

Speleotherapy: Salt of the Earth helps asthma patients breath easy

By Julia Hakobyan
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Early in the morning Aida Kazaryan rises to drink her herbal tea and prepares for another day in the salt mine; another day in the hospital.

She catches a minibus for Avan, on the edge of Yerevan where she gets off at the salt mine stop and heads for a one-storied building.

There she takes off her coat, puts on a lab coat and a hardhat and goes to the lift, where a group of people have already been waiting for her.

Genrikh, the man with the flashlight gives a command to the lift operators. They take the control levers of the rope and start to lower down the lift. In some 5 seconds the lift with passengers immerses into a deep darkness. Genrikh switches on the flashlight and tells everybody to hold on to the handrails.

The lift – a cage without walls – shakes and rocks. A passenger bumps his head and laughter from the others echoes in the elevator chamber.

The ride to the bottom, 235 meters below that one-storied building, takes two and one-half minutes and at the bottom, the lift passengers step over rails – the passageway for metal vans hauling huge chunks of salt. The passengers in their lab coats and hardhats greet the dusty miners waiting to put their load onto the unsteady lift, then go further leaving behind the noise and bustle of the miners.

Signs on the walls lead them to a big wooden door marked with a red cross – the international symbol of medical aid. Genrikh turns off the flashlight, opens the door and the group enters the lighted cave that is Republican Speleotherapeutical Hospital.

For more than 10 years, bronchial asthma, allergy and respiratory disease patients like Aida have been coming to this cave for treatment. (KGB officers used to come here, too, because conversations were hard to “bug” in the cave.)



The clinic – built in 1987 as a special project of the Galurcial Institute of St. Petersburg – is carved out of a massive stratum of stone salt and differs from a traditional understanding of medicine. If not for the indexes of red crosses it would seem to be an extraordinary excursion hall of the ancient cave, looking more like a magical kingdom than a health clinic.

First impression is the absence of smell. The walls and ceiling are carved out of solid salt, while the floor is covered with salt pebbles. A stream of electric wires passes on the ceiling.

On some walls are small holes, dug by patients taking pieces of salt to keep as souvenirs of their stay in the clinic.

Patients play table tennis, walk the long, shadowy corridors, work out on a few crude exercise machines or, mostly, sit around a table in the “lobby” and gossip.

The only attribute of medicine here is a stethoscope around the neck of Andranic Voskanyan, the Director and Chief Doctor of the clinic.

“The salt environment has an amazing healing impact on the respiratory system,” he says. “Salt caves are spread on the whole valley of Ararat. Actually it is the bottom of the Biblical sea, from where life came into being.”

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Similar clinics can be found in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. But the clinic in Armenia is the only one of its kind because of the unique microelement substance of aerosol. The aerosol contains all the components that exist in human blood, which makes this place almost ideal for treatment of respiratory disease.

The Avan "saltmine clinic" is a huge labyrinth – 4,000 square meters of corridors where crystals of salt reflect the light of the luminescent lamps, which create the impression that the cave shines from within. And though it is not forbidden even to sing, everyone speaks very quietly, as if not wishing to break the natural silence. The only sound is of salt crunching under footsteps.

The few patients who come for regular treatment most often meet in the area they call the "conference hall" – one of the carved out corridors – where they sit for tea and conversation.

"I've been suffering asthma for 20 years," says Aida Kazaryan, a cheerful woman of 43. "I was suffocated every time when I had cough. It was awful, especially at nights."

Asthma has played a fatal role in Aida's life. During her third pregnancy the agonizing attacks of cough often led to the loss of consciousness. She was compelled to interrupt pregnancy.

Since that life-threatening episode six years ago, Aida has been coming to the clinic one month each year. She says her asthma has almost disappeared. She only regrets that now she is too old to have another child.

"Unfortunately, Aida came to us late," says Dr. Voskanyan. "Seventeen pregnant women suffering from asthma in various stages got speleotreatment in our clinic. They had normal pregnancy and delivery. The newborns did not have diatheses or any other symptoms of allergy during the following years."

According to statistics there is a world-wide increase in the number of people suffering asthma. In Armenia about 6 out of every 100 people are asthmatic.

Because of the consistent temperature, the dryness of the air and the curative powers of salt, the mine provides a near-perfect environment for asthma patients.

The positive impact of the cave environment in general and salt's particular effect on man's health is known from ancient times. Early on, people noticed that wounded animals escaped to caves, where they heal their wounds or stings. People investigated that phenomena and later appeared a new branch in medicine, Speleotherapy ("speleo" is Greek for cave).

"Many scientists from different countries, are engaged now in study of speleotherapy," Voskanyan says. "The existing energy sources contained in salt crystals are well known. But the opportunities of speleotherapy are insufficiently studied."

Voskanyan says that during the Soviet years the clinic did not have enough capacity to cope with the flow of patients, treating more than 2,500. Today, the cost of the treatment -- \$200 for 5 sessions per week, 3 to 9 hours per day for 3 to 6 weeks -- is too expensive for the majority of the population and most days the clinic is nearly empty.

At 3 p.m. Aida Kazaryan takes a meal she has brought from a bag. "By the way" says she, "here you not only improve your health. The meals here became especially delicious."

Smiling Aida shares the secret. She takes a small knife and approaches to the wall. She scrapes the wall and salts the meal.

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Photos By Mkhitar Khachatrian

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