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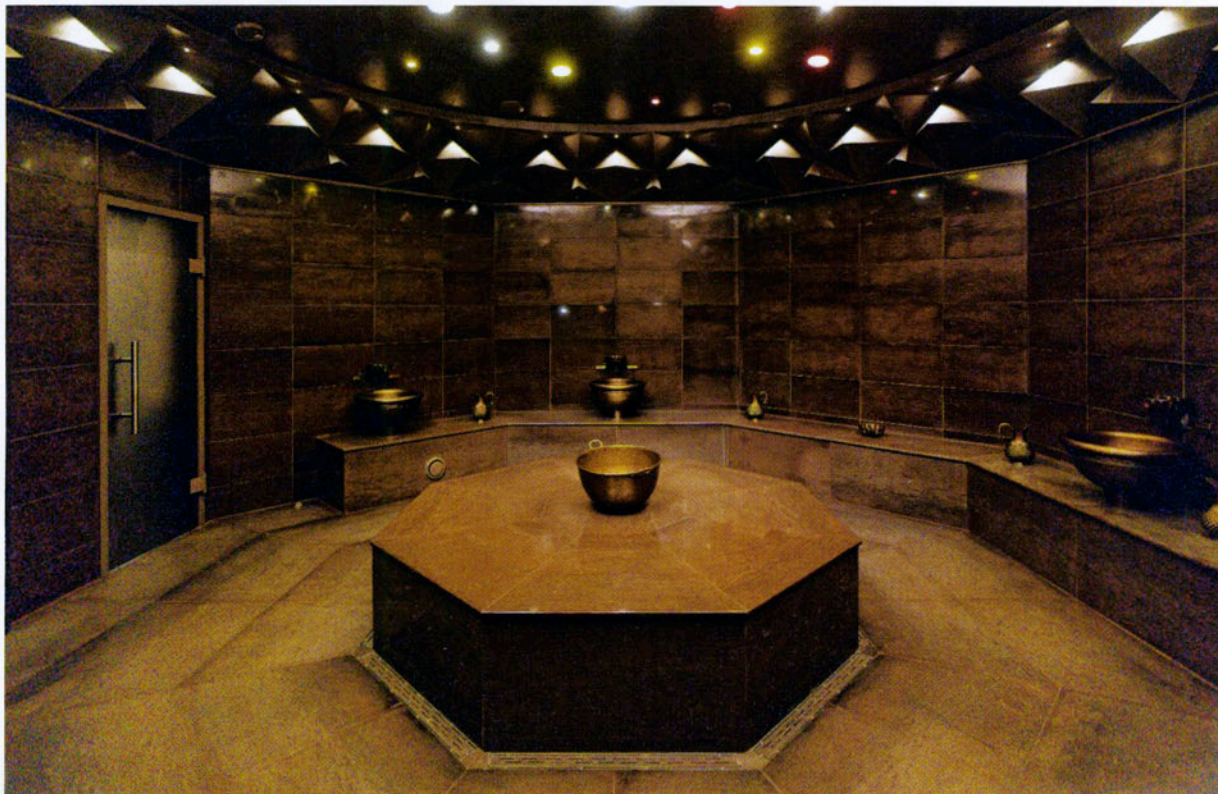


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## Full Steam Ahead

*Istanbul's elite hotels are putting a glamorous twist on the age-old tradition of taking a Turkish bath.*

BY JENNIFER RYAN

ABOUT 30 MINUTES into our drive from the Istanbul Edition—an Ian Schrager-conceived hotel that opened last year in the city's modern neighborhood of Levent—we crossed the Golden Horn inlet off the great Bosphorus strait. Pulling into the Old City, my driver gestured toward the pointed spires and enormous domes of the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque, recognizable landmarks even to a first-time visitor to Turkey. But my driver, an Istanbul native, still had no idea where we were going.

I had supplied him with the name and address of our destination back at the hotel; and yet, with each pedestrian we passed on the street, he rolled down his window to shout the name of the 271-year-old Turkish bath.

“Cağaloğlu Hamami?!”

The strangers shook their heads. So he stomped on the gas pedal and lurched the car down the narrow street to the next bystanders, who would inevitably shake their heads as well.

A good hammam can be hard to find in Istanbul.

