

The steamy pleasures of the Mideast

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Vancouver's Miraj is Canada's first Islamic steam bath. Moroccan soap, Arabic tea, plump pillows await

I am lying flat down on a slab of Jerusalem gold-streaked marble, a light mist surrounding me, in a giant Middle Eastern steam room with soaring archways and columns. I am alone, save for Fereshta, a young woman from Afghanistan, who is giving me a full-body gommage.

Using black Moroccan soap with the consistency of viscous honey, she massages my entire body, then leaves me to steam for about 10 minutes. When she returns, she scrubs me all over with a loofah, exfoliating dead skin. It feels heavenly. Finally, she holds a gold showerhead over me and lukewarm water rains down until I am clean and soft as a baby.

I am in Miraj, Canada first hammam (Islamic steam bath), which opened in Vancouver in mid-November.

Known for centuries as the silent doctors, hammams are found throughout the Middle East, most often as an annex to a mosque: In separate areas, men and women bathe and cleanse themselves physically and spiritually in accordance with Islamic hygiene and purification laws.

Hammams became popular around 600, after the prophet Mohammed extolled their recreational religious benefits. At first, women were forbidden entry but later those who had been ill or had just given birth were allowed. Today, hammams are an important part of Middle Eastern social life.

Miraj (which means paradise) is the dream of Surinder Bains Kassour.

The Victoria-born daughter of Indian parents went to her first hammam -- attached to a mosque in the heart of Paris -- with her Franco-Algerian husband Madjid. "I was blown away. The architecture, the way the tea was served, the energy. I felt at home. I knew exactly what to do, and I wasn't embarrassed by the 80 nude women walking around, doing self-cleansing. And when I came out I was floating. I knew then that I must build one."

She returned to Vancouver, sold her travel agency and has spent the past five years preparing for Miraj.

This included visiting hammams throughout the Middle East, though none would reveal their trade secrets. She also consulted Mikkel Aaland, the San Francisco-based author of *Sweat*, who spent three years studying bathing customs in Russia, Finland, Mexico, Turkey and Greece.

They believe Miraj may be the only hammam in North America.

The years of preparation have paid off. Entering Miraj is a little like being in the Taj Mahal. In the foyer are gold tables from the souks (Middle East bazaars) of Paris, Indian antiques and polished Venetian plaster. There is a handcrafted mosaic fountain and grill work over the windows to block the noise from Granville Street.

Trickling water and Arabic music on the stereo are the only sounds that break the silence within what Kassour calls "the inner sanctum."

But it's not just the architecture and the ambience that distinguish Miraj from the many European-style spas in Vancouver. It's the treatments, the staff, the lounge, the tea and sweets.

During my gommage, Fereshta describes the difference between Miraj and the hammam she went to as a child. "Size," she says with a laugh. "In Afghanistan, the hammams are huge and full of women and children." And, in addition to steam rooms, there are hot-and-cold-water baths.

In many Mideast hammams, the baths are fed by natural mineral water -- obviously not an option in mid-town Vancouver.

Miraj accommodates just 20 women a day, or three bookings per hour, according to the degree of privacy Kassour believes North American women want.

Thursday is the only day men are allowed. "They really like the intense steam room," Kassour says. And, no doubt, the massages. Offered in separate rooms, the massages (not gommages but Western-style massages) are performed by the city's most skilled practitioners. Facials and body polishing are also available, but the real treat is the gommage.

After the treatments, the staff serves Arabic mint tea and Lebanese sweet cakes in the Sultana lounge, a plush area with two giant beds covered in velvet, with plump pillows and gently swooping drapes. There are archways, columns and another fountain, this one a replica of a fountain built a millennium ago.

"I want people to feel at home," Kassour says. "Today, I had three women in the lounge who didn't want to leave."