

## **Miraj Hammam Spa**

### **Startlingly sensual pleasures at Canada's only ancient hammam**

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As I succumb to the heat of my steamy environment, the Jerusalem gold marble is refreshingly cool against my skin. My body is bathed in sweat, and is completely enveloped by voluptuous clouds of eucalyptus-scented mist that waft over the ornamental tilework, up the magnificently arched columns, and towards the domed ceiling where daylight barely filters through small glass roundels. It is a moist and gentle warmth that invites my body to languish over the smooth marble surfaces. The feeling is startlingly sensual.

Within a few minutes, Jasmine, an Arab-Afghani, ushers me to the gommage (body scrub) area. She slathers my body in syrupy, black Moroccan soap, loofahs me from head to toe, and then rinses off the suds to leave my skin feeling soft and supple. As the cooling water patters down my cheeks, she whispers an Islamic blessing of thanks that acknowledges the cleansing ritual of the hammam, a spa experience like no other. But then Vancouver's Miraj, Canada's only Islamic steam bath, is no ordinary spa.

Entering Miraj, which means paradise, is like stepping into something from the Arabian Nights, and, save for the magic carpets, exudes an exotic authenticity. Designed with arched windows, vaulted 20-foot ceilings, handcrafted stone mosaics, and ornamental grill work, Miraj embraces an eclectic array of furnishings: decorative leather poofs from Tunisia, Islamic-styled wooden benches, gold threaded silk cushions, Moroccan light fixtures, brass door handles from Spain, gold tables from the souks (middle east bazaars) of Paris, Indian antiques, polished Venetian plaster, handcrafted mosaic fountains, and Arabic music. Everything evokes a sense of the Middle East.

"Experience was my only research," says Miraj owner Surinder Bains-Kassour, a vivacious woman whose penetrating brown eyes sparkle with the knowledge that she is living both her vision and her passion. "When my then future husband, Madjid, introduced me to the hammam concept in Paris 15 years ago, I was blown away by the experience and knew that one day, I would open my own, although I had no idea where, or how it would be financed."

The opportunity came in 1995 when Surinder sold her travel agency and, after touring the hammams of Europe and beyond, her imagination soared as to what was possible.

Located just outside of Vancouver's downtown core, Miraj is much smaller and more luxurious than the traditional hammams of North Africa or the Middle East. There, it is not unusual to share a steam with 80 other people. Miraj, on the other hand, can handle less than 20 guests a day, making it a much more private experience.

"I wanted quality and authenticity above all else," explains Surinder. Consequently, within its 1,900 square feet lie a welcoming reception, a changing-room, and the essence of Miraj, a small, elegant inner sanctum of steam. There are three massage rooms where you can also enjoy an excellent body massage with natural Hather oils, and a richly textured resting area, the Sultana Lounge. Here, after treatments, you can fall into plush satin cushions, snuggle beneath blankets, and drift into dreams over Moroccan mint tea and a Lebanese sweet cake. All that is missing are those magic carpets. It is a reflective space that easily transports you to another dimension, perhaps even back in time when hammams were very much a part of everyday life.

An evolution of the Greek baths and Roman balnea, hammams, which in Arabic means 'spreader of warmth', really came into their own when, in 600 AD, the Islamic prophet Mohammed endorsed them as an enhancer of fertility. Hammams became known as 'the silent doctors' for their curative effects of ailments, such as arthritis and congestion. Even today, many Arabs consider them essential to maintaining good health.

"Through the years, hot-air bathing gained religious significance for the Arabs," says Mikkel Aaland, a San Francisco author and photographer of hammams. "Steam baths became an annex to the mosque and were a quiet retreat - an atmosphere of half-light, quiescence and seclusion." Mikkel maintains a Web site on hammams at: [cyberbohemia.com](http://cyberbohemia.com), and is currently updating his book *Sweat*, which was first published in 1978 by Capra Press.

"When Mohammed first advocated the use of the hammam for religious and recreational purposes, women were forbidden," Mikkel continues. "But as hygienic benefits became apparent, 'The Word' was reinterpreted and women were permitted after an illness, or after they had given birth. Eventually, Arab men begrudgingly opened the pleasures of the hammam to women who, before then, had virtually no other opportunity to socialize with anyone outside the home. It wasn't long before the 'privilege' became a 'right'."

Indeed, the hammam was so integral to the life of Moslem women that if a husband were to deny his wife her visit to the hammam, she had grounds for divorce. In a place where no physical flaws or social foibles could escape notice, mothers often used the hammam to inspect prospective brides for their son. And it was perfectly acceptable for her to kiss a possible daughter-in-law to learn whether or not she had bad breath.

Thankfully, Miraj offers no such encounters. Rather, it provides an ancient source of health and well-being in a modern context.

"Miraj is as much about finding a space for oneself - one's own communion of mind, body and spirit - as it is about socializing with friends," says Surinder, "and because Miraj is small, we're able to book the hammam to accommodate both needs." That includes an increasingly popular men-only day.

"When people go once, they can't help but go again because the experience is so all-emcompassing," says Mikkel. "It appeals to the physical, social and spiritual side of our nature. You get hooked and it becomes a way of life."

I should know. Miraj has become my oasis, my Aladdin's Cave for the soul where, after every steam clean and polish, massage and mystical make-over, anything seems possible. Save, perhaps, for the flying carpets.

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