Once numbering in the thousands, Istanbul's public baths, most of which were built during the Ottoman Empire, are indeed a dying breed. According to the Turkish tourism board, the number of public baths in the city has dwindled to around 60, as the existence of indoor plumbing in most Turkish households has eliminated the need for the facilities. However, many Istanbul residents still make regular visits to

*At Espa at the Istanbul Edition, this modern take on a hammam features cast-bronze sinks and chocolate-brown Italian marble.*

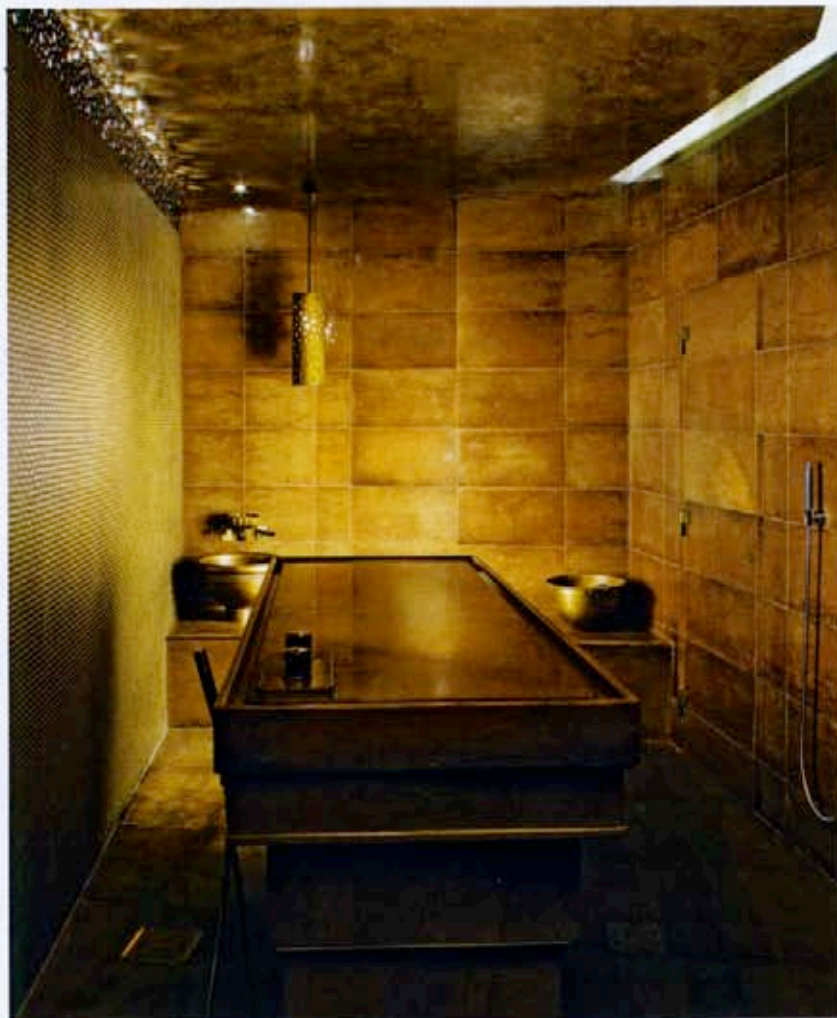
hammams, and the traditional Turkish-bath experience is considered a requisite for tourists. As luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent says on its website, "No visit to Istanbul is complete without a traditional Turkish bath."

Tourists, however, frequently have an idealized notion of what a traditional Turkish bath entails. Cihan Girgin—whose family owns Çağaloğlu Hamami, a hammam gifted to the city by Sultan Mahmud I in 1741 and recommended today by Abercrombie & Kent and the Turkish tourism board—remembers a Swedish client who emerged from a treatment angered and shouting: "She thought they were going to carry her like Cleopatra inside the hammam, where they would massage her with oil and afterwards put grapes in her mouth one by one," he said. "Well, you went to the wrong movie, I told her."

The traditional hammam cleansing method takes place in a domed room (or *sıcaklık*) heated to around 100 degrees. Patrons lie on a heated marble plinth in the center of the room, while attendants pour water over them and use lather soap wrapped in silk *kese* mitts to scrub away the top layer of their skin. Various lathering, rinsing, and massage rituals follow.

Though beautiful inside—with several-hundred-year-old marble and natural light streaming in through small cutouts in towering cupolas—historic facilities like Girgin's are generally either overrun by tourists or are nearly impossible to find. (Truly local public hammams do not advertise in English.) They also lack facilities to address modern preferences for privacy, and deliver an overall experience that is rich in tradition and culture but virtually void of contemporary-spa-style pampering. Elsewhere in Istanbul, however, the traditional Turkish bath is being reinterpreted for the modern luxury world.

