



Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan Hamami is located in Sultanahmet Park, next to the Ayasofya museum

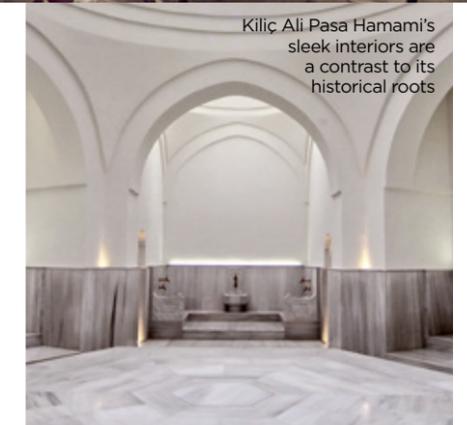


The 16th-century Kiliç Ali Pasa Hamami recently reopened after a refurbishment



Istanbul hammams

The Hammam Suite at Raffles Istanbul sets the tone with elegant artworks and contemporary furnishings



Kiliç Ali Pasa Hamami's sleek interiors are a contrast to its historical roots

No longer are bathhouses simply a place for locals to doze and gossip. Nor are they a quirky activity for tourists to tick off their to-do list. Times have changed



Hip HAMMAMS

Istanbul's ancient tradition of Turkish baths is undergoing a modern revamp. **Kathryn Tomasetti** wades in and reports back on the new ones you must try

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, a visit to a traditional hammam is luxuriously familiar. Clothes, bags and phones are abandoned and stored in lockers. Bathers are swaddled in woven wraps and escorted into the heart of the bathhouse. The rituals vary slightly, depending on the country you're in. In Turkey, the experience starts with the regional tradition of stretching out on the *göbek taşı* (warm marble "navel stone").

So far, so familiar? Think again. Because over the past 18 months, Istanbul's newest hammams have inserted boutique hotel bling into the traditional scrub'n'soak. Many of the city's ancient bathhouses have undergone multi-million-dollar renovations. Others offer personalised beauty treatments and shimmering new spaces for quiet contemplation. Private steam rooms and high-end organic products are the norm, wooing discerning residents and visitors alike.

No longer are bathhouses simply a place for locals to doze and gossip. Nor are they merely a quirky activity for tourists to tick off their to-do list. In Western Asia's most cosmopolitan metropolis, times have changed.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY

Kiliç Ali Pasa Hamami

Streamlined but sumptuous, pared-down yet posh, Kiliç Ali Pasa Hamami reopened to the public in 2012 after seven years of meticulous renovations. It's tucked between the Bosphorus-side districts of Tophane, an area of docklands under arty gentrification, and Karaköy, set to be 2015's neighbourhood *du jour*.

The bathhouse takes its name from Italian-born Ottoman admiral Kiliç Ali Pasa. It was the Pasa himself who commissioned Sinan, Sultan Süleiman the Magnificent's iconic architect, to design and oversee the building of this hammam and its mosque complex in 1580. The result: a historical space that soars to the sky – and offers ultra-modern spa services to boot.

Push through the heavy wooden doors and the pampering starts immediately. Spagoers are greeted with a glass of traditional fruity sherbet, freshly brewed from a family recipe courtesy of the owner's septuagenarian mother. The complimentary hammam slippers are "Made in Italy".

"Not only is visiting the hammam good for your skin," explains Melike Safak, Kiliç Ali Pasa Hamami's youthful sales manager. "It's also great for relieving stress, increasing circulation and relaxing the

muscles. While [bathers here] experience a very old tradition, they also have all the comforts and luxury of today."

And how. Optional hour-long, full-body massages follow the more traditional treatments. Afterwards, bathers are encouraged to stretch out on snowy-white sofas in the lounge area, while attendants serve cups of jasmine tea or freshly pressed pomegranate juice. Copies of *Vogue* and *Condé Nast Traveller* (naturally) are on hand. The scene is topped off with a bubbling marble fountain at the centre of the reclining room.

Just outside the spa sits Derya, a small boutique purveying traditional cotton wraps (*pestamal*), scrubbing mitts woven from natural fibres (*kese*) and ornate copper bowls – so you can attempt to recreate the experience at home. Note that Kiliç Ali Pasa Hamami is women-only from 8am to 4pm, and men-only from 4.30pm until 11.30pm daily. kilicalipasahamami.com

Raffles Spa

Launched in late 2014, Raffles Spa seamlessly blends age-old Turkish culture with 21st-century techniques. "People are looking for relaxation," spa manager Asli Sakizli says of their ethos. "But people are also looking for results." ▶

Istanbul hammams



Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan Hamami has been restored to its former glory

Raffles offers traditional Turkish hammam treatments, but these experiences – ranging from 30-minute classic scrubs to two-hour cleansing “journeys”, comprised of a full-body mask and an aromatherapy rub – have been adapted enormously. Hammam therapists who work here often come from a long family lineage, trained by their mothers and grandmothers. Yet new techniques are integrated, such as the speciality ice massage used to close out a hammam experience and stimulate blood circulation.

