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The outdoor soaking pools and garden area at the Houstonian Hotel's Trellis Spa.

Photograph by Mackenzie Smith Kelley

TRAVEL & OUTDOORS

A Massage Addict Embraces Touchless Treatments

Look, spa, no hands! Looking for stress relief via a salt cave, "a wellness tube," and an infrared sauna pod.



By Lauren Larson

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*This article is part of **Relax Already!**, our guide to Texas spa offerings.*

Three weeks after the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation shut down spas during the rigid COVID-19 lockdowns of March 2020, the agency received a call from Beata Huzarska Hatley. She designed, built, and runs the Puresólspa salt cave at **Tapatio Springs Hill Country Resort** (located in Boerne and, incidentally, co-owned by George Strait), and she was determined to reopen.

Hatley is a woman drawn to extremes: her husband is six foot seven, and her dogs, Paige and Kronos, are Great Danes. Kronos, the larger of the two, rises to taller than Hatley, who is technically five foot two but has a vertical swoosh of white-blond hair that adds a few inches. But, she told me, he knows who the alpha is.

Apparently, so did the TDLR. After Hatley pleaded her case on the phone, the salt cave was permitted to reopen. Puresólspa, which also offers facials, massages, and an array of body treatments, wouldn't be able to resume those services until later that year, but the salt cave, which Hatley argued was antibacterial, was allowed to welcome customers again that May. "You cannot—I can guarantee; I can pretty much say with severe confidence—you cannot contaminate this room," Hatley said when I visited the spa on a Friday afternoon this past February. "I can be sitting here next to somebody who has a major cough, and you cannot contaminate it. It's so antibacterial."

Although there are only a few studies of the antibacterial and antiviral effects of salt on an environment, adherents of salt caves often tout their germicidal properties. And saline sinus washes and nose sprays have been popular throughout the pandemic. I'm a reluctant naturopath, but I succumbed to Hatley's confidence the same way I'd succumbed to much less persuasive "hygiene theater" early in the pandemic. As had many others, it seemed: the week I visited, Puresólspa was booked. Services are available for resort guests as well as the public, and there had been a run on appointments in the wake of Valentine's Day.

At noon, Hatley was hurrying around Puresólspa, tersely issuing instructions in her strong Polish accent. Every time she charged in or out of the lobby, through a curtain of silver metal beads, the strands clacked to and fro behind her like a Newton's cradle. Soon she reemerged, holding two sets of blue mesh booties similar to those dispensed to visitors at the Taj Mahal, one for my shoes and one for hers. She ushered me back to the hallway that leads to the salt cave, which is, reductively, a sealed room lined with salt blocks. Hatley was unmasked, so I asked if I could remove my KN95. Yes, she said: to wear it would defeat the whole purpose of the cave.

I was still skeptical of the medicinal claims of the salt cave—as skeptical as I am about the ability of a \$25 Himalayan salt lamp from Bed Bath & Beyond to clean the air in my home, for instance. But the air in the cave felt fresh and winter-morning cold, so much so that I didn't remove my puffy jacket. (Visitors can opt to have massages inside; I preferred to remain bundled.) I settled into a metal-framed chair with a fabric sling seat at the far end of the cave, and Hatley sat in another nearer to a side wall.



The salt cave at Pecosito, in Tropic Springs Hill Country Resort, in Boerne.

Photograph by Rick Kline for South Coast

Hatley's voice in the cave was hushed compared with its level in the lobby, but it was easy to hear her in the silence of the space. She has been around salt since she was a child in Poland. Her father often took her to visit Wieliczka Salt Mine, which dates back to the thirteenth century and is located near Kraków. He also built a prototype for a negative ionizer, a device thought to remove harmful air particles, for their home. "It was loud and big and ugly, but it was healthy," she said. Hatley, who turns 55 in May, boasts more than two hundred cave installations worldwide, though she and her company, Salt Cave ProDesign, are based in the Hill Country, where she's lived since 2009. The business has boomed during the pandemic, and Hatley recently introduced a more mobile salt cave "pod," a boxy structure, padded with a foot of insulation, that contains a streamlined version of the cave.