In recent years, the Edition and other top hotels in Istanbul have opened hammams that are both contemporary and traditional, offering private settings



*"Istanbul is a sophisticated city, and there are a lot of very well-traveled people who want the pampering and luxury they've found throughout the world."* —NATHAN HUTCHINS, HBA

where the city's best therapists deliver relaxing, results-driven experiences. At the spa at the 4-year-old Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Bosphorus, three small marble hammams with colored mosaic tiles host private treatments such as Lavish Moments, which includes a massage, body mask, and facial in addition to a *kese* scrub. Attendants at the spa at boutique hotel Les Ottomans lather clients with foam before applying

a honey-and-lemon body mask and then an ice-flake polish. Above the white-marble room, fiber-optic lights twinkle in the domed ceiling that is painted to look like a cloudy blue sky. Spas at the newly restored Pera Palace Hotel, Jumeirah, and the Çırağan Palace Kempinski Istanbul feature heated marble *sıcaklık* rooms among modern treatment areas, whirlpools, and saunas.

At the Espa at the Istanbul Edition,

*Scrub rooms at the Istanbul Edition host traditional Turkish treatments in private—and hygienic—environments.*



which was designed by the London-based firm HBA, visitors walk past woven horsehair wall coverings and over bronze-and-leather flooring to reach the chocolate-brown Italian marble hammam. "Istanbul is a sophisticated city, and there are a lot of very well-traveled people who want the pampering and luxury they've found throughout the world," says Nathan Hutchins, an associate designer at HBA. "But at the same time they want something distinctly Turkish."

MY DISTINCTLY TURKISH experience at Çağaloğlu Hamami began with Girgin ushering me to the ladies' side of the public bath, where Florence Nightingale, Kate Moss, and Cameron

Diaz had reportedly gone before me. "There's this famous book called *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*, and we are in the book," Girgin said. "Most other things in the book are monuments, like the Eiffel Tower. But this place is still running. Business is still going on."

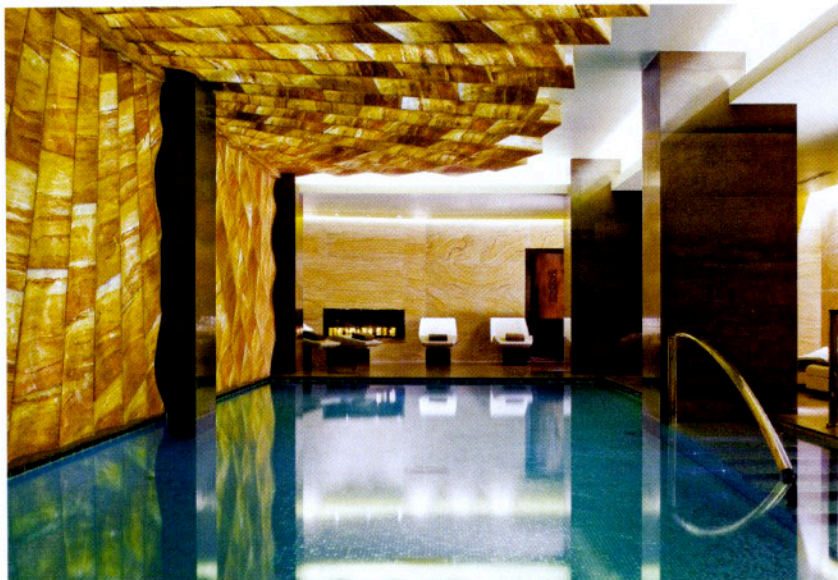
At the center of the female waiting area was a white-marble fountain, and lining the surrounding walls were first and mezzanine levels of numbered changing rooms. Sitting on a red-velvet stool, I browsed the food menu while waiting to change. A painting on the front depicted a group of naked women reclining together with their arms draped over their heads. The actual women around me—wrapped in neon bikinis, checkered cloths, or less—clipped

around in provided wooden sandals (*nahn*) as the noise of electric blow-dryers droned on in the background.

An attendant wearing sweatpants eventually came over to hand me a key for cabin number 37, where I undressed and wrapped myself in a checkered *pesternal* cloth. Grabbing a bar of olive soap from one of the big bins, I clopped into the hammam looking for my therapist.

