

The Max in Relax
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Indulge at the city's snazzy new spas, from modern to Middle Eastern.

The second-best assignment I ever had was to spa away the blahs in the name of story research. The best? This follow-up investigation into the latest in local body care. Here is a foursome of sensual havens, each with a distinct touch.

Days later I was glowing from within at **Miraj**, North America's only *hammam*, Arab for "spreader of warmth" (1495 W. 6th Ave.; 604-733-5151). Visiting this exotic steam bath was like travelling to another country. In the arcade-like foyer, a stone fountain, antique-style hanging lamps and wrought-iron flourishes create a Moorish ambience without Disneyish excess.

I had missed out on the ancient steam baths during my travels in Jordan and Syria last year, but this one could be even better. "We sanitize the hammam after each visitor," explained a sarong-wearing staff member, Charlene.

Lounging alone in the hammam, a honey-colored chamber with a Middle Eastern tile motif, I could hardly see for the steam. The air was boiling, even for a heat-worshipper like me, so I cracked open the glass door before giving in to torrid pleasure.

Charlene made sure I drank plenty of water as she guided me to a counter of Jerusalem gold marble for the *gommage*, a slathering of Moroccan black soap following by an invigorating loofah scrub. She scoured every inch--buns and boobs included--so expertly that I forgot to be bashful.

I was led to another Moorish-style room for my *orientale*, a 15-minute body rub by Jennifer, a certified aromatherapist. Intoxicating oils soaked into my skin as she kneaded the last vestiges of tension out of my rapidly unwinding frame.

Afterwards I sipped Moroccan spice tea and nibbled on date cake in the deep-rose Sultana Lounge. In this harem-like room with raised sofas and walls of pillows, I listened to trickling fountains and flipped through magazines, feeling oh-so-languorous.

This was one research project I didn't want to end. My finds: the vision of luxury at Miraj--and the other spas pictured here--is no illusion.