

## Have You Floated Before? Money for Nothing.

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“Have you floated before?”

The receptionist asks this as if it were normal, like the everyday conversation starter retail workers in North America are so good at: “crazy rain, huh?” or “how’s your day going?” It’s late winter in Vancouver; a little light still remains in the thick clouds. The receptionist is wearing a headband embroidered with a Lululemon logo. A few blocks away is the headquarters of the yoga apparel juggernaut. Their logo looks an awful lot like the Greek letter omega: the last, the final, the end. On her desk is a bottle of “Happy Water”, another local product that claims to contain naturally-occurring deposits of the antidepressant lithium.

I’m in the lobby of a floatation spa in the upmarket neighbourhood of Kitsilano, and I’m still wrestling with her question: have I floated before? I’m led to an upstairs lounge by a tall, whispery man with long hair balled up into a bun that sits atop his head. I’m shown to a sofa among the other clients – most are middle-aged and well dressed. Have they floated before? They certainly look calm, at ease. Perhaps they’ve had the Happy Water.

The floatation room is deceptive. A narrow, completely white, tiled chamber gently lit by warm pink lights; a relaxing nightclub. There is a shower at the far end, and a little area for your clothes, but not much else. I am told of the procedure in a whisper: stick a pair of foam plugs into your ears, then disrobe and shower. The term ‘Castile soap’ is used twice and I nod along, though I’m not entirely sure what that means. The man reminds me to wash my hair twice and behind my ears: can’t get oils into the special, heavily salted water. After he shows me around, he turns a handle in the wall next to the shower: he pulls it to reveal a small half-meter by half-meter portal. Inside is a square room dense with a soft mist, the light in here an intense blue. “That’s the ozone dissolving,” the man smiles at me, gesturing to the thick cloud above the water. Suddenly, he’s gone.

Growing up in a place like Johannesburg infuses water with a sense of the spectacular. In the City of Gold, every decorative fountain struck me as impossibly fantastic – what a pleasure to see water dancing around in a city that, famously, has no real river or ocean or lake to call its own. Walking the streets of Kensington as a child, I would see the telltale reflection of sparkling water on the trees or high walls of the nearby houses: there, behind the brick, barbed wire and broken beer bottle barricades, was an oasis. Water always seemed beyond the realm of the normal.

I step into the shallow pool of the flotation room, close the portal door, lie on my back, and turn off the lights. Have you floated before?

Each of these sessions cost \$65. That’s over R600 for the privilege of . . . nothing. That is what is promised: pure darkness, pure silence. There is no sense of gravity, that most oppressive of forces. As I lay, floating in the dark, my eyes seeing phantom flashes of light, I can’t help but wonder if this is the Lululemon Omega – the end of something.

What do we do with excess? Elton John once spent £290 000 on flowers in the heady days of New Labour and Britpop. Musa Keita, the 14th century Malian emperor, and perhaps the richest person to ever live, would make his pilgrimage to Mecca with dozens of gold-dust laden camels to treat peasants along the way. They did things a little differently, Elton and Musa, but both spent currency in return for something, even the immaterial.

The floatation tank seems fundamentally different to all of these past luxuries. It promises nothing, it gives nothing. It denies you the world; gone are emails, the air that is thick with Wi-Fi and cellular data, other people, light, sound,

feeling. It promises omega, the end, emptiness. You are left only with yourself, the faint trace of your heartbeat in your ears, the sense that your right hand cannot find your left because of the phantom limb feeling the water induces. There is only the suspicion that this water, this room, might not exist in the real world and that you have disappeared along with it. For only \$65 plus taxes.