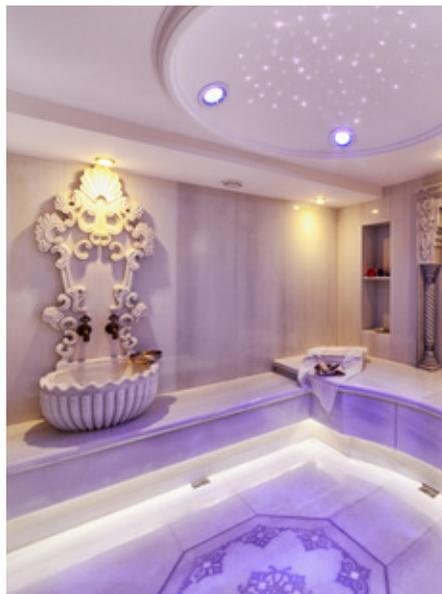
Nutritionists, personal trainers and lifestyle coaches are on hand, too. All the bath products contain medicinal herbs, and are so organic that you could literally eat them, claims Sakizli. These include London’s The Organic Pharmacy and Gazelli skincare by Azeri beautician Jamila Askarova.

The spa is large enough to get lost in. The facilities include more than 3,000sqm of relaxing space, with three petite hammams, two couples’ suites and seven treatment rooms, plus more dried apricots and shelled pistachios than at a Lebanese wedding. Saunas, Jacuzzis, ice fountains and experience showers abound. There are indoor and outdoor swimming pools, as well as a yoga and Pilates studio.

The newest packages comprise three- to five-day detox programmes. Perhaps even more tempting is the thought of a pampering stay at Raffles during this extreme treatment – though, according to Sakizli, patrons are a mix of overseas guests and Istanbul locals. raffles.com/istanbullspa

Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan Hamami

The Ukrainian-born wife of Sultan Süleiman the Magnificent, Roxelana (or “Hürrem Sultan”) wielded unprecedented power



and influence in her day. First a slave, then a favourite concubine, Roxelana charmed Süleiman into marrying her – almost unheard of for a sultan. She advised him on political issues during the Ottoman Empire’s reign and bore him five children. So when designing a hammam for his master’s wife, court architect Mimar Sinan didn’t dare create anything less than spectacular.

The Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan Hamami is certainly extraordinary. It crowns the skyline midway between Istanbul’s most illustrious sights, the Ayasofya and the Blue Mosque. The impressive 16th-century hammam was actually gifted by Roxelana for the use of visitors to the nearby places of worship. For centuries, it was one of the city’s most popular places to scrub down and socialise – until its transformation into a carpet bazaar in 1958.

Just over 50 years – and one \$7.5 million restoration – later, the Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan Hamami has been returned to its former glory. White Marmara marble swathes the bathhouse’s two identical wings (one for men, one for women) and private steam rooms. Transparent panels throughout are a window to the past, showcasing the original 16th-century remains.

The elegant space offers an extensive menu of one-off experiences. These include Judas tree oil-based massages and bridal bathing parties. All accessories are top-notch, including silk and cotton *pestamal* wraps crafted exclusively for the hammam in the town of Ödemiş, a centre for woven textiles for well over 1,000 years. Pure olive oil soap is sourced from the Aegean town of Edremit, famed for its abundant olive production, and gold-plated bathing bowls are dotted liberally throughout the bathhouse for guests’ use. ayasofyahamami.com



Each suite at the Armaggan Bosphorus is unique. **Left:** The Ottoman-themed hammam is located under the Bosphorus strait

Armaggan Bosphorus Suites

For those who don’t know, Armaggan is the Harrods of Turkey, a luxury emporium that creates one-off pieces with artisans from across the land. Ancient Turkish crafts such as hand-woven towels, silk *kesse* scrubs and linen dressing gowns stock its two boutiques in Nuruosmaniye and Nisantasi.

In November 2013, Armaggan also relaunched three elegant waterfront *yalis* (traditional Turkish wooden mansions) as one plush guesthouse. The premises were originally designed by 19th-century starchitect Sarkis Balyan (creator of the Ottoman sultans’ summer palace, Beylerbeyi, across the water). It houses 18 opulent suites, waterside terraces and on-site private dining. The entire set-up is located in Ortaköy, one of Istanbul’s chic Bosphorus suburbs.

Equally enticing is Armaggan’s boutique-sized Ottoman-themed hammam. It can be booked for private sessions by hotel guests only. The spa menu is short and sweet – choose from a Turkish hammam experience, reflexology or three types of massage – yet the benefit is that the treatments are exceptionally personalised. “Our treatments can’t be compared to a public Turkish bathhouse,” says Banu Yegül, Armaggan’s operations manager, “as the experience obviously takes place in the comfort of what feels like a guests’ own home.”

All-organic products feature in the hammam. “Natural hazelnut oil is used for a 45-minute head and body massage, which kicks off the experience,” reveals Yegül. All of the treatments come courtesy of Olive Farm’s organic body creams, shampoos and soaps that are produced in Datça on the Aegean coast.

armagganbosporus.com **CNT**

GETTING THERE

Turkish Airlines (turkishairlines.com), Emirates (emirates.com), Etihad (etihad.com) and Qatar Airways (qatarairways.com) fly direct to Istanbul