Traditional Turkish baths are a must for anyone keen to get under the skin of the country’s culture, finds Katie McGonagle

**SCRUB UP WELL**

I’ve had my fair share of spa treatments, but never before have I been summoned for a scrub by a Turkish woman clad in nothing but a black bikini, flicking drops of water to get my attention.

Of course, she needed to do something to rouse me from my stupor. As I lay flat out on a warm marble pedestal so enormous it dominated the cavernous hall of the