

Finding yourself in hot water

The perfect cup of tea after a day at the hammam

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You haven't been to Marakech until you've experienced the Arabic spa treatment known as the hammam. An integral part of weekly life in many Middle Eastern cultures, the hammam is a public bathhouse, a progression of hot, quiet, watery rooms, wherein almost naked strangers scrub a totally naked you within an inch of your life -- a weekly ritual that keeps Moroccans looking clean and sprightly. When Muhammad first advocated the use of the hammam (he believed that the heat of the hammam, which in Arabic means "spreader of warmth," enhanced fertility), women were barred from entering. But as the hygienic benefits became apparent, the rule was relaxed and women, too, gained access. It wasn't long before the hammam privilege became a right, to the point where if a husband denied his wife her weekly visits, she had grounds for divorce.

"I treated this as a cultural gig," says Suriner Bains, owner of Vancouver's Miraj Hammam, as we chat over tea and cake in the lounge of her spa. She tells me that her first experience of a hammam was one she frequented in Paris, Hammam de la Mosquee in the Fifth Arrondissement. "It was about the size of a city block," she says. Indeed, so profound was the experience that she knew that "one day I'd build my own." That day arrived several years ago, in the form of Miraj, a steamy oasis in the heart of Vancouver, the first of its kind in Canada, offering an authentic experience in private surroundings and this very delicious sweet tea.

MIRAJ HAMMAM'S MIDDLE EASTERN TEA

- 2 bags Chai Spice tea
- 2 bags peppermint tea (or a few big sprigs fresh from your garden if you've got them)
- 8 tsp raw Indian cane sugar
- 5 cups boiled hot water

1. Place the sugar and half the water in a Thermos. Close the lid and shake like crazy. 2. Add remaining hot water and tea bags. Gently stir. Close the lid and let sit for 10 minutes. Serve with any Arab, Indian or Greek sweet cake.