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Luxury Homeowners Retreat With Sensory-Deprivation Tanks

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Wealthy residents are spending tens of thousands of dollars installing pods that let them float free of gravity, claiming the amenity hastens muscle recovery and boosts creativity



Last year, Francie and Ali Nilforushan spent “hundreds of thousands” of dollars turning their formal dining room and a guest bedroom into a high-tech relaxation area in their ranch-style San Diego home. There’s a hyperbaric oxygen-therapy chamber, an infrared sauna, a steam shower and therapeutic lighting. But the centerpiece is a 7-foot-tall sensory-deprivation tank.

Here they can spend 30 minutes to an hour floating in saltwater in complete silence and darkness to achieve a meditative state.

“If life is busy, this is the best hour you could spend,” says Mr. Nilforushan, a 42-year-old former Olympic equestrian who now puts on horse events throughout the country. Mr. Nilforushan says he floats four times a week in his sensory-deprivation pod, beginning each session with meditative music that fades away after five minutes. Between sessions, the water is filtered and cleansed using ultraviolet light and hydrogen peroxide.



Homeowners looking to tune out the sights and sounds of daily life are installing futuristic float tanks that are touted to hasten muscle recovery, reduce headaches and pain and even boost energy and creativity. Some of the newest options cost \$20,000 to \$45,000 and feature star-effect lighting and underwater sound for meditation.

The Nilforushans purchased their \$40,000 Zero Gravity Float Room from Kevin Johnson, an Austin, Texas-based float-spa manufacturer. Their unit features a door instead of a lid because some clients dislike feeling like they're trapped inside a tank, says Mr. Johnson, who adds that he is working to install four more units in homes this year.

The residential market is still in its infancy, with most sensory-deprivation tanks offered commercially. In 2017 there were 193 centers, up from 170 the previous year,

according to data from Float Tank Solutions, a consulting firm and float center in Portland, Ore.



But some manufacturers hope the market for residential versions will take off as more people include home spas in their design plans. Consumers spent \$42.5 billion on bathroom remodels last year, which includes spa areas, up from \$38.5 billion in 2016, according to data from the National Kitchen and Bath Association.

At Superior Float Tanks in Norfolk, Va., residential units make up 5% of sales, says owner James Ramsey, who started manufacturing tanks four years ago. The \$30,000 egg-shaped Revolution Float Orb is the most popular residential option, he notes.

Installation of the stand-alone unit requires an electrical outlet. A water line and drain make setup and use more convenient. The water, which is about a foot deep, is heated and mixed with about 1,000 pounds of Epsom salt to enable floating. “After three to four minutes, the skin temperature and water temperature will sync up,” says Mr. Ramsey.

Saltwater is filtered and can be normally reused for one or two years, he adds.

Even mainstream tub manufacturers are tapping in. Toto USA, based in Atlanta, now offers a Floatation Tub for \$18,800. The unit looks like a traditional, free-standing bathtub but is designed to simulate weightlessness with massaging water jets and an adjustable headrest. It’s meant “to put you in to a meditative state,” says Bill Strang, the company’s president of operations and e-commerce for Toto USA.



Float tanks attract an international jet set, says Floataway co-founder Gini Stanwell-Smith, based in Norwich, England. The company has sold residential units to more than a dozen countries. The company offers 11 models ranging from \$15,000 to \$47,000. Buyers can choose from shallow rectangular pools to an oversize “float-around” pool that accommodates two people. Floataway’s Tranquility pod with a remote-controlled door and underwater sound is the most popular residential option, says Ms. Stanwell-Smith. She says users note the pod’s likeness to a sea animal: “It looks like a dolphin.”

Other float aficionados are taking a more budget-savvy approach. This summer, musician Hal Walker installed a used commercial tank made by Samadhi in a large closet behind the master bathroom in his Kent, Ohio, home. Mr. Walker, who is 52, paid \$7,000 for the tank, which retails for around \$14,000, and spent another \$5,000 on installation and upgrades, including a more heat-efficient window. “It’s worth it.”

Homeowners who don’t want the hassle of buying and installing a flotation tank can find them in some luxury developments. The Quincy, a high-end apartment building in downtown Denver, will have two float pods available to residents later this year. Monthly rents at the Quincy range from \$1,600 for a studio to \$10,000 for a penthouse.

In Aspen, Colo., Dancing Bear, a residential club with 19 private units available for fractional ownership, residents have access to two float pods, which were added to the spa after the second building was completed in 2016.

While potential buyers often haven't heard of the offering, Pamela Ross, the development's director of real estate, says the amenity is an attention getter: "I'm always like, 'No, it's not a spaceship,'" she says.