Proponents of salt therapy, or halotherapy, believe that it can serve as a palliative for asthma, allergies, and other respiratory ailments such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. (Medical research on halotherapy is not especially helpful. Since the early aughts, studies have ping-ponged between recommending the therapy for respiratory relief and cautioning against it because of possible complications.)

Nonetheless, it was pleasant sitting in the cave, with its sultry, dim lighting and rich textures. The room was small—it usually seats about six—but not overly so. The stacked blocks that formed the walls were tinged with warm sunset hues, the ceiling was thickly spackled to resemble stalactites, and the floor was composed of white stone-like salt particles that reminded me of a Zen garden.

On the wall near me, a “graduation tower,” which I at first registered as a decorative water fixture, trickled soothingly. The graduation tower is what keeps the air so salty: to make one, Hatley explained, she imports branches from blackthorn bushes, which are native to Poland. She runs briny water down the branches, and the fine thorns, she said, split the molecules and send negative ions into the air. The blackthorn branches looked witchy up close, and the thick, wet, cauliflower-like growths of salt around the frame of the device were satisfyingly gross-looking.

The space was calming, but mainly I enjoyed the novelty of sitting in a room with someone I didn’t know, unmasked, free for a moment from the COVID-19 anxiety that had become habitual to me. During the darkest days of lockdown, I had fixated on visiting a spa as the first thing I would do after the pandemic was *fin*, the way many friends had fixated on going to karaoke or dive bars. But during my inaugural, long-anticipated post-vaccine massage, in May 2021, I had still felt too overwhelmed by the proximity to a stranger to really relax—it was too soon, I thought. Another massage, this past September, a post-marathon deep tissue treatment, was physically effective but just as mentally fraught. Even in February of this year, fully vaccinated and boosted, I felt ill at ease contemplating the hands-on therapies I had once dreamed about.

I wanted to find ways to enjoy spas without activating any pandemic trip wires: without touch. As I was driving away from Hatley's salt cave, suddenly aware of how harsh and thin the conditioned air of my car felt after an hour in the microclimate of the cave (and with newly clear sinuses, after weeks of allergies), it occurred to me that maybe my approach to spa treatments had been too narrow for too long. I wondered if, beyond the tried-and-true appeal of expert hands kneading my neck, spas had more to offer me.

In 2020 the pandemic caused spa visits and revenues in the U.S. to drop by more than 35 percent, according to an industry study. The number of employees working in the field also fell significantly, by about 20 percent.

But the study, conducted for the International Spa Association, also highlighted the ingenuity of establishments in finding ways to offer services amid restrictions and anxiety: 42 percent of spas introduced new treatment menus, 40 percent debuted outdoor or curbside services, and 21 percent developed touchless treatments. Clients appeared to be responding well to the adjustments. Even when the association surveyed industry professionals in early 2021, after one of the pandemic's darkest chapters, most were bullish on the future of spas: the study pointed to a slight increase in the average cost per service as a sign of continued demand and a crocus heralding the sector's recovery.

“In the beginning of the pandemic there was certainly some hesitation around the experiences that are perhaps more touch-based,” said Sheri Morgan Muskin, general manager of Miraval Austin, an upscale wellness resort overlooking Lake Travis. “But I will tell you that people are craving physical touch because they haven’t been able to necessarily see the ones they love. Once people understood the protocols and the precautions we were taking, from therapist to guest and guest to therapist, they very quickly began to transition into wanting those services that provided touch.” Morgan Muskin and other spa professionals told me demand for all services has soared as clients seek equilibrium after several years of upheaval.

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Everyone has different strategies for achieving said equilibrium, but in my experience there are two primary genres of spa-goer: those who want to be gently lulled into a meditative and balanced state and those who wish to plumb the extremes of what the human body can take. I am the latter: I feel best when I’m physically exhausted, as after a long run or an unforgiving deep tissue massage. Typically that has meant giving myself over to a tough-love spa shepherd. I worried that touchless treatments wouldn’t provide the necessary intensity.

