

TRAVEL

# Good Vibrations

With a trip to the Integratron, writer **Brittany Shoot** journeys inside one man's unusual dream—to reverse aging, commune with other worlds, and travel through time.

**GENERALLY SPEAKING,** I live with managed expectations. I wouldn't call them *low*. It's just that giving things the benefit of the doubt tends to improve my interactions in the world. So when I booked a "sound bath" at the Integratron—a 38-foot-high wooden dome built atop an energy vortex in California—I did so without any preconceived ideas. The website says that the dome was designed to be "an electrostatic generator for the purpose of rejuvenation and time travel," but, heck, I was ready to be satisfied with a relaxing, meditative afternoon.

Located two and a half hours east of Los Angeles and about an hour south of Joshua Tree National Park, the Integratron was conceived and created by George Van Tassel, a frustrated aerospace engineer who quit his job and moved to the Mojave Desert in

1947. A pioneering ufologist who founded the influential Giant Rock Spacecraft Convention, Van Tassel claimed he was contacted by extraterrestrials—and even spent time with a visitor from Venus, who gave him a ride on a flying saucer. From those encounters, he said, he received the original designs for the Integratron—a structure he believed would harness the energy vibrations of Giant Rock, a sacred seven-story boulder nearby. The building would be a kind of machine, restoring and recharging cells in the human body and even facilitating time travel. His final blueprints were based on telepathic extraterrestrial communications, the work of inventor Nikola Tesla, and the design of Moses's Tabernacle from the Bible.

As I speed down the final stretch of

dusty two-lane blacktop, a gleaming, bone-white dome rises up from behind a cluster of sagebrush and cacti. The Integratron, a striking, luminous rotunda, was constructed without any metal components, the upper dome made of polished Douglas fir, joined by a 1.5-ton ring of concrete to form a skylight. Maybe most important is the location, a high-frequency "electrostatic zone" that Van Tassel believed would transform his structure into an antigravity, reverse-aging time machine.

I park with only a minute to spare. With city-girl determination, I speed-walk toward the Integratron, passing a small sculpture garden. A chalkboard on a chain-link fence commands me to slow down: "STOP: Sound Bath In Progress."

Technically, you could say the Integratron itself is still in progress, although it will likely never be completed. Van Tassel worked on his passion project off and on for nearly 20 years as offerings from supporters poured in—reportedly around \$150,000 by the time of his death. But when he passed away in 1978, the dome was still only about 90 percent complete. Despite his original design, it doesn't move or spin in any way. Visitors often ask Joanne Karl, a former nurse and one of the three sisters who own it today, if she'll turn it on. She cannot.

On the building's ground level, which doesn't get a lot of sunlight and



remains quite chilly, we all remove our shoes. One by one, we climb the wooden ladder to the brightly lit upper chamber where the sound baths take place. Like the last woman to arrive for yoga class, I sheepishly grab a blanket and pillow and find a mat on the outer edge of the room. (Later, cold and shifting uncomfortably, I regret not taking two of each.) If I were one of the Integratron's veterans, I'd have arrived early enough to claim one of 12 padded mats that form the innermost ring in the room. As I lie down, Drayton, who will be our bowl player this afternoon, gently suggests I turn so my head will be toward the center of the room. Of course.

*Plong!* One deep note pulsates through the air as Drayton swings his suede-covered wooden mallet into one of 15 massive white quartz crystal singing bowls. "This is a heart bowl, which some of you can already tell," he explains with an amused lilt in his soothing voice. As the sound reverberates, bouncing off the sloping wooden walls, he runs through announcements like a seasoned flight attendant: during this 24-minute set, our souls will leave our carbon bodies, he says, but "we aren't allowed to remember where we've been once we get back." Also, house rules: No phones and no snoring. If the wizened, khaki-clad man to my left snorts, I have permission to nudge him awake.

I feel like grabbing the floor as the room vibrates with resonant energy.

I'm not unpleasantly unmoored, but I'm not exactly sure what's supposed to be happening. Am I doing this right? The bowls cascade sound that sweeps around the room like waves crashing on a beach. I glance over at more experienced sound bathers who have already fallen asleep—I'm still rearranging myself under my blankets, trying to warm my cold feet and relax my back, stiff from the drive. Then Drayton strikes a different set of bowls and the tones make my throat and ribs seem to quiver inside my skin, a strange sort of soothing I've never experienced. I stare at the wooden beams above me, contemplating their relative age to my own, wondering if I'm the only person still present in my carbon body.

I'm still cold and self-consciously fidgeting when Drayton concludes his set and plays a CD to finish the hour. "I forgot to tell everyone this is kindergarten nap time for adults," he murmurs as I get up, the first to slowly rise and begin rolling up my mat. Eventually, others stir and start milling about. A few of us, perhaps less reverent than we should be, experiment with the structure's strange acoustics. Standing in the center of the room, my voice is amplified—but only in that exact space; no one else can hear what sounds like shouting to me. Outside in the blinding desert sunshine, several people have climbed into hammocks to doze off again.

Although the Integratron was

rented to private groups or occasionally opened as a recording space to musicians, it remained closed to the public in the years following Van Tassel's death. That changed when it was purchased 14 years ago by Joanne and her two sisters, devotees who had been visiting since 1985. A few months after they took over the site, the late Huell Howser, a beloved Golden State television host, featured the Integratron on an episode of his show, *California's Gold*.

"There were a hundred people at the gate the next morning," says Joanne. Unwilling to turn away pilgrims who drive hours to visit the chamber, she'll squeeze up to 45 people into a public sound bath—although that's her limit, since with more bodies, the vibrations won't resonate so greatly.

As I mosey around, admiring the art, Joanne comments on how refreshed I seem. I nod, silently agreeing that I feel rejuvenated. Maybe I haven't traveled through time or felt my soul depart my body, but I *have* been transported—to this monument from another era, inside one man's far-reaching vision of the possible, and the community of believers who've followed him.

"This is the only place I've ever been able to meditate," Joanne is telling me earnestly, and I nod again, thinking of my personal sacred places. We should all be so fortunate to find one to call our own. —S@H