Girgin warned that it was a busy day, but I was not prepared to see such a density of bodies lying, sitting, and standing dripping wet inside the hammam. Most everything in the room was marble—benches, washbasins, Corinthian columns, a heated central plinth. I identified my therapist by the

Set in a 19th-century Ottoman palace, the Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at the Bosphorus houses a spa with three private hammams.



*“I think we managed to get the tradition, but also the luxury and the glamour.”*

—SUSAN HARMSWORTH,  
FOUNDER AND CEO, ESPA

big white number printed on her black wrestler’s singlet. The friendly, heavy-set woman with few English skills motioned for me to sit on one of the benches and pour warm water from the basin over my body with a metal bowl. As soon as a place opened up on the plinth, she would begin my scrub.

BACK IN CALIFORNIA, on a phone call with Espa founder and CEO Susan Harmsworth, I mentioned my trip to the traditional hammam.

“With the masses of people where you get beaten up?” she responded on cue.

Harmsworth too was startled by the mass social aspect of traditional

hammams—and had hygiene concerns—after her first experience at a public bath more than 35 years ago. In February 2011, her London-based company opened the Espa at the Istanbul Edition as a pristine alternative to the traditional Turkish bath.

Based on the hotel owner’s request for a state-of-the-art hammam with design influences that draw on Turkish traditions, the 20,000-square-foot Espa features two heated *sıcaklık* rooms in chocolate-brown marble with cast-bronze sinks and adjacent private scrub and steam rooms. “In hammams you see a lot of white marble with gray veins,” says HBA’s Hutchins. “For

modern travelers, the experience is in the materials, so we used a chocolate-brown Italian marble that allowed us to play a lot with light.”

Built underground in three basement levels of the Edition tower, the Espa does not incorporate natural light as the traditional hammams of Istanbul do. “Turkey has quite a tradition of ornate glasswork,” Hutchins says. “So we have these hand-blown wall sconces that create wonderful patterns of light on the walls of the treatment rooms.” The dark marble and concealed light sources together create a meditative environment throughout the relaxation and treatment areas.

“I don’t like to put words into Turkish mouths because it’s a very personal thing,” said Harmsworth on the phone, “but for spiritual reasons, time in the hammam is often used to meditate and think inwardly.”

Socially speaking, the purpose of a hammam is not so mysterious. Harmsworth mentioned a new project she is working on in Azerbaijan for an Iranian owner who grew up in Turkey. “He’s married and goes with three or four couples into the hammam,” she said. “Even to the point where some of the guys will go off and discuss business.”

At the Istanbul Edition, the hotel’s owner visits the hammam regularly. “I think we managed to get the tradition, but also the luxury and the glamour,” Harmsworth said of filling the owner’s request for a space that could be very private and also a place to meet with friends.

On my visit to the Espa at the Istanbul Edition, I was greeted in the steam room by Lale, a roundish redhead donning a tasteful one-piece bathing suit. “My English is very small,” she said in a big, friendly voice. “I come back in 10 minutes.”

Called *tellak* in Turkish, hammam attendants during Ottoman days were young, non-Muslim boys charged with soaping and scrubbing the bodies of Muslim men. Ottoman texts document that the *tellak*’s responsibilities included

*Designed by London’s HBA, Espa at the Istanbul Edition fulfills the hotel owner’s request for a state-of-the-art space rooted in Turkish tradition.*

sexual favors, though after the defeat of the Ottoman army in the early 1900s *tellak* boys were replaced by adult attendants who gave scrubs, massages, and nothing more.

Turkish hammam attendants like Lale come from families of scrubbers who pass techniques down from generation to generation. *Espa* training enhances the traditional practice by considering modern anatomy and physiology and introducing international modalities like salt and oil scrubs and hot stones.

My 150-minute Turkish Indulgence treatment with Lale began with a steam. She then wrapped me in a cloth and showed me into a private scrub room where a stone table moved vertically with the push of a button and featured built-in hoses and a soap-dispensing system. Reading Lale's gestures I figured out that I was to lie face down on top of the wet

cloths she had prepared on the table.

"Madam," she said every time I needed to change positions.

With a *kese* mitt she began her long, even strokes along my calf.

"Madam."

I turned over.

"Good, very good," she said after a while, directing my fingers so I could feel how much skin had come off of my thighs. Later I could see the result—little worms of dead skin cells covered my body. Lale was *very* pleased.