Nevertheless, I headed to **Trellis Spa, at the Houstonian Hotel**, which reopened in 2021 after receiving a multimillion-dollar pandemic glow-up, becoming the largest spa in the state. I was especially curious about a detoxifying treatment table called the MLX i3Dome, by Gharieni Group, a German maker of high-end spa devices. It's been called the Rolls-Royce of spa equipment. I called it the wellness tube.

The contraption, I gathered, would extract and destroy all the evil within me in a very short time using far-infrared, plasma, and light therapy—"no therapist needed," Gharieni Group's press materials boasted. I would wear a helmet from which negatively charged ions and light would emanate and enter me. I could customize the helmet with red, green, or blue light, which offered antiaging, antibacterial, or antianxiety effects, respectively. (As I researched the tube, I came across a pleasantly nasty diagram of the dermis, which looked like putrefying Neapolitan cake being zapped by colored beams.) After about an hour, I would be birthed from the tube with infantile skin. The Houstonian's public relations director warned me that I would emerge a bit wet and would need a shower before enjoying the rest of the facilities.



The indoor pool at the Houstonian Hotel's Trellis Spa.
Photograph by Mackenzie Smith Bellus



Towel for sale at the shop at the Trellis Spa.
Photograph by Mackenzie Smith Bellus

I needed just such a rebirth the morning I was scheduled to enter the i3Dome. The evening before, I had given myself over to the liquid charms of Houston: imagine a bichon frise drinking a gallon of Carlo Rossi. Making my way across the beautiful grounds of the Houstonian in the morning light after breakfast, a soft breeze rustling the leaves of the property's fantastic live oak, I felt bilious and desiccated. While I stepped out of my clothes and into a swimsuit and robe in the locker room, I wondered idly what would happen if I barfed in the wellness tube.

But ten minutes later, an attendant had situated me under the dome and light helmet. (Though momentarily intrigued by the alleged aphrodisiac qualities of the antibacterial green light, I chose the antiaging red.) I had quibbled over whether to wear my swimsuit in the dome, as some guests do, but decided to enter a state of higher consciousness as I entered this world. The attendant told me the infrared rays of the dome could be adjusted up to level ten, but she would start me at six. In my delicate condition, I chose to remain at that setting. She placed a small buzzer near my face that I could nuzzle if I needed assistance and left with a promise to check on me in twenty minutes.

Then I was alone. At first I didn't think anything was happening to my body. But when I raised my hand to scratch my nose, my knuckles brushed my side. I was drenched in sweat. I was long-run-on-a-summer-day, fever-breaking-in-a-Jane-Austen-novel drenched. The hangover seeped out of my pores. So did all my embarrassing memories from middle school and my exes' names.

For a few moments before the attendant returned to remove my helmet for the remaining time in my personal sweat lodge, panic set in. I knew I had arrived dehydrated and wondered where all the sweat was coming from. I wondered too if a person as hungover as I was had ever been in the tube before. (Later, general manager Shana Ominsky confirmed that some guests sought out the tube specifically *for* hangovers.)

A few weeks after my visit to Trellis, the spa removed the i3Dome to make space for new injectable offerings. Because the tube required minimal labor to operate, it wasn't costing the spa much money (beyond the major initial investment), but it also wasn't a big draw. Like Morgan Muskin, Ominsky, who had arrived at Trellis after the i3Dome was already in place, had been surprised by the interest in high-touch services at both her previous post and in Houston. "You'd think it would be the reverse," Ominsky said—you'd think spa-goers would, like me, be more drawn to low-contact activities. But, she said, "there was this sort of turning point. It was after the booster shots came out."

I hadn't quite arrived at that point when I visited Trellis, and I appreciated that I had been able to have an extremely intense treatment with minimal intervention from the attendant. I was thrilled by the volume of sweat and the gelatinous weight of my limbs. Aside from the fleeting moment when I wondered if I'd die on the table, I hadn't missed having another person around.

