the contact info for all airline executives, including Frontier Airlines, to help consumers do just this.

If all else fails, you could file a claim in small-claims court, especially since the value here is under \$200. Fortunately, this wasn't necessary. I contacted Frontier on your behalf. After reviewing your case, the airline agreed to reopen the claim and offered to pay for a new stroller.

Your case shows that being organized, polite and firm can make a difference — even when your stroller has a meltdown on the plane.

*Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a non-profit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at [elliott.org/help](http://elliott.org/help) or [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org).*