

Out of Irritating Rain and Into Warmth of Exotic Spa

Katie Schneider

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Waiting for a taxi in the rain on one of the busiest streets in downtown Vancouver--during rush hour--could drive any out-of-towner mad.

But it's hard to have a care in the world after all the stress is cleansed from your body, while hiding away from the bustling city and taking in a detoxifying Middle Eastern massage in the quiet oasis that is Vancouver's Miraj Hammam Spa.

Located on busy Granville St., in a city rich with diversity, Miraj became the first Hammam spa in North America when it opened eight years ago.

Visitors are offered a spa experience dating back to 600 AD, when worshippers would be cleansed before praying in mosques.

But it's more than just a spa experience, it's a cultural one, said owner Surinder Kassour, 54. Kassour is a former travel agent, who first had the idea to bring this spa to the North American marketplace while in Paris meeting her future husband, who has Franco-Algerian roots.

"I just created what I thought was a UN project in sharing the heritage and tradition of the old world", she said.

The Hammam involves relaxing on Jerusalem gold marble in a steam chamber and receiving a gentle "Gommage" exfoliation treatment with black Moroccan soap.

That's followed by a private massage and lounge on velvet beds, sipping tea and eating scrumptious sweet cakes.

"I wanted clients to experience the Middle East and North Africa without having to transfer at Heathrow--I wanted the smells and fountains to transport them to another world", Kassour said of her "East meets West" spa.

It's also an opportunity for visitors to shed their fears and learn to be comfortable in their own skin while getting away from their daily stresses.

"Life is complicated enough, you need to come here where everything is a simple formula--it's uncomplicated", she said.

"There's something magical that goes on here and makes you realize there's a safeness about being there."

"I think it's a hidden jewel in the city, where you can have a perfect retreat that stimulate all your senses."