

Steam Clean: Melting Cares the Miraj Way
Veronique Bijoux
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Spa Spy

Mission: to find a de-stressing experience

Budget: one hundred big ones

Target: Miraj Hammam Spa

First impressions can be hard to forget. That's why I almost decided against returning to the Miraj Hamam Spa after a quick reconnaissance mission.

I'm glad I didn't.

If you've never been to a hammam, it's a type of steam bath considered the "silent doctor" of the Middle East. The Miraj's brochure says the hammam "cleans your body in low mist and high intensity steam chambers, while stimulating your senses and your imagination."

For \$99 at the Miraj, one can enjoy some imagination-stimulating time in the hammam, a 15-minute soothing massage and something called grommage--a body exfoliation technique said to leave your skin baby-smooth and your mind relaxed. More luxury follows the pampering. Clients are invited to nibble sweets and drink tea while lolling about on velvet cushions in the Sultana Lounge.

It sounded blissfully indulgent. It sounded like a place I could take my mother. So I brought her along to check out the atmosphere at the Miraj, said to be North America's sole hammam.

It was like stumbling into an oasis.

Tucked discretely below a contemporary condominium complex on 6th Avenue and Granville, the spa's door opens into a narrow, elegant foyer with terracotta tiles, a gently splashing fountain, cushioned benches and ornate ironwork over the windows. The impression: serenity.

But the woman who greeted us seemed flustered. In fact, she didn't seem to want us to even step beyond the water fountain--we had shoes on, we hadn't called, the spa was full, they were so busy--it was obvious she wanted us to go. We wondered if we should give it a pass.

But the day we returned was another story.

The welcome began at the door and continued as staff led us to a dressing room where the gracious hammam esthetician introduced herself and opened locking wooden cabinets for us to stash our things. She gave us beautiful fine-cotton sarongs to wear, turned on the showers, then left to prepare the hammam.

Call me a prude but semi-public nudity--even in front of my mother--is a tough for me, so I was glad to have a generous swath of fabric to wrap myself in. After a shower, I wound the sarong tightly around my body and entered the softly lit hammam.

Wafts of warm lavender and eucalyptus steam filled my lungs. The sound of trickling water soothed my ears. Through the warm mist, candles flickered around a fountain encircling a Doric-styled column--a feature dividing the arched room as well as disguising the steam machine. Gleaming Jerusalem gold marble covered table-like structures for reclining and for grommage. It was a shimmering, scented sanctuary--the kind of place that gives you an internal 'ahhh' response.

The esthetician, also dressed in a sarong, opened a glass door to the high-intensity steam chamber and offered to spread my wrap out on the cool marble. It was hot and humid in the chamber but I demurred. Soon my mother came in and we stretched out on our backs on the cool marble slabs, sucking in deep breaths of lavender and eucalyptus, cupping the backs of our heads in our hands.

The warmth and the steam were relaxing; the sarong was wet, heavy and constricting. I stopped caring about modesty and decided to get the full benefit of steam on my skin. Maybe I blushed whenever the esthetician came in to offer water, but her manner was so calm and easy, it made nudity seem more natural.

The grommage part of the visit was where I thought my bashfulness would be truly tested. This is when one removes one's sarong--if it's still worn--and lies upon it while the esthetician washes you with black Moroccan soap. This is followed with a full-body exfoliation using special textured mittens.

By this point, however, I had the body tension of a wet noodle and didn't mind being nude so much anymore. The esthetician applied the soap like a therapist would apply massage oil, and the scrubbing--from toes to fingertips--was firm but gentle. Any my skin came out satin smooth. The pampering wasn't even finished. Next up was a luxurious massage with scented oils by a tiny woman with mighty hands.

A confession: I kicked in an extra \$25 on top of my \$100 *Canadian Healthstyle* budget so I could have the full half-hour massage. No regrets.

The spa has three massage rooms so my mother and I were able to meet up in the Sultana Lounge at the same time, afterwards. This lounge is a luscious piece of decadence--an aubergine velvet and brocade cushioned room with richly colored curtains and stacks of spa magazines. We reclined like queens in the spa's cotton robes and were served small glasses of tea with what tasted like a light version of baklava. I don't think I've ever seen my mother look so relaxed.

This is one Vancouver spa experience that shouldn't be missed.

If you go: visit the spa with a friend and you may get more than the usual 15 or 20 minutes in the steam room--the attendant can only offer grommage to one person at a time. It's a popular indulgence for wedding parties, as the spa can accommodate up to three people at once in the hammam. Miraj Hammam Spa is located at 1495 W 6th Ave., call 604-733-5151 for reservations. Underground parking is available.