



Wellness

The float test

Float tanks are being used to treat everything from insomnia to PTSD. Despite her existential misgivings, **Anne Fullerton** takes the plunge...

ILLUSTRATION BY BEA CRESPO

IT DIDN'T OCCUR to me that floating inside a soundless, pitch-black pod designed to simulate oblivion might be daunting. At least, it didn't until I found myself staring into the mouth of a high-tech water coffin in a wellness studio not far from Venice Beach in Los Angeles.

"Any questions?" asks the owner in a soothing talk-whisper. I have a few. What if there's a fire in the building? What if I fall asleep inside and drown? What if I'm forced to confront some long-suppressed personal trauma?

I settle for the more pedestrian "Should I wear a swimsuit?"

The owner explains that most people go into the tank naked to eliminate any physical distractions and then closes the door, leaving me alone in the softly lit room. With its wood-panelled walls, fluffy towels and bespoke bath products, the studio would feel like a regular upmarket spa if not for the giant white contraption dominating the space. It looks a lot like the "egg" that hatched Lady Gaga at the 2011 Grammys – minus the crew of manservants in loincloths.

For the next hour I'll be alone inside the pod, with only my thoughts, 600 litres of water and seemingly interminable darkness. What could possibly be more relaxing than this?

Sensory deprivation, or "float therapy" as it's now known – presumably because it's easier to market something that doesn't

sound like an interrogation technique – was invented in the 1950s by neuroscientist John C. Lilly to test the effects of sensory deprivation on the brain. The concept is simple: fill a tank with body-temperature water, add about 450 kilograms of magnesium sulphate (which is where the floating comes in), shut out light and sound then get in and let the mind do its thing. While Lilly is best known for unconventional practices involving large quantities of LSD and attempting to speak to dolphins, the float therapy he pioneered has endured – due largely to a growing body of evidence that suggests it can be helpful in the treatment of everything from muscle strain, PTSD and anxiety to insomnia, high blood pressure and addiction.

According to Jeff Ono, who opened Pause Float Studio in 2016 to cater to the overworked, stressed-out health hackers of LA's Silicon Beach tech hub, the effects of floating are twofold. "On the physical side, any muscle soreness you have, any aches and pains, are going to be gone after 60 minutes in a tank," Ono tells me. "It's so dark,

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you can't tell if your eyes are open or closed. It's so silent that you lose all sense of time. And when the mind really slows down, it hits the theta state, which is the dreamlike state where a phenomenal amount of healing occurs.”

Sports recovery, coupled with a healthy dose of celeb endorsement, is driving the industry's renaissance, with luxury studios such as Ono's popping up in LA and New York. Athlete Carl Lewis supposedly used floating to assist with visualisation techniques before his 1988 Seoul Olympics long-jump win, while Ono recently helped install a float tank at Dodger Stadium for the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team.

“But the foundation for floating is all about the mental decompression,” he says. “It's the counterpoint to the crazy lives we lead.” Some floaters claim the absence of external stimuli can have a hallucinatory effect, while others use the dreamlike state it induces for creative inspiration. In an age when fat-melting lasers and mugwort steams pass as health trends, there's something reassuring about a treatment that is endorsed by both Elle Macpherson and NASA.

But back to the hour ahead of me. I strip off, have a quick shower and lower myself into the pod, closing the lid above me. The first thing I notice is that it's surprisingly roomy inside. The second thing I notice is how many small abrasions on my body I had not been aware of (450 kilos of salt will do that). The glowing

indigo of the pod's interior makes it feel a bit like an aquatic nightclub for nudists so I lie back and press the buttons that turn off the lights and meditation music. It's time to go dark.

Having crawled to the float studio through LA's notoriously bad traffic, the nothingness is confronting at first. I splash my hands against the silky solution. The water is only 28 centimetres deep but I'm so buoyant that I have to strain to touch the bottom of the tank. I try rolling onto my stomach like a skydiver then put my hands behind my head, Ferris Bueller style. My mind races – am I hungry? What if I need to pee? What if the person before me needed to pee? But as I begin to relax, I'm only faintly aware that my hands are starting to drift above my head and I am content to bob around like a big napping baby.

What feels like a mere 20 minutes later, an automated voice interrupts my reverie and I'm surprised to find that the session is over and it's time to wash off. Sipping organic reishi tea in Pause's post-float cushion room, I reflect on the experience. There were no hallucinations, nor did I have physical ailments to begin with – but I do feel more relaxed. If nothing else, I got an hour without wi-fi or phone reception and, in complete silence and darkness, I was able to lose all sense of time. In 2017, in the centre of one of the world's most frenetic cities, that might well be as close to transcendental as it gets. ●

Where to float in Australia

BEYOND REST

With a number of locations in Perth, Melbourne and Brisbane, Beyond Rest (beyondrest.com.au) was founded by brothers and self-described “float evangelists” Nick and Ben Dunin. They use hand-polished, car-sized i-Sopods (the largest pods on the market) and offer colour-therapy LED spa lamps if you're not quite ready to bathe in darkness.

REST HOUSE FLOAT CENTRE

A living wall, breezy blue-and-white design and light timber furnishings make Rest House Float Centre (resthouse.com.au) in Victoria's Hampton East a pleasure to visit. Bask in the post-float glow with a cup of caffeine-free tea or pick up a bottle of organic magnesium oil to go.

SALTUARY

Offering a full range of salt-based therapies and holistic treatments in addition to floating (this is the spa to visit if you want Gwyneth Paltrow's exact brand of infra-red sauna), Saltuary (saltuary.com.au), in Sydney's inner west, is also one of the few centres that offers a float room instead of a pod.

FLOAT FACTORY

Located in Sydney's Glebe, Float Factory (floatfactory.com.au) plays on its name and urban surroundings with exposed brick walls and leather couches.

INNERVERSE

Innerverse (floattanksmelbourne.com.au), in Melbourne's Southbank, specialises in longer floats, offering up to two hours in Australian-made tanks that are specifically designed to maintain a consistent water temperature. It also has a powder room to make going to work or heading out to play afterwards a breeze.