

Steam Heat

Jenny Lee

The Healthy Life

November 13, 2000

Opulent sweating is the name of the game in Vancouver's Turkish bath

When Surinder Bains Kassour's Turkish bath opens in Vancouver this week, it will offer an exotic alternative to B.C.'s largely European-styled beauty spas.

A Turkish bath, or hammam, is a Middle Eastern steam bath from a tradition dating back to 600 AD when the Islamic prophet Mohammed endorsed it as an enhancer of fertility.

Bains Kassours' south Granville Street version doesn't promise increased fertility, but offers a luxurious combination of steam, "gommage" where your body is lathered with Moroccan black soap, loofaed, scrubbed, and finally, massaged.

Conventional spas "do a lot of manicures and pedicures; all wonderful things in life, but I wanted to create a sense of an architectural feast for the eye, almost like a 1001 Nights," says Bains Kassour, a former North Vancouver travel agency owner.

Architecturally, Bains Kassour's hammam, Miraj, evokes the Middle East with 1,900 square feet of marble slab, vaulted 20-foot ceilings, and hand-crafted stone mosaics. The space is divided into a 400 square-foot steam bath, three massage rooms and a lounge area.

"All I've done is taken this wonderful ancient idea and brought it into the modern world."

She concedes that some middle eastern people may wonder what she is trying to prove. After all, traditional hammams are often huge affairs accommodating 50 or 60 bathers at once, while Bains Kassour can handle only 20 people a day.

Traditional hammams, often built as annexes to mosques, are social meeting places where visitors can also comply with Islamic hygiene and purification laws, says San Francisco photojournalist and writer Middle Aaland who spent three years travelling the world, photographing and researching steambaths.

Aaland is now working to update his out-of-print book *Sweat*, published in 1978 by Capra Press.

Bains Kassour claims she did no market research -- "I didn't need to. I just know that this is going to work" -- and that the bank lent her funds based on her past performance as a travel agency owner with a stack of lucrative corporate accounts.

Bains Kassour sold her travel agency five years ago and set aside funds for the hammam.

"Anyone who reads this will say 'Is she a fool or what? I mortgaged my house and have invested more than half a million dollars. This is a passion. I'm following a dream. There is nothing calculated in it."

Nevertheless, Bains Kassour reasons that spas are a hot commodity with baby boomers clamouring to indulge and pamper their newly aging bodies.

"It doesn't matter what spa you telephone, you can't get in on the day you want. You can spend up to \$300 or \$400 on an afternoon package. A massage costs anywhere from \$80 to \$100.

Aaland agrees.

"There is a huge resurgence of interest in the hammam in the last couple of years. People are totally stressed out and very much looking for ways to relax," says Aaland, who maintains comprehensive Web pages (www.cyberbohemia.com/Pages/Islahammam.htm) on steambathing around the world.

In North America, Turkish baths have quietly existed in major U.S. cities since the turn of the century. Communal bathing flourished in the 1960s, nosedived in the AIDs-conscious but misinformed 1980s and is now experiencing a renaissance, Aaland says.

Where traditional hammams usually offer a relaxed beauty massage, Bains Kassour expects her North American clientele will want a "performance" massage, so her staff will provide various combinations of aromatherapy, shiatsu, reflexology and Swedish massage. Targeting primarily women, Bains Kassour is initially allocating one day a week to male clients.

Hammams usually offer more mellow, humid heat than saunas. You sit on marble or tile versus wood, but the ultimate effect -- sweating -- is the same, Aaland says.

Similarly, while the traditional Turkish bath is a communal bath involving ritual, atmosphere and specific architecture, the body treatments themselves are not uncommon, says Erin Reffern, executive spa director for the Absolute Spa Group which owns Spa at the Century and the new Spa at the Fairmont Hotel.

Vancouver spa services are becoming increasingly international, Redfern says. The Spa at the Fairmont will be offering a Javanese spa ritual as well as Swiss aromatherapy, Redfern says.

Nathan Zadworny, attendant at the Sheraton Wall Centre Hotel's Garden Health Club and Spa, is not familiar with hammams, but says steam rooms, body exfoliation and massage are readily available in Vancouver for about \$150 for two hours.

Bains Kassour, sister to Vancouver commercial realtor Avtar Bains, was first introduced to hammams while living in Paris in 1986.

"My breath was absolutely taken away. You walk into a huge steam bath with high vaulted ceilings based on architecture from 1,000 years ago in Constantinople.

"I ended up becoming an addict. Cleanliness and purity is a pretty good mission.

"It's a physical and spiritual cleansing. When I walk out, my body is light, my spirit is free and I feel like a million dollars."

Bains Kassour, 46, doesn't own a cellular phone, fax, car or microwave.

"I didn't want the sound of those machines in my house. They just irritate me." She walks to the market for fresh food daily.

"I'm just one of those people and I like to walk and I like to meditate."

Miraj (733-5151) is located at Granville and 6th in Vancouver and opens Nov. 17. A two-hour treatment costs \$169.99.

Steambathing facts

Are there health benefits to steambathing or is it merely a very pleasant, relaxing pastime?

Health benefit claims attributed to steambathing include increasing the metabolic rate and burning body fat, cleansing the pores, and detoxifying the body.

Sadly, few if any health claims are borne out by medical science.

- Unlike dogs, humans don't burn up more calories when they sweat, says Craig Horswill, an exercise physiologist with the Gatorade Sport Science Institute in Illinois.

Although your heart rate may increase, the increase in metabolic rate is very minimal, and won't promote cardiovascular fitness or reduce cholesterol, he says. "Don't consider this exercise. It's dehydration."

"You don't dehydrate fat. Sweat is mostly water and fat doesn't mix very well with water."

- A steambath will not warm up" your body for upcoming sports activity, Horswill says. The process of warming up prior to exercise needs to occur internally through heat generated by the muscle, not externally via lounging in a steambath. The steambath is an effective warm up only if you stretch and do calisthenics while there.

- Toxins can't be 'sweated out," Horswill says. Sweat, which comes from the bloodstream and extracellular space, or the space that surrounds our cells, contains water, some sodium, potassium and chloride and not much else.

Horswill and Bert Cameron, head of nephrology at the University of B.C., both say steambathing will not detoxify your body, although theoretically it is possible that certain toxins may be sweated out in insignificant amounts.

- Steambathing will open your pores and rid you of certain impurities such as salts, but won't necessarily unclog pores, says Vancouver dermatologist Jason Rivers, an associate professor at the University of B.C.

- Steambathing is generally safe for most people although it is important to replenish water, potassium and sodium loss, Cameron says. Pregnant women and people with blood pressure and vascular problems should consult their physicians before steambathing.