

So you're the sort who dutifully skips the salt at every meal, regarding it as something to be avoided, even feared.

Andrea Geresdi would like 45 minutes to change your mind.

Inside the cool, dark confines of her new Naples business venture, Salt Cave, you'll drag your bare toes through up to 8 inches of blush-colored Himalayan crystal salt. It feels like beach sand, but drier: The cave's humidity is always between 40 to 50 percent.

The cave's walls and ceiling are covered with more salt. Piled in the corners and center are large, gently lit salt rocks. Exposed wooden beams and a hanging lantern add to the feeling that this 450-square-foot room, located inside a Naples shopping plaza, is actually nestled inside a cave or salt mine.

That's the idea, Geresdi said.

"That's how this treatment started," she said.

The treatment is halotherapy, or salt therapy. Geresdi, who was born in Hungary and now lives in Cape Coral, said the process of taking a salty sojourn into a cave or mine is a long-standing and popular alternative health treatment in certain parts of Eastern Europe.

While she doesn't suggest salt is a cure-all, she certainly feels that the mineral has been much maligned.

“It’s so vital,” she said. “We so need it.”

Many of the maladies Geresdi believes a salt cave session might improve upon are respiratory and skin-related. Asthma, bronchitis, allergies and psoriasis are just a few she quickly lists. But she also said the salt cave can relieve the symptoms of more serious health issues, such as depression and cystic fibrosis.

The typical session lasts 45 minutes and costs \$45, with participants simply sitting in a chair and relaxing or meditating as they breathe in the atmosphere of the salt cave. Soft music is played. Each participant is given a cover for their hair and, if they wish, their feet.

A generator is used to create an aerosol salt spray of one to five micrometers, and the spray fills the room in just a few minutes. As participants breathe, Geresdi said, they absorb all the benefits of the salt, which is effective because it is a natural antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal.

Afterwards, there’s a soft woosh as all the salty air is vented from the sealed room to prepare for the next session.

Naples resident Jackie Wright has visited the Salt Cave several times. Her initial trip was prompted by back pain from an existing medical condition. The pain improved more quickly than expected, she said. After that, she decided to return before taking a flight to Michigan in the hope that she might avoid the respiratory troubles she always seemed to encounter when taking such a trip.

“I can’t prove or disprove, but I do know I didn’t get sick,” Wright said.

Now, in addition to her occasional cave visits, Wright is adding a dash of salt here and there to her daily life. She believes it is giving her more energy – just as

Geresdi claimed it would.

But not just any salt will do, Geresdi explained. The salt must be natural, not the processed, table salt most people keep in their cabinets. Any salt with a color to it is her rule, she said. Sea salt, for example, should be gray. If it is white, it has been processed, and has lost its value. The Himalayan salt in the Salt Cave is pink and, she said, is some of the purest on the planet.

“It’s untouched salt,” she said. “They take it, put it in a container and it comes here.”

In building the business, there were some moments Geresdi wasn’t entirely sure if that was the best thing.

Although she was certain she wanted to build a salt cave and offer other holistic treatments and classes in connection with it, finding the space for such a business proved difficult. Potential landlords worried about the salt cave concept, she said.

She forged ahead, ordering the salt before she had a store and hoping a space would materialize. To her dismay, it didn’t.

“You definitely don’t want to have 20 tons of salt lying around,” she said.

But then, in what Geresdi considers a quirk of the universe, she found a suitable spot at Heritage Court, a shopping plaza on U.S. 41 in Naples, just south of Pine Ridge Road. Three days after that, the salt arrived.

Now the Salt Cave is fully operational, offering halotherapy sessions, yoga, tai chi, meditation, crystal bowl sound healing and more within its walls. There are lectures and other classes, too.

While parents soak up the salt, their children can dig for hidden plunder – Geresdi has a children’s area in the cave that she stocks with fake jewels and coins.

There is plenty of that pretty pink salt for sale, too: Bags of it, big and small, neatly stacked in the lobby shelves. Geresdi suggests adding a half-pinch of it to a glass of distilled water.

Do that, she said, and you’ll have the best drinking water in the world.

“Your body would just smile and thank you,” she said.

By ELIZABETH KELLAR

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