

ROAD TEST 3:

I found peace in a salt cave

By Rachel Bertsche

Leaving my job and heading to Chicago for love a year ago didn't faze me. But once I arrived and realized that most of my family, my best girlfriends, and the only stylist who doesn't butcher my kinky curls were 713 miles away, the stress knocked me over like a late-January gust off Lake Michigan. I've perfected my anxiety-averting routine of running, yoga, a non-negotiable seven hours of sleep, and the occasional night of cooking. (Substituting an onion for your boss/mother/commander-in-chief's head and chopping away works wonders for pent-up rage, as does the resulting tearfest.) But it isn't no-fail, so when I read about the Galos Caves—man-made salt and iodine caverns in western Chicago that are said to ease tension—I thought they were worth a try.

In Eastern Europe, naturally occurring salt caves have long been hailed for their healing abilities. In the 19th century, Polish health officials noticed that salt-mine workers rarely got sick, and released a report touting the compound's numerous health-promoting properties. Today, visitors to European salt spas queue >>

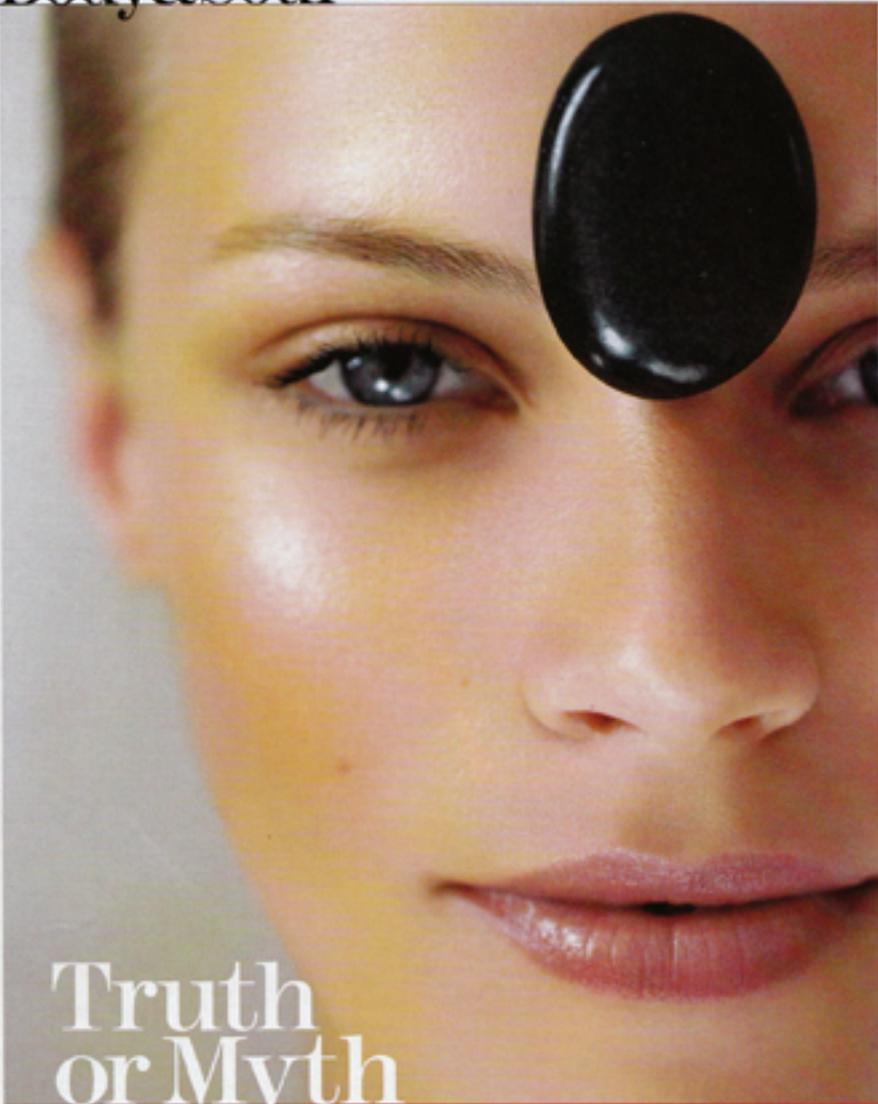


A WHIFF OF SERENITY

Essential-oil-as-mood-enhancer is a practice as old as the pyramids, but in recent years, aromatherapy has moved from hippie communes to doctors' offices in treating pain and stress. The most potent stress-busters? Lavender and chamomile.

