

# Goopy and glorious

Nov 04, 1999  
By Anna Hanks

Seaside mud has been used for centuries as a curative for whatever ails you - inside and out. While most patients visit Estonia's mud baths to relieve serious physical complaints, Anna Hanks explores the mud bath out of curiosity.

Imagine yourself immersed in warm, slippery chocolate cake batter. Except that the cake batter smells of sulfur. The post-mud bath feeling is comparable to the feeling after a massage or a sauna. You are relaxed and capable of movement, yet it is difficult to think of anything more strenuous than a leisurely walk home.

Arriving at the stately, beachfront Parnu Mud Baths, I found a very Soviet-style health treatment center behind the elegant 1927 facade.

The peach neo-Classical exterior is in perfect shape. It looks like the painters left yesterday. Inside is another story. When you walk into the spacious entryway, the neo-Classical style continues, but the spit-and-polish decorating does not.

This dimly-lit entrance way has two halls running right and left off of it. To the left is the no-frills business office, where I checked in and paid extra for my towel. On the way to the mud room we passed through the building's central courtyard. This courtyard is prominently featured in the mud bath's brochure.

The pictures show a brightly-lit, working fountain with a statue of a woman bathing. In reality, the most prominent feature of the courtyard is a snack bar where you can buy alcoholic beverages. The fountain itself is dim and dingy and was not working the day of my visit.

A few rooms down from the courtyard was my mud treatment room. It looked like a high-ceiling, windowless dorm room, complete with piped-in heated mud and a shower. After the receptionist dropped me off at room 24, I was met by my mud attendant. I was then told to remove everything.

"Nothing, nothing," said my slender, dark-haired attendant, making motions up and down her own body. She then hurried off to tuck in my mud-bath roommate - an older woman. As soon as I was naked I tried to put on my towel.

Before I could manage to get it around me, the attendant appeared behind me, firmly removed it, hung it up and led me by the hand over to the mud treatment area. Being led naked by a stranger was an odd

sensation to someone with a conventional middle-class American upbringing. This is not an American spa experience.

The attendant led me to a knee-high, twin-bed size, ceramic couch attached to a wall. It looked like the permanently attached dorm-room furniture in my American university. Covering the ceramic sofa was a large piece of much-washed, very soft brown canvas.

The attendant then turned me toward her, with my back to the slab, and gave my shoulders a firm push. My bottom was immersed in a surprisingly warm, throw-pillow sized puddle of mud. I made surprised sounds, which the attendant had apparently heard before. She held firmly onto my shoulders to prevent my immediate reaction - hopping straight back up.

After a few seconds she then lay me down in the mud, pulling my shoulder-length hair out of the way with a few practiced twists and putting a towel under my neck. My arms were by my sides.

She then took a mud-filled metal bucket and began slopping mud over my legs and torso with authoritative motions, similar to those used for slopping hogs. She avoided putting mud on my chest, leaving my heart and lungs free from the effects of the mud. The situation and sensations were so odd I couldn't help laughing. The attendant found it funny that I was laughing and laughed along with me.

After the brief application of mud was finished - taking less than 30 seconds - she wrapped me up in the rest of the canvas like a giant burrito, then covered me with a blanket. She then dimmed the lights and left me to marinate in mud. I started sweating a little almost immediately - not surprising, as the mud is kept between 41 and 42 degrees Centigrade.

All this time my mud companion, lying a few feet away, said nothing. The atmosphere is one of fairly serious medical treatment, not a place of levity.

When you hear that the mud treatment lasts 15 minutes, you might think, "Oh, that's nothing! I want to try half an hour." Believe me, 15 minutes lying in warm mud is enough to relax anyone. God help us if there had been a fire alarm. I wasn't going anywhere.

Halfway through my treatment it was time to unwrap my roommate. She was unfurled and led off to the shower in the corner of the room. When she was sufficiently showered it was my turn.

My blanket was removed and my canvas was unwrapped. The attendant helped me sit up. I was a little lightheaded. This was apparently normal, as the attendant held me in a sitting position for a few seconds before slipping a pair of plastic slippers onto my feet and helping me stand up.

I was completely covered in mud - mud that was thick enough to stay on. The mud covered more than my bathing suit. Wearing nothing but a grimace and my mud I trotted a few feet to the shower.

I was left alone in the shower, which needed a good scrub even more than I did, with water pressure that wasn't sufficient for the mud.

After about five minutes, the attendant came back and got the places I couldn't. Admittedly it was a little odd being washed by a stranger.

Yet, while visibly clean, I wasn't mud-free. Toweling off, I kept wiping off dirt. When I ran out of clean towel, I put my clothes back on.

Afterward, I was very relaxed and took something close to a nap in the quiet "resting room." The cots were Soviet-style and not overstuffed, but that did not matter. It was a warm day, the windows were open. The birds were making pleasant bird noises. The snores of the room's only other occupant were not enough to keep me from a semi-daydream about Harrison Ford. I felt like unset fudge. In a surrealist painting I would have melted off the cot.

Later that afternoon, I have to admit to being very aware of my reproductive organs. Not in a bad way, just more aware than I normally am. We're told that the mud increases fertility for those with reproductive problems.

The theory behind the treatment is that the mud stimulates the skin and subcutaneous tissues, which are connected to other major body systems, including the digestive, respiratory, nervous and circulatory systems. The treatment could speed up metabolism, make skin softer and more elastic and soothe muscle strains. Mud treatment is not recommended for those with cancer, diabetes or heart problems, or women in the later stages of pregnancy.

After my brief nap, I requested a short tour of the entire mud-bath facilities. There were infusion baths, which were a sort of Soviet Jacuzzi where the bubbles came out of what looked like a hard plastic bath mat. There were treatment showers composed of half-circles of copper piping with holes and low water pressure, meant for circulation problems and cellulite.

There were paraffin treatments much like the mud baths. There were treatments that involved what looked like translucent, high-pressure garden hoses being trained on naked women. There were other types of underwater massage where it looked like the garden hoses were trained on clients underwater, and a swimming pool where clients stretch with weights in the water.

Most of the clients I saw during this tour were older, perhaps in their late 70s or 80s. Most of them seemed able-bodied and in fairly decent health. According to the doctor who gave me the tour, most of the patients treated are older women.

When I asked the young doctor about the benefits of the treatments, she looked almost sheepish. With a smile she said that the treatments do no harm.

In short, if you are just in the mood to try something new, stick to the mud baths, or perhaps the paraffin, although I can't vouch for those. The rest of the treatments did not look enjoyable.

The strangest and most disconcerting effect of the mud bath was that, showering afterwards, I found I had mud in places I had forgotten I had places. For a day or so afterwards, at close range, I smelled

like sulfur.

As someone with very sensitive skin, I can say that the mud bath did not bother my skin at all, but, weeks after my mud bath, I still have an odd pattern of peeling dry skin.