

ForbesLife

DECEMBER 2009

A SPECIAL ISSUE

HANDMADE
LUXURY



Up to his knees: David Luster stands in a beige travertine Ravenna model tub, his best seller. He made it to order for a home spa in a Manhattan loft. Below: Luster out in the field prospecting for stone.



One Man's Quarry

David Luster will go anywhere to find exquisite stone for his limited-edition tubs. • By Taylor Antrim

David Luster can't keep his hands off his bathtubs. We're standing in Advent Design International's New Jersey warehouse, and Luster has just uncrated a beauty: an enormous beige travertine tub, four by six feet, 1,400 pounds of exotically striated and smoothly honed stone.

Bong! "Listen to it," says Luster, the company's founder, thumping the inside of the bath with his fist, producing a bell-like, resonant sound. He smacks it twice more—*bong, bong!*—then runs the flat of his hand along its curved surface. Advent Design makes tubs to order out of travertine, marble, limestone, onyx, and basalt, one at a time, at a rate of about 25 a year, each carved by hand from a single quarried block. This bath originated as an 11-ton boulder cut out of a cliff in Carrara, Italy; one of Luster's Italian craftsmen spent nearly 300 hours chiseling it into an elliptical shape and honing its surface smooth. Called the Ravenna, it's one of Luster's more popular models and will be delivered to a princely home, still under construction, on Tortola.





Luster sourced this red travertine boulder (top) from a desert in central Turkey. Each bath is honed to a highly tactile finish (above). An Advent tub requires careful handling (right) and installation—not included in the purchase price.

As amphitheater-scale “home spas” have replaced functional master baths in the world’s finest homes, a wide range of exotically shaped and oversize tubs have appeared on the market. For discriminating bathers, carved stone, rather than the traditional molded acrylic, sets the standard. “The Italians began all this with marble tubs in organic shapes, but the idea is being perfected here in this country,” says New York interior designer Geoffrey Bradfield. “Bathtub design is a highly creative field now. The options and varieties open to us are extraordinary.” For designer Glenn Gissler, who commissioned an Advent Design tub for a grand weekend house in New York’s Westchester County, Luster’s tubs offer “a level of elegance and luxury that isn’t so common. They’re so minimal and gorgeous. There are companies making big soaking tubs and Jacuzzi spas, but this is for a client who wants something above and beyond. It’s more like sculpture.”

Founded six years ago, Advent Design is too small a company and serves too narrow a niche to maintain a showroom. So if clients want to lay eyes on one of Luster’s pieces, they have to come to this no-frills warehouse. “The last person who sat in this bath was a woman who flew out from Wisconsin,” says Luster. “We picked her up at the airport and drove her here. She’s tall, thin, 45 years old. She climbed into the bath and just said, ‘Wow. I want one.’” No wonder: To see such a prodigious scoop of stone is to want to test its gentle curve against your own back. *Bong!* Luster smacks the tub again. “Take off your shoes,” he tells me. “Get in.”

The price for an Advent Design tub starts at \$22,500 and goes up from there, depending

on the size of the bath and a client’s choice of stone. When I visited the warehouse, Luster’s craftsmen were carving a block of white Calacatta Oro marble to produce a \$36,000 tub. His latest model, the high-tech Imperia (see “The Bathtub Reconceived,” opposite), will start at \$35,000.

Advent Design’s lightest tubs come in at 1,100 pounds, and they plump up to more than two tons. “It’s not a big deal,” Luster says of the weight. “This is what I tell people on the phone: You put ten people in a corner at a party and each of them weighs 150 pounds, the floor is not going to collapse.” And in fact, Luster has a spotless record when it comes to baths falling through floors. Still, tub weight is a factor: Luster once lost a sale to a Parisian client who lived in a historic building and couldn’t get the necessary permits to reinforce the apartment’s structural integrity.

Luster’s 30 years of experience in the field (prior to founding Advent Design, he worked in his family’s stone and ceramic tile business) means a client has an impressive range of options when it comes to materials—from the pinkish red of Rosa Portogallo Italian marble to the sea blue of Azul Cielo, from Argentina. Luster has climbed Andean mountains to find good stone; he’s slept in his dress suit in unheated rooms in Mongolia and been menaced by AK-47-toting security teams in Turkey. High-quality onyx, Luster knows, can be found near Karachi, Pakistan, but that may be a destination too far. “I don’t know if my wife will let me go,” he says. Advent does, however, use Pakistani stone provided by an intermediary.

Stone is a wonderfully tactile substance, and it radiates hot water’s heat against the skin—but it is

“This is for a client who wants something above and beyond. It’s more like sculpture.”





standards among his carvers, ensuring, for instance, that the undersides of his baths are perfectly flat and their bases graded for flawless draining. The Ravenna model has a 28-degree slope, precisely chosen to accommodate the human form. (Shoes off, lounging comfortably in the Ravenna, I can vouch for this specific detail.)

"It took two years to design this piece," Luster says of the Ravenna. "I went through five baths to get it right. At 250 to 300 hours of labor, that's an enormous amount of human sacrifice."

But Luster thrives on challenge, and he takes particular pleasure in the custom request. Recently, for example, a South Carolina client asked him for a big bath: "My wife is petite—but our combined weight is 460 pounds," he told me. Luster made him a modified Ravenna, raised two inches on either side. "And he loves his bath." Then there

was a demanding Wall Street client who requested a massive circular bath of caramel-yellow travertine for his new Hudson River home. The tub is 75 inches in diameter, big enough to hold three adults. Luster partially uncrates it for me in the warehouse—and gives it a thump, producing a deeper sound: *Bong!*

"He came out here in a private car with his driver, and I held my breath when I showed it to him," says Luster, who noted that the client still owed him 50 percent of the total. "He took one look. 'Magnificent,' he said. 'I love it.'" ■

Advent Design International, 201-444-0426, www.adventstone.com

The Ravenna (above) is sloped to accommodate the human form. This example originated as a five-ton block of beige travertine and costs \$22,500.

aesthetically unpredictable. No one can say with certainty what the inside of a block will look like; hence no two stone baths are alike. One client recently asked for a "pure white" marble tub. "Impossible," said Luster. To prove it, he traveled with the client to various Italian stone yards with which he works to meet dealers and carvers. (Luster speaks Italian fluently.) In the end, the client chose a block of white Thassos marble from Greece because there was minimal probability of color variation and striation. (The bath ended up costing \$38,000.)

While no two baths look exactly the same, each piece is consistent in design. Luster has established

THE BATHTUB RECONCEIVED

"I wanted a departure from the traditional look of a stone bath," says David Luster. And so he traveled to Italy to brainstorm with Advent Design's team of craftsmen. "We sat in a small apartment, myself and three men around an empty table with espresso coffees, scribbling designs on pieces of paper," he recounts. "It took four months." The result, called the Imperia bath (right), is an 80-inch length of stone carved into an undulating ribbon shape, sandwiched between two slabs of four-inch glass. It has discreet drains in each well, and the design allows water to spill over the curve at the foot into a draining basin of stones. The bath lights up, fills, and empties at the touch of a button. The Imperia exists in design only; they will all be built to order. Prices start at \$35,000.