"*Esuper!*"

To begin the foam massage she filled a bucket with bubble bath and, using the cloth like a pillowcase, scooped up the bubbles and wrung them out into a mountain of froth that covered my neck and arms on down to my legs. She began fast, hard, slippery massage strokes that hit all my pressure points and sore muscles.

With the showerhead built into the table she carefully rinsed off my body.

"Madam."

I sat up, slowly, as to not slip off the table. Placing my feet on the floor we walked into the main hammam room so I could lie face up on the warm marble plinth. Lale applied a milk-and-honey mask, stepping back to analyze her work after finishing each limb.

Leading me back to the steam room, she communicated by example that I was to rub my body while standing directly in front of the steam.

A few minutes later Lale came back and wrapped me in a dry cloth, put on my robe, and helped me into the relaxation room where I was left in a state of bliss with a plate of almonds, dried apricots, and figs.

A good hammam in Istanbul is a great find. R

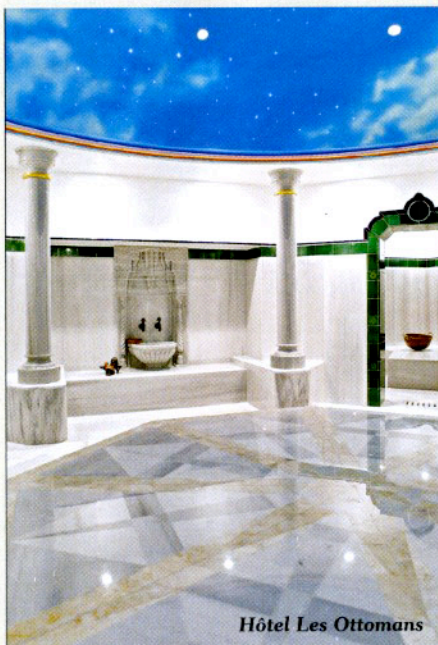
## HOTEL HAMMAMS OF ISTANBUL

### Vinothérapie Spa by Caudalíe Paris at Hôtel Les Ottomans, Istanbul

This 10-room boutique hotel on the Bosphorus strait offers private, couple, and group cleansing rituals in its traditional light-gray marble hammam, where twinkle lights flicker in the domed ceiling that is painted to look like a cloudy sky. A menu of signature hammam treatments ranges from a 30-minute scrub and hair wash for about \$85 to a 60-minute scrub, foam massage, honey-and-lemon body mask, face peel, ice-flake polish, and hair wash for about \$125. +90.212.359.1500, [www.lesottomans.com](http://www.lesottomans.com)

### The Spa at the Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at the Bosphorus

Opened in a converted 19th-century Ottoman palace in 2008, the Four Seasons overlooks the Bosphorus strait and offers scrub treatments in either of three marble hammams with colored mosaic tiles. The 30-minute Traditional Hammam *kese* scrub costs about \$130, and the 180-minute Lavish Moments experience includes a scrub, body mask, massage, and facial for around \$450. +90.212.381.4160, [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com)



Hôtel Les Ottomans

### Espa at the Istanbul Edition

The 15-story, 78-room hotel features a 20,000-square-foot *Espa* in its basement. Designed by the London-based hospitality design firm HBA, the three-story space includes a striking contemporary hammam

in brown Italian marble. Treatments range from a 20-minute scrub for approximately \$60 to the 150-minute Turkish Indulgence for about \$300. +90.212.317.7717, [www.espaonline.com](http://www.espaonline.com)

### Talise Spa at the Pera Palace Hotel, Jumeirah

Reopened in 2010, the 120-year-old Pera Palace underwent a \$29 million restoration that preserved and modernized the landmark originally built as the glamorous final stop for Orient Express passengers following their three-day journeys from Paris. Talise offers 20-, 40-, and 60-minute sessions in its small, white-marble hammam. +90.212.377.4000, [www.perapalace.com](http://www.perapalace.com)

### Çırağan Palace Kempinski Spa, managed by Sanitas

Built by Sultan Abdülaziz in 1871, Çırağan Palace in 1990 became a hotel with 313 rooms including 11 suites in the historic palace building. Hammam treatments range from about \$160 for the 40-minute Pasha Treatment to about \$635 for the 80-minute VIP Treatment. +90.212.326.4646, [www.kempinski.com](http://www.kempinski.com) —J.R.