

It's about relaxation, cleansing massage...and being naked

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Steamy Pleasure

One of the joys of the spa is having a beautifully tiled steamroom all to yourself

It's best to leave modesty--and your clothes--at the door when entering the steamy wonders of Vancouver's Miraj Hammam Spa if you truly want to get the full experience of the Turkish-inspired bath.

Bathing suits are permitted, but really *why* would you indulge in a steam bath and full-body scrub if parts of your body are covered up?

One of the greatest joys of the luxurious spa is having a beautifully tiled steam room all to yourself (unless you go with a partner or friend) and allowing the thick warm steam to roll over every inch of your skin as you lie in the absolute silence of the grand room and let a heavy fog weigh down your eyelids.

Miraj is not about esthetics. There are no manicures or facial peels here. It's all about relaxation, cleansing, massage...and being naked.

I realize there are those who adamantly refuse to be naked in front of strangers (or even non-strangers), but the atmosphere at Miraj is so non-threatening I suggest even the most prudish types give it a chance.

The naked portion of the experience is not abrupt or shocking, but is eased into gradually.

The first articles of clothing to go are the shoes and socks, which I was asked to leave tucked under a bench in the reception area. I was given a pair of plastic sandals and guided--fully clothed--into a change room with dark wooden lockers and showers complete with curtains.

A soft-spoken young woman named Candice instructed me to de-robe and handed me a large sarong I could wrap around myself after a quick rinse in the shower. As extra back-up, a white waffle cotton robe was hung for me just outside the entrance to the steam room.

After the shower, I was led--still wrapped in the sarong--into the high-intensity steam chamber within the main steam room and guided through the fog to a wide stone bench. Candice told me it was best to lie down on the hard stone to let the eucalyptus-infused steam gradually descend onto my skin. I followed her recommendation and watched her slip through the door as thick steam filled the room and candle lanterns flickered nearby.

I lost all concept of time, but after what was probably about half an hour, Candice came in to guide me to the "gommage" or scrubbing part of the experience.

I was gently instructed to lay the sarong on the slab of Jerusalem gold marble in front of me, and lie down on my front.

In the foggy haze of the room and after 30-odd minutes of intense steam treatment, I couldn't have cared less about who was looking at my naked body.

Candice explained that she was going to use a black Moroccan soap (which smells a bit like olive oil) to cleanse my skin before exfoliating it with rough gommage gloves that she used almost everywhere from my neck to my toes.

She graciously avoided the sensitive bits that happened to be exposed when I was lying both on my front and back, and responded accordingly when I asked her to keep the scrub-down on the gentle side.

After the exfoliation, Candice gave me a quick rinse with some cool water before applying a full-body papaya toning mask. There was some quiet giggling on my part as I tried to flip on the bare marble after the sarong was removed and felt like I was going to slip straight off the edge. But Candice quickly calmed my nerves as she steadied me and applied the rest of the mask before leaving me for a while to let the warm goopy substance seep in and do its trick.

She came back to rinse me off and then guided me, reluctantly, back to the change room to put on the robe and wait for Mehraneh, who was going to give me a 15-minute massage and cleansing facial.

I was already so blissed out by this point that my critical capacities had all but disappeared. I remember the brief massage being wonderful and wanting more.

But then during the gentle facial--during which there was no pore pinching or harsh exfoliation--I drifted off into a beautiful sleep where I dreamt briefly of a small boy chasing a blue balloon across a brilliant green field. I have no idea what the dream meant, and I don't particularly care. It was lovely.

After the massage and facial--which left my skin very smooth and relaxed--I was taken to the Sultana lounge, where I slid up onto a plush red cushion, sunk into the pillows leaning against one of the grand columns, and did my best to keep my eyes open while Mehraneh brought me a delicate glass of hot tea and a small sweet cake.

Once I'd regained a bit of composure, I returned to the change room and wrapped myself in clothes that suddenly seemed terribly dull and drab after the 90 minutes I'd spent wrapped in steam, heady aromas and the papaya mask.

Under a full moon, I ventured home and promptly fell asleep on the couch.

MIRAJ HAMMAM SPA

The treatment: Hammam, gommage, papaya toning body masque, 15-minute Orientale massage and 15-minute nettoyage de peau. (Longer massages are available.)

Where: Miraj Hammam Spa, 1495 West Sixth Ave, at Granville Street. (604) 733-5151.

How much: \$160 plus tax and tip. (Treatment prices start at \$99 and all include the hammam gommage.)

Who: Both men and women are welcome at Miraj, but generally attend at different times. Couples bookings and group bookings can be accommodated. All the estheticians are women.