

WELLNESS

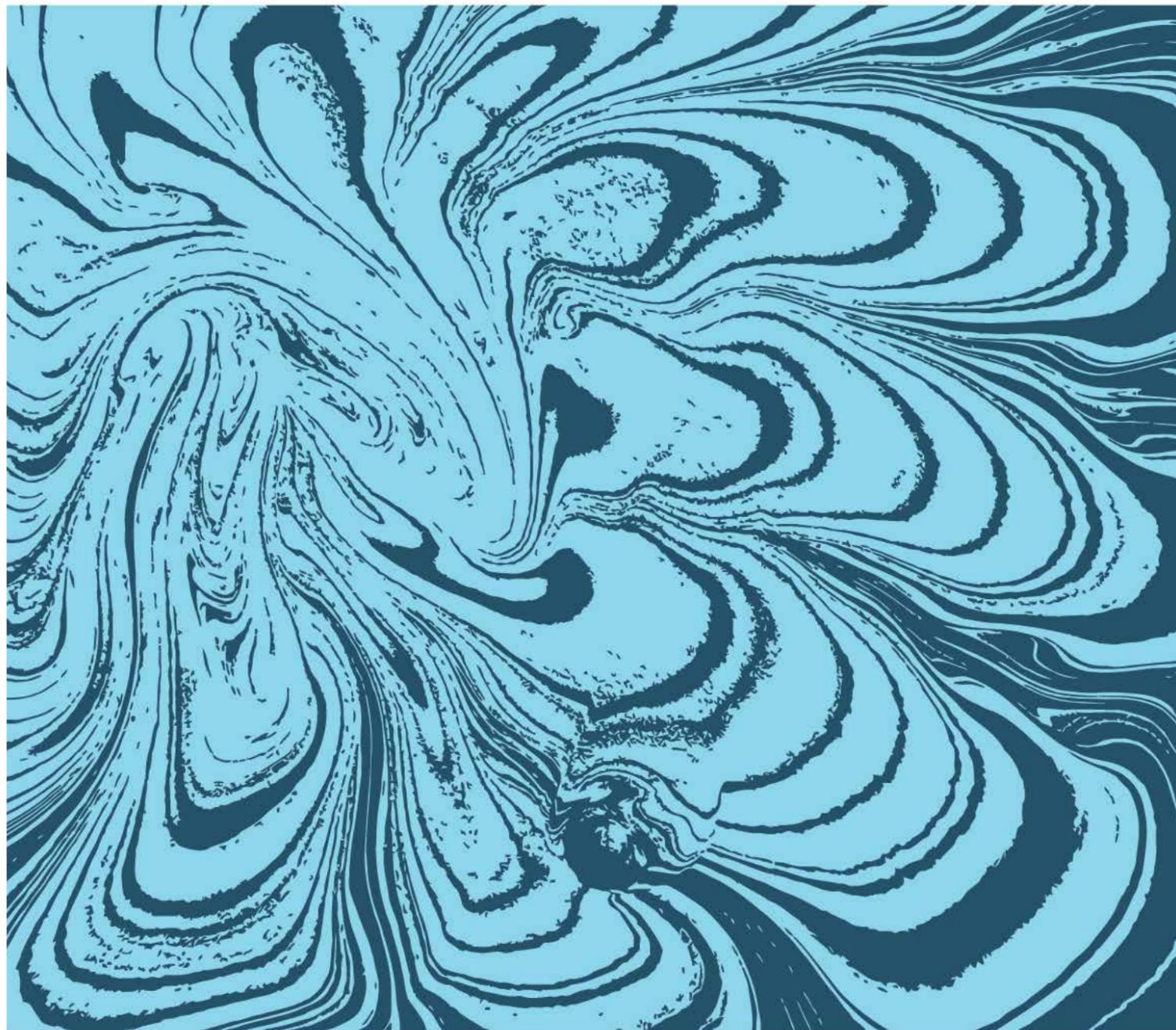
TESTING THE WATERS

Our columnist dips her toes in the salty water of a sensory-deprivation tank

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA

“HAVE YOU done this before?” I glance over at the gentleman sitting next to me, whose left foot is doing some sort of a neurotic tap-dancing routine. He shakes his head and tells me it’s his first time. *Oh, good. I’m not alone*, I think. We’re in the lobby of a float spa, which is exactly what it sounds like: a spa where you float, suspended in a tank (or a pod) of water packed with roughly 1,000 pounds of Epsom salt. That component of the experience sounds nice enough to me. I remember my mother telling me stories of how, back when she lived in Israel in the early ’90s, she’d lather herself with mineral-rich mud and bob around the Dead Sea. I remember her rhapsodizing over that feeling of weightlessness.

My experience, I’ll come to learn, is similar to my mother’s in no way at all. Because in a flotation tank, better known as a sensory-deprivation tank,



there’s no light, no sound, no nothing. I first learned about floating last year, as I was perusing an issue of *Vogue*, or more specifically an interview with actress Jennifer Lawrence, who tried the trend and called it “lovely.” And although flotation spas have been popping up around the country within the past few years, the practice can be traced back to the 1950s, when American physician and neuroscientist John C. Lilly first began studying how the human consciousness responds

to being deprived of all external stimulus in a flotation tank. Since then, the wellness industry has had a somewhat on-again, off-again relationship with sensory-deprivation therapy, with interest undulating throughout the ’60s, ’70s, ’80s and petering out by the ’90s. Now, its therapeutic applications in reducing rheumatoid arthritis, improving muscle control and relieving stress are being examined and acknowledged once again.

