

NEXT STOP

Art and Nightlife Have Baden-Baden Percolating Again

By CHARLES RUNNETTE

THE jammed bar and lounge areas are dimly lighted with candles; the D.J. spins an irresistibly danceable Sasha track, and the flushed, pulsating Prada-clad crowd in their 30's and 40's is having a ball. The scene looks straight out of a well-cast and choreographed liquor ad, and nothing like the fusty image many have of legendary Baden-Baden. But this new club, inside the Bombay Rooms, is indeed in Baden-Baden, the historic and elegant Black Forest spa town that has a not-so-subtle new spark.

"We do a lot with fire here," said Thomas Costal, the club's manager, shouting over the din. "We have fire on the bar, fire eaters, we even serve drinks with fireworks."

After decades of hibernation, Baden-Baden, the Teutonic Monte Carlo, is bubbling back into favor with cultured, carefree visitors — including the English soccer team and their nearly as famous wives, who were based there for the World Cup. Sure, the Versailles-like 18th-century casino still looks as it did when Dostoyevsky lost his shirt researching "The Gambler," and yes, there's something a bit disturbingly old fashioned about the 125-year-old all-nude Roman-Irish bath, but this place knows something about staging a comeback.

The reappearance of youthful glitterati in this high-priced hamlet that was until recently seen by many as a haunt for surly, stinking-rich septuagenarians is just one more sign that this picturesque valley of the River Oos is becoming chic again. Baden-Baden is determined not to lose its deserved reputation as one of history's exclusive summertime escapes. To its long list of celebrities, artists and aristocrats who have visited — from Queen Victoria to Mark Twain, Marlene Dietrich to Peter Sellers — they can finally add some contemporary names like Bono, President Clinton and the Beckhams.

While many still credit Baden-Baden's enduring popularity to the 211,000 gallons a day of piping hot (as high as 156 degrees Fahrenheit), fabled spring water that has made the town's iterative name famous the world over, one very prominent resident sees a different picture. Frieder Burda, scion of the Burda publishing empire says: "The real secret to Baden-Baden are the friendly people — young and old. We laugh a lot and enjoy life here more than any other place in Germany."

Mr. Burda founded — and financed — the town's latest celebrated attraction, his own Richard Meier designed museum. Built in late 2004 to house Mr. Burda's phenomenal personal modern art collection, the positioning of this small, white, boxy, perfectly proportioned museum adjoins the 100-year-old public Staatliche Kunsthalle (the State Art Museum) on the town's tree-lined, horse-and-buggy-only Lichtentaler Allee. Its positioning is a fitting symbol of the new local ethos: don't overshadow our beloved town's storied past, just figure out subtle ways to improve on it.

Or as Mr. Burda puts it, "Baden-Baden has an ability to connect tradition with the future."

Last week, the Frieder Burda Museum's permanent collection of German Expressionism (Max Beckmann, August Macke), American Abstract Expressionism (Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning), and the post-war German art of Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and the Leipziger School will be mostly put away to make room for its first truly international exhibition. Until Oct. 29, "A New Light on Chagall" brings together 100 pieces of Chagall's best work — on loan from his family; museums in Paris, Moscow, St.

Petersburg, Nice and Madrid; and several private collections — and helps put Baden-Baden back on the art map.

Like the Burda Museum, the thriving Festspielhaus is another relatively new (1998) internationally acclaimed cultural center in this town of just 35,000. With 2,650 seats, it is one of Europe's largest opera houses, and it has generated a good deal of buzz in just a few years with a diverse but popular line up: from the experimental composer Steve Reich, to the Bolchoi Ballet, to the mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli.

One of this summer's hottest tickets for opera fans around the world is the long-awaited return to Baden-Baden of the Kirov's "Ring of the Nibelung" (July 13 to 18). The Russian production's debut at the Festspielhaus in 2004 received rave reviews, including a piece by critic John Rockwell in this paper calling it, "A 'Ring' to match the four or five most important stagings since the middle of the last century."

The local hotels and restaurants have been kicking it up a notch or two, as well. Brenner's Park, perhaps Germany's top hotel and the temporary home of Posh and the other wives of the English soccer players, boasts a couple of notable enhancements. First, it just received a Michelin star for Andreas Krolik's seafood-heavy menu at the stunning 30-seat Park-Restaurant. And to the Beauty Spa and a staffed medical spa, Brenner's has added a Bulgari spa suite.

The town's other standout hotel is the hilltop hideaway the English soccer team called home during the World Cup, the Schlosshotel Bühlerhöhe. Up until now, this fortresslike former Prussian army hospital was mostly known for its fantastic views of the Black Forest, the clubby bar with two giant Van Dyck portraits on the walls, and the Michelin-starred Imperial Restaurant. But as part of the deal to secure the stay of the English team, the once ragged-looking rooms were completely redone, with longer beds, a fresh coat of soothing champagne paint for the walls, plasma screen TV's and new furnishings. Once the cleat marks are cleaned up, the Bühlerhöhe may finally be a worthy competitor for Brenner's.

Old school as they are, no trip to Baden-Baden would be complete without a trip to the city's two most famous sights: the dressy casino and not-so-dressy baths. For those who want to try curative spring water (German doctors prescribe visits for patients with arthritis, rheumatism and broken bones) there are two options.

The bold should head for the all-nude (as in no towel, no nothing) unisex Roman-Irish Bath at the Friedrichsbad. Dating back to 1877, this schloss-like, neo-Classical temple to spa culture was built following the plan of the town's original Roman baths with a few newer Irish elements (dry heat rooms and a cold plunge at the end). The three-hour, 16-stage spa process is not for everyone. A little rough and very intense, it's an extreme spa experience.

The first few stages are a thorough cleaning — everyone (don't try to skip one, they're watching) takes numerous showers, sits through sweat chambers, steam chambers and most even get a firm massage brushdown that seems to be designed to remove a few layers of skin. Then comes what can be the slightly awkward moment.

Most days of the week — and even on days when it's supposed to be separate — men and women at the Friedrichsbad meet up for stages 7 through 11 in the gorgeous domed thermal bathing area. The mostly attractive straight and gay couples in their 30's and 40's are very close to each other and the uncoupled few are often shopping around. People who tell you it's not sexually charged are pretty much lying.

Luckily for the modest, the other spa with access to the water, the modern and huge (32,000 square feet) Caracalla Spa, next to Friedrichsbad, requires bathing suits (except in the saunas where they are verboten). The multiple family-friendly spacious indoor and outdoor pools range from a chilly 64 degrees to a sweltering 101. There are also Finnish saunas, outdoor log cabin saunas, a saltwater inhalation room, aroma steam bath and ample room to sunbathe overlooking the town's castle gardens.

The town's other not-to-be missed throwback, the high-stakes Louis XIV-style casino, has its own quirky dress code: jacket and tie for men and formal for women. It's all part of the charm of this, the oldest casino in Europe. With the players in their suits and gowns and the dealers in their tuxedos all surrounded by gold leaf-covered molding, massive crystal chandeliers, priceless Chinese vases, there's a distinctly "Casino Royale" vibe.

Just a few blocks away down Kaiserallee, the retro chic gives way to sexy chic. Stacked one on top of another is the town's current nightlife hub: Max's dance club below and the Bombay Rooms above. Smiling as he watched a guest conga drummer step up onto the bar to entertain the raucous crowd, Bombay's Mr.

Costal said, "This may not quite be St.-Tropez, but in Baden-Baden, we know how to have a good time again."