

How sweat it is
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Canada's first authentic Middle Eastern hammam is relaxing minds and bodies in Vancouver

Surinder Bains-Kassour is simply obsessed with *hammams*.

In fact she loves the Middle Eastern steam bath so much, that she recently created one in her hometown of Vancouver. Entering her *hammam* and shutting the door behind you, evokes a sense of the Middle East. Your eyes are drawn to the marble slabs along the floor, vaulted ceilings, arched windows and hand-crafted stone mosaics.

After a brief shower, you are led into a large room to bathe in hot air. Steam fills the room as you lie helpless and sweating on slabs of Jerusalem gold marble. An aesthetician then lathers and massages your body with a black Moroccan soap, leaving your skin feeling soft and supple.

After receiving another head-to-toe massage with natural oils, you enter a lounge painted in red. And as your body drops on the soft cushions, you are served warm mint tea and a sweetcake.

Unlike a sauna, which is a drier sweat bath, "a *hammam* offers a more mellow, humid heat that relaxes the body and mind," according to Bains-Kassour.

Bains-Kassour was turned onto the *hammam*, also known as the Turkish bath, in the 1980s when she took off from her Vancouver travel agency for a six-month vacation in Europe. She was first introduced to it in Paris by her future husband, Madjid. When she returned to Vancouver, it was all she could think about.

"I made a decision then and there that I was going to build one eventually. I didn't know in what country or where I'd get the money from." Bains-Kassour said. Finally, in 1995, she sold her North Vancouver travel agency and set aside the funds for the *hammam*.

"I partially did it for purely selfish reasons because every time I came back to Vancouver, there was nowhere to go," she said.

With the opening of Miraj last week on Granville Street, Bains-Kassour is seeing her dream come true. It's the first *hammam* in Canada. "It will take a certain kind of person that will pamper themselves to enjoy it," she said, while sipping on a warm mint tea at her apartment a few steps away from the *hammam*.

The Turkish bath is an alternative to largely European-styled beauty spas. It's a tradition that dates back to the Roman Empire with hundreds of people bathing together in the *hammam*. In 600 AD, the Islamic prophet Mohammed endorsed it as an enhancer of fertility. *Hamмам* in Arabic means "spreader of warmth."

Through the years, hot-air bathing gained religious significance for the Arabs, becoming an annex to the mosque, said Mikkel Aaland, a San Francisco author and photographer on *hammams*.

"Once the delight of the warm water sunk in, the cold water bath or shower after sweating no longer appealed to the Arabs. The *hammam* developed into a quiet retreat -- an atmosphere of half-light, quiescence and seclusion," he wrote on his Web site www.cyberbohemia.com.

Aand like the Roman baths, the *hammam* became a place to socialize, he added.

"You can't really compare it to a shower ... to them a bath was a mind and body experience. It was about relaxing and it was about camaraderie," said Aaland in an interview. He is currently updating his out-of-print book titled *Sweat*, which was published in 1978 by Capra Press.

The traditional *hammams* are often hugh affairs accommodating about 60 bathers at one time, while Bains-Kassour's can handle under 20 at one time. "I'm not looking for quantity. I'm looking for quality," she said matter-of-factly.

In the United States, *hammams* exist in major U.S. cities, like New York and Chicago. At Vancouver's Miraj, Bains-Kassour will be inviting men once a week for the *hammam* treatment. The full treatment for half an hour costs \$119.99 and for two hours it costs \$169.99.

"She's tapping into an ancient source of health and well being," he said. "And when people go once, they will go again. You get hooked. It becomes a way of life," Aaland says.