But I’m not here to treat anything. I came here to learn something I’ve never quite been able to do in yoga class: to quiet my mind, which can be a bit of a rambler and is easily distracted by the smallest and most inconsequential things. And, of course, a part of me is just curious to know what the fuss is all about.

“The water in the tank is skin temperature, so what happens is that your body actually starts to disappear into the water,” says Becky, the receptionist, who swears by the practice. “You start to lose sense of where your body ends and the water begins. It’s pretty cool.”

“OK, don’t freak out,” the guy next to me cracks a half-hearted joke, and I laugh nervously. Look at us. We’re like two peas in a *flotation pod*. Becky goes over the general do’s and don’ts of floating and all the rookie mistakes you could possibly make on your first float. Like being hyped up on caffeine. Or sticking your freshly shaven legs in stinging salt water. Or inserting your earplugs *after* your first shower, which is a big no-no since the trapped water in your ears can be quite bothersome during the session. Or, worst of all, touching your eyes with your salty fingers.

“Should any sort of questions come up while you’re in there, I can hear you pretty well, and I can help you out,” she says a few minutes before handing me a pair of earplugs and guiding me to my room. The tank, which looks like a bank vault that could be loaded with gold bullion, is on my right. Upon taking a closer peek inside, I see that it’s got a high ceiling and 10 inches of water at the bottom.

I ask Becky if I can keep the door slightly open, or if I’m allowed to exit the tank if I feel uncomfortable. “Yes,” she says, smiling like she’s heard it all before, assuring me that I’m free to do as I please. This isn’t a torture chamber, after all. (Even though long-term sensory-deprivation techniques have been used for that purpose, particularly when interrogating prisoners of war. It’s a fine line, really.)

I shed my clothes, take a quick rinse and pat my face dry. This, Becky tells me, is important because you don’t want anything tickling your face when you’re inside the tank. I scan my body in the mirror for any cuts, take a deep breath and climb awkwardly into the tank, butt-first, like an old lady getting into a cab. I use my yellow foam neck pillow to keep the door propped open and allow a shaft of light to fall inside the tank. This isn’t bad. *At least it’s not completely dark,*

Want to try your hand and head at floating? Schedule your appointment at FLOATspa in Little Rock and Hot Springs or Therapods in Fayetteville.

I console myself as I slide back into the tepid water. Reaching my hands to the sides of the tank, I hold myself in place until the water settles. “The trick to floating is once you find your comfortable spot, to try to stay there and be as still as possible,” Becky had said earlier.

Then the soft, Zenlike music stops abruptly. My eyes fling open. *Wait—are my eyes open?* I can’t tell if they are looking around or just rolling about in their sockets. *Oh, no.* A sharp thought tears through my mind as I realize that my one ray of light has disappeared. *Did the neck pillow fall out?* I flail around, a little theatrically perhaps, and try to feel for the door. The pillow is still there. However, the light in the room outside isn’t. It seems like Becky and I had a misunderstanding. There goes my open-door policy.

An unbelievable darkness blankets the space, and frankly, I start panicking. I’ve never experienced darkness like this before—the kind of darkness where my body is indistinguishable from the pitch black. I can’t see even the slightest outline of my fingers, no matter how close I bring them to my face. For all I know, I’m just a floating head. Maybe not even that. I’m just a stream of strange new thoughts, none of which feels like it belongs to me in particular.

For a brief moment, I consider hitting the panic button because until now, I never knew I was morbidly scared of the dark and perhaps a bit claustrophobic. But then I remember something—something I’d read while scanning other people’s advice

for first-time floaters: Focus on your breathing. I roll back into the water and let the darkness swallow me. *This is weird*, I think. *This is so weird.* This feels unearthly and infinite, like space. Just a roughly 4.5-by-7-foot room full of nothingness.

For about 15 minutes (or forever), I’m finally able to relax. The air around me swells. The darkness is now dotted with psychedelic, surreal shapes and bursts of color. *Am I hallucinating? I’m pretty sure I’m hallucinating.* I weave in and out of consciousness. *Did I fall asleep?* And then, just as I deepen myself into this unfamiliar place that’s both frighteningly new and extraordinary, just as I get the hang of it, I hear music. It’s my cue to leave. *Has it really been an hour and 15 minutes?* I feel for the giant steel handle and push the door open, giving myself some time to adjust to the light outside, as well as to gravity and to, well, having limbs.

Back in the real world, I schlepp home with spaghetti legs in the blistering heat, reflecting on the experience. *Wow, that was hard.* While stillness and meditation might come naturally for some people, for folks like me, it took a bit of patience and dedication to get there the first time around. (Now that I know what to expect, I hope I’ll be able to get into that Zen state of mind faster next time around.) I didn’t have the slightest inkling that I would expend a great deal of energy trying to relax. But if you ask me, I’m glad I put in the effort. In the wise words of Becky (whom I hope to see again), “Everybody has a different experience, and every session is going to be different. You can float up to a hundred times and still never have the same experience.” ♦