

THE BIG CHILL

Cryotherapy is the latest treatment for a range of ills including cellulite, psoriasis, dull skin, and even wrinkles. New-age madness or beauty breakthrough?

Featuring: Antarctica. Botox. Prozac. Skimpy shorts. Slovakia.

The airlock door is pulled open and a whoosh of cold air rushes out. I am about to step inside an enormous fridge and all I'm wearing is a pair of skimpy shorts, a vest, knee-high socks, white mittens, a sweatband and some fetching white clogs. I look like Anna Kournikova in a nuclear fallout zone. This is Aqua City in the Tatras Mountains in Poprad, Slovakia. It's also the place to experience the latest alternative beauty treatment: whole-body cryotherapy. Liquid oxygen is used to chill the air to minus 120C and the body is exposed to the cold, dry air for two minutes at a time. To put this into perspective, the lowest natural temperature ever recorded is minus 89.2C, at the Vostok research station in Antarctica. I am only enduring such temperatures for two minutes but were I to stay in the chamber for longer than eight minutes, I'd most certainly be dead.

Cryotherapy has become popular in Eastern Europe as a treatment for revitalising the body and perking up skin. The theory is that the extreme cold shrinks the molecules in the body which then expand as you return to room temperature, increasing blood flow. The point is to wear as little as possible so that you get really cold, with only your extremities covered to save them from frostbite. Aqua City's medic, Dr Jan Potocky, explains the procedure while he checks my blood pressure and that I don't suffer from any heart problems. (I don't. Yet.) After assuring me that I am "plenty healthy", I'm given a face mask to protect my nose and lips and told to blot myself down with tissues before entering, "so there's no chance of any moistness causing freezer burn".

I am joined by two other beauty addicts and herded into the antechamber, a room the size of a lift that's cooled to minus 60C. I am pleasantly surprised – it's not that bad. I breathe slowly and shallowly, as recommended, then after 30 seconds a door opens and we move into the main, minus 120C chamber.

The cold is like nothing I've ever felt before and there is a sharp needle-like stinging in my thighs. It's like being slapped all over – and not in a good way. We stomp around the one-metre-square box in circles like some kind of deranged army as Dr Potocky barks over the intercom from outside: "How you feel?" "F***ing freezing!" I want to shout, but there is a burning sensation in my chest and no words come out. Dr Potocky, who is monitoring the time, says with a cheerful disposition, "One minute left!"

It's the longest minute of my life and suddenly



a bit of cellulite doesn't seem so bad in comparison to dying - here and now - in a box with two women I barely know. When Dr Potocky says time's up, there is some very unladylike scrabbling for the door and we clatter out in our clogs.

I feel a huge sense of relief to be out and my bright red face is proof that my blood is pumping faster. We're sent to the gym for 20 minutes of aerobic exercise to boost circulation. After 15 minutes on the rowing machine, my face is practically puce. Can this really be good for me?

Dr Potocky recommends two to five sessions to really feel the benefits. I must admit that after just one session, I am left wondering whether the treatment is anything more than a short, sharp shock. But I sleep well that night and a few days later, friends start to comment on my skin, which admittedly feels fresh and glowing. A week on, and while I may not actually be a new woman with the skin of a 14-year-old and buns of steel, I'm feeling pretty damn hot.

"We have a lot of female visitors," says Dr Potocky. "They see the difference it makes to their complexion and they come back and bring their

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friends." Thousands of women use cryochambers in Poland and Slovakia but so far there is little scientific evidence to support the benefits and conventional doctors remain skeptical. But the numbers speak for themselves; Aqua City regularly attracts 5,000 visitors a day and during my stay I meet devotees who swear that cryotherapy has changed their lives. Honza, 36, has had 26 sessions in the past year and claims she's never felt fitter. Mary, 46, says that cryotherapy improves her complexion and makes her eyes brighter for up to six weeks. She now travels to Slovakia every few months for treatment. Back in London, I get a message from Katie, my fellow first timer in the cryochamber, who says, "I definitely felt great and my skin looked good for weeks after - perkier all round." "Like Prozac and Botox in one?!" I email back. "Absolutely!"

So there you have it: Cryotherapy is better for you than botulism and cheaper than a shrink. With so many women going back for more, cryotherapy is the new miracle cure. Either that or they just like getting dressed up as Anna Kournikova. ●

W—Helen Russell |—Chris Martin

BETTER BODY FADS THROUGH THE AGES

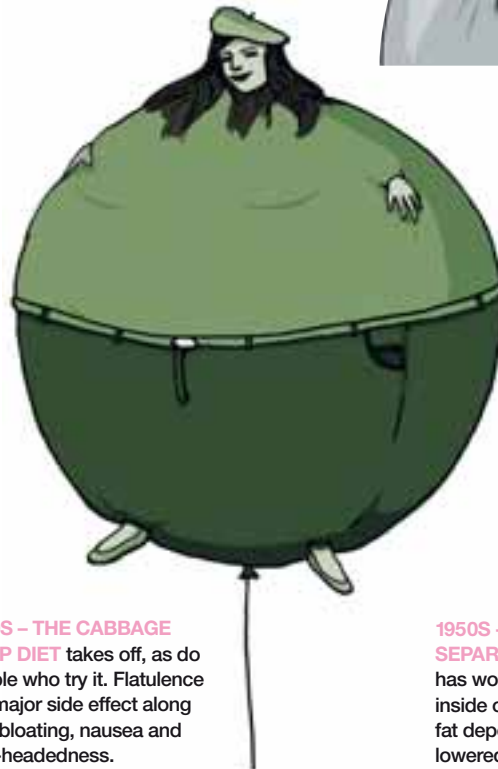
1990S - DIY ENEMA KITS take off. Number of "accidents" in the home also rises. You do the maths.



1980S - DOLPHIN THERAPY is the latest wellbeing must-have until scientists realise that there are no longterm benefits and that injury is a very real possibility when you get in a tank with a 400-pound wild animal.



1970S - THE SLEEPING BEAUTY DIET involves individuals being heavily sedated to reduce food intake. Early fake tans turn thousands of women orange.



1960S - THE CABBAGE SOUP DIET takes off, as do people who try it. Flatulence is a major side effect along with bloating, nausea and light-headedness.

1950S - THE SLAP AND SEPARATE EXERCISE plan has women pummeling the inside of their knees to shift fat deposits. Hemlines are lowered to cover up bruising.

