

The Miraj
Vancouver Spa Transports Guests to Seventh Heaven
Tracy Tjaden
Unwind
Winter 2001

Stretched out on a slab of Jerusalem gold marble in what looks like a mini Taj Mahal engulfed in clouds of steam, I am utterly relaxed. After being lathered from head to foot with silky Moroccan black soap, I await the return of an aesthetician to softly scrub away my dead skin.

This is no ordinary spa experience.

Canada's only Islamic steam bath--known as a *hammam*, or spreader of warmth--Miraj opened its doors a year ago in Vancouver's trendy south Granville district and is attracting clients from across the country. Miraj's owner, Surinder Bains Kassour, says 40 percent of her customers are from Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, usually in Vancouver on business. "I love to watch how they come in here after work and walk out like they're floating."

Miraj evokes a calm, relaxed feeling with soft Middle Eastern music, bubbling water fountains, handcrafted mosaic tiles and one-on-one attention.

After a quick shower, visitors slip on a sarong and enter the 400-sq-ft hammam, with its vaulted ceilings, marble benches and wafting steam. After about 10 minutes in the high-intensity steam chamber, it's off to the low-medium mist chamber, where the specially imported soap is applied, followed by the *gommage*, or loofah treatment, and then a rinse. Finally, there is the scalp-to-toe massage in one of the three massage rooms.

Visitors are then guided into the Sultana Lounge, where they are served Arab mint tea and sweet cakes on velvet beds covered with silk cushions.

After visiting her first hammam in Paris in 1987, Bains Kassour, 47, vowed to build one in her home province. "I had a vision and I knew I had to do it," says Bains Kassour, who made the dream a reality by selling her Vancouver travel agency in 1995 to get the start-up funds.

Hammams were popularized in A.D. 600 by the Islamic prophet Mohammed. Traditionally, the steam bath was connected to the community's mosque and used to cleanse and purify the body in preparation for prayer. Typically, the hammam could accommodate more than 50 people at one time. Miraj keeps it down to about three per hour, with Thursday evenings and Sunday afternoons set aside for men. The full hammam, gommage and "orientale" (a 15-minute scalp-to-toe massage) treatment costs \$90.