

CAN SITTING IN A 'SALT CAVE' STOP SINUS PROBLEMS?

The owner of The Salt Cave in Randburg, the first facility of its kind in South Africa, says invisible particles of salt can be the remedy for respiratory problems, writes **Helen Grange**

I THOUGHT it was rather a different name for a spa, but it turned out that The Salt Cave is a pretty accurate description, only the "cave" is a custom-designed room in a building in Randburg.

The salt is real. There's about a ton of it on the floor, and the walls and ceiling are coated in sea salt, crumbly to the touch. The lighting is bluish so you could easily imagine yourself in a real salt mine.

The Salt Cave, the first in South Africa, is a spa of sorts. It's a hi-tech facility that offers salt therapy – purportedly a natural remedy for allergies, asthma, sinusitis, hay fever, bronchitis and pneumonia. It's been designed to recreate conditions found in a Siberian salt mine, except the "cave" has the sound of waves in the background, soothing lighting and comfortable chairs.

To recreate a natural salt cave microclimate, particles of dry rock salt are ground up by specialised machinery and circulated in the chamber, like a saline aerosol. You breathe in these invisible salt particles. As it penetrates deep into the respiratory system, the salt, along with the minerals magnesium and potassium, is said to help reduce inflammation and clean out mucus blocking the airways.

On arriving to test-drive the Salt Cave, I was handed a head cover and pair of blue shoe covers, apparently to protect both my feet and the salt on the floor. I took my seat in an easy

chair and spent an hour breathing deeply. The time went by quickly, and I reckon that the lung expanding exercises aside, this would also make for a regenerating meditation in the middle of a busy day.

A lick of my lips confirmed that salt was indeed in the air, and though it was subtle, I did feel as though oxygen was enjoying an easier passage into my system as the session came to an end. It lasted the rest of the day, with the odd expurgatory cough.

Salt therapy, otherwise known as halotherapy or speleotherapy, has been around for 167 years. It was first used medicinally after a Polish physician found in 1843 that salt miners hardly ever suffered from respiratory diseases. Today salt therapy is widely used in eastern Europe and Russia, where people with chronic breathing disorders often spend two to three hours a day in underground salt grottoes. The Russian government approved "salt caves" for medical use in 1995.

Sophia Benke-Gal, the founder of Salt Caves in the UK, Ireland and Singapore, expects that introducing Salt Caves to South Africa will significantly contribute to the quality of life of people suffering from allergies, asthma and other respiratory ailments. "It's been rewarding to hear a parent telling you that their son who previously could not last out 10 minutes of a soccer game is now able to play a full game."

Consult the scientific evidence, however, and it's clear the jury is still out on halotherapy. A comprehensive independent review of all the reliable studies looking into salt caves and asthma was carried out in 2001, and the finding was that "the available evidence does not permit a reliable conclusion as to whether salt caves are effective for the treatment of chronic asthma". A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, meanwhile, has found that inhaled hypertonic saline "could be a complimentary treatment for cystic fibrosis".

Pulmonologist Dr Michael Greenblatt at Netcare's Milpark hospital dismisses salt therapy outright, saying "there is no documentation to show that salt is a remedy for asthma or other respiratory ailments".

That said, the anecdotal evidence is quite compelling, with some people reporting it to be very effective in clearing up sinus-related allergies after a few sessions. Benke-Gal is also quick to stress that salt therapy is not intended to replace medication but to complement it.

If it is indeed effective, it should come as a relief – at a cost, of course – to many. About 10 percent of South Africans have asthma, according to Red Cross Children's Hospital lung expert Heather Zar, and a recent report by the Global Initiative for Asthma found that South Africa has the world's fourth-highest asthma



death rate among five- to 35-year-olds.

Salt therapy is also said to alleviate eczema and psoriasis (the salt settles on your skin and kills bacteria), and to help with stress and sleeping disorders, though evidence of this is also purely anecdotal.

At the Salt Cave in Randburg, there are two chambers, one for adults and the other for children. "We realised adults and children have different needs during the therapy. Adults want a tranquil environment while kids need to be entertained, so their chamber is kitted out with toys, a playpen and kiddies seating," says Anitha Soni, managing director of Salt Cave Africa.

The Salt Cave in Randburg is open six days a week. A session costs R250, with discounts on packages (10 sessions cost R2 100).

Salt Caves are being franchised countrywide. Call 0861 7258 22 or go to www.saltcave.co.za



Visitors to the adult cave, top, find the experience very relaxing, while the kiddies' cave has toys and games to keep them occupied.

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