From left: Space.NK De-Stress Bath Oil, Bath & Body Works Aromatherapy Sleep Massage Oil in Warm Milk & Honey, Blissliving Buddha Head Candle, Intelligent Nutrients Innercalm essential oil, Aveda Balancing Body Mist: Chakra 3, Shiseido Zen Eau de Parfum, Dr. Hauschka Lavender Bath Oil, Johnson's Melt Away Stress Dreamy Night Cream





Truth or Myth

Do these alterna-therapies actually abolish stress?

PETS Truth. A recent study of hypertension in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* found that cat and dog owners fared significantly better under stress than those without pets. Best friends indeed.

COMFORT FOOD Myth. Your blood sugar falls when you're stressed, and most carb foods contain refined sugar, which only creates more dramatic highs and lows in your glucose level.

MARIJUANA Truth. Researchers at McGill University in Canada found that in low doses, marijuana increased the level of mood-boosting serotonin in the brain. Large amounts had the reverse effect, worsening depression in the long run. And of course, illegality could bring stresses all its own.

PUNCHING A PILLOW Myth. Recent studies at Iowa State University put Princess Diana's favorite "catharsis hypothesis" to the test and found that college students were more agitated and aggressive after pummeling a punching bag.

ALCOHOL Truth. As a central nervous system depressant, alcohol reduces tension when consumed moderately—meaning one drink a day. Getting wasted, however, has the opposite effect and raises blood pressure.

MARRIAGE Myth. A recent batch of studies show that for women, saying "I do" doesn't offer protection from stress and other health problems, as we'd once assumed. Only a happy marriage can.

RETAIL THERAPY Truth. According to doctors at Emory University, shopping can give your brain's pleasure centers a rush of feel-good dopamine that drops off after you leave the store.

up in hopes of curing respiratory conditions and hypertension.

The Galos Caves, the first state-side, were built with 20 tons of imported Black Sea salt, and according to the brochure, there is just about nothing that a session here can't relieve: Asthma. Heart disease. Allergies. And, at the bottom of the list: "low stress immunity." In fact, just 45 minutes are said to have the benefits of a three-day stay at the beach. Fifteen bucks for a long weekend oceanside? Sign me up.

I call to make a reservation for a Saturday morning, and the manager tells me to bring clean white socks. She doesn't say why.

The location, a weird Polish strip mall that also houses the Jolly Inn restaurant, doesn't exactly scream ancient Zen oasis. I enter the "caves," a room with salt stalactites hanging from the ceiling and a mermaid statue in the corner, and I wonder if I've actually stumbled into a rave. There's a seriously trippy black-light overload. The seven of us in this session settle into reclining beach chairs and wait for the salt to work its magic. When the manager turns off the lights, I can't stop staring at my glowing feet. Maybe that's why the white socks? A shiny focal point for the relaxation-resistant?

Apparently, I should be able to taste the salt in the air. I can't. But it does sound like the beach, if the sound of the waves were constantly underscored by Pachelbel's Canon. I take deep breaths and almost fall asleep a few times. Forty-five minutes later, my session is over. I feel... calm. Maybe there was saltiness in the air that I didn't notice, seeping into my lungs and fighting all that nasty bacteria trying to make me sick and stress me out. But I'd also argue that a midday time-out with mood lighting and classical music could give anyone a natural high. Still, the end result cannot be denied: I am worry-free.

Well, at least until I hit traffic on the beltway going home.

For more info, go to galoscaves.com. **mc**