



More than just hammam

Traditionally, bathhouses in Turkey were more than just places to clean up — they were indispensable for the smooth running of society. These days, they still offer soft skin, but with a touch of luxury.

By Saba Siddiqui

“I hope that until the end of days, good-hearted friends who take a look at what I have made, when they will perceive the seriousness and the spirit of my effort, can have a fair view and can invoke my name to pray for me,” Mimar Sinan once said.

After a visit to the hammam, I did bless Sinan, chief architect of the Ottoman Empire, who designed and built the Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan Hamam in the 16th century. The hammam, which was built at the request of Hürrem Sultan Roxelana, wife of Suleiman I, stands between the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and is one of the best in Turkey.

Turkish hammams date back about a thousand years. They were used for deep cleanses, an important aspect of Islam, and were meeting places where locals met to socialise. Here, men discussed business and politics while older women came to look for brides for their sons. The girls also cooked and carried food to the bathhouses and it served as a test of their culinary skills. A hammam was also where a new bride would bathe and the spot for the ritual dip of newborn babies.

Even today, every Turkish town has at least one hammam and big cities have many.

Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan Hamam is a high-end option and its location is its unique selling point. If you are a tourist

in Istanbul, chances are you'll visit the Sultanahmet district.

And when you do, you'll notice this hammam standing right there, like an old monument, hiding the secrets of history. Televisions outside play videos of what you would miss if you don't go inside. More often than not you will be enticed to go in.

I walked into the women's quarter. Although the hammam was built in the classical Ottoman bath style, it was an innovation in Turkish bath architecture as the men and women sections were constructed on the same axis as mirror images of each other.

The menu offered reflexology, aromatherapy and anti-stress massages. Traditional treatments



The Cold Room is the place to relax

include the Pir-i Pak (traditional full cleanse), Keyf-i Hamam (pleasures of the hammam), Zevk-i Sefa (extravagant pleasures) and Ab-i Hayat (elixir of life).

After a discussion with my therapist, Caroline, I opted for the 60-minute Keyf-i Hamam, priced at €115 (around Dh580).

I was taken to the Cold Room, where I changed into a *peştamal* (bath wrap) and a pair of slippers and was provided a locker to store my belongings.

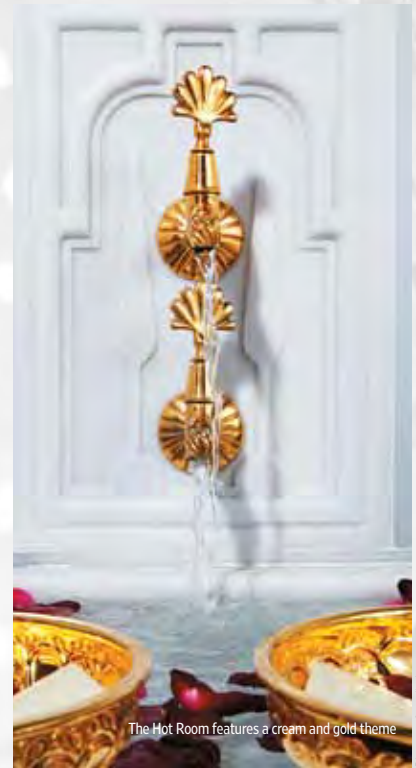
I was then escorted to the Hot Room. The room has a cream and gold theme. It is spotless, with sun beams peeping through the holes and the marble slab's gold and black design shining in the centre.

Warm water was poured on me with a gold-plated Ottoman bath bowl, which made me feel like royalty, and I was asked to pour lots to soften my skin. Caroline then left to make arrangements for my treatment. She returned with a set of personalised toiletries including an olive oil soap, Judas tree essential oil shampoo, hair conditioner and body lotion.

QUICK FACTS

- The Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan Hamam was built where the ancient public baths of Zeuxippus (100-200AD) stood.
- It was used as a public bath until 1910.
- It was later used to house convicts when the Sultanahmet prison was full.
- It was restored for the first time between 1957-58 and was used as a carpet bazaar until 2007.
- Modern restoration began in 2008 and it took three years and 17 million Turkish Lira (around Dh29 million) to restore it to its former glory.

After perspiring in the Hot Room, I was escorted to the Warm Room, where Caroline scrubbed my body and removed the dead skin, leaving me clean and smooth. I was then taken back to the Hot Room and asked to lie down on the large, warm marble slab for a bubble bath. I was completely covered in bubbles, washed and my hair conditioned. After the child-like pampering, Caroline poured cold water on me telling me that it



The Hot Room features a cream and gold theme

Pictures: Supplied



Enjoy a cup of coffee after your treatment

would prevent a headache as we were headed to the Cold Room

In the Cold Room, I was served a glass of traditional sherbet and asked to relax. Caroline was back, this time to take me through the last phase of the treatment. On the second floor of the hammam, I was given a massage. Focusing on my head and neck, it was one of the best I have ever had and quite therapeutic, so much so that my spondylitis did not return for two weeks.

When I woke up, my body felt light — I was ready to explore the Grand Bazaar.