Post-tube and post-shower, I recovered with a vast salmon salad at the spa's cafe. After an excellent HydraFacial, which completed my skin's return to neonatal elasticity, I headed outside to spend the afternoon among several newly constructed pools. They are intended for hydrotherapy, which is a broad term encompassing many water-based treatments, but here it means submerging oneself in water of different temperatures to improve blood flow, ease joint pain, and relax.

"Our pool has turned into sort of a party pool," Ominsky had told me, a little woefully, as she perched at my table for a few minutes over lunch. The evening before, I had watched a video tutorial on the best way to move through the pools, and I told Ominsky I planned to militantly enforce the appropriate circuit. "You'll love it," she said. "You just have to know that someone is probably going to be in the hot tub with a glass of wine."



A HydraFacial at the Trellis Spa.

Photograph by Mackenzie Smith Bailey

And so there was. It was the middle of February, but the temperature was in the low seventies, so duos and trios drifted around in the warm waters and lounged in the plush recliners. Everyone held a drink, and nobody was taking ice-cold showers between hot tub dips, as the tutorial had instructed. Soon I too had a glass of wine in hand (not Carlo Rossi), and after a few dutiful icy intermissions, I marinated in the warmer of the two hot tubs.

I remembered that, years ago, hydrotherapy had been my gateway to spa culture. I had liked that boutique bathhouses and sauna studios were so low-key: all you really did was sit and stew, so there was no insider etiquette to learn, and nobody was minding you.

When I first dipped a toe into hydrotherapy, and into the pools at Trellis, I experienced another key aspect of spa-going: a very peaceful kind of passive socializing. I love crossing paths with other guests in matching robes, drifting past one another with blissed-out expressions. At spas, I'm like a puppy who needs to learn the ropes from the other dogs; when I'm around other people who are relaxed, I relax too. Nobody in Trellis's pools mingled, and everyone maintained a safe distance even in the outdoor space, but I was still taking my cues from them.

I thought I would miss that sense of community two weeks later, when, back in Austin, I booked an hour in a private infrared sauna pod at a facility called **the Ocean Lab**, five minutes from my house. It was the second of what would be a string of frigid, raw days, and I hoped to re-create the cathartic heat of the MLX i3Dome. Infrared saunas are supposed to ease muscle soreness, aid circulation, and improve sleep quality; I just love to be warm.

In the narrow pod, I futzed with the very hot touch screen on one of the walls until I found my go-to podcast, *POOG*, in which two comedians use the wellness industry as a portal for life's big questions. I lay back on a towel, enjoying the nautical creak of my body on the wood. It was strange to be alone: most of my sauna experiences have been in communal spaces, such as gyms. (For an additional charge, you can bring a friend into your pod, and the Ocean Lab also has a communal sauna.)

Even as the solitude made me feel a bit lonely, it was also a relief. I had prepaid, and on the way in I had seen only one staffer, a slender, ethereal young man who, in bare feet, guided me from the lobby to my pod and, after giving me brief, polite instructions, vanished.

I don't know whether I'll ever be as comfortable with *mano a mano* treatments as I used to be. It occurred to me after I left the sauna pod that my relief at being alone in there couldn't be fully explained by my residual anxiety about contracting COVID-19.

Rather, I think that during the most sinister days of the pandemic, the nation developed an at least performative empathy with the workers who were risking exposure by providing essential services and, later, with workers in restaurants and other less essential businesses. Getting a massage at a spa, even with a grand gratuity, seemed inappropriate. I was a vector, willfully and frivolously exposing a person who was paid to be at close range to my vector vapors.

I remember balking at the attendant-attendee dynamic during my first forays into the spa industry, but over time, as I was deployed to various spas for reporting purposes and accompanied savvy friends, that discomfort faded. In the pandemic era, it has bloomed again.

That's certainly not a bad thing, especially because there are now so many less intimate offerings that still scratch the spa itch, from salt caves to sauna pods. These treatments can be just as intense, just as social, and, in many cases, more accessible than the therapies I was drawn to pre-COVID. There's nothing like the pleasantly walloped feeling after a deep tissue massage. But for now, an hour in a wellness tube comes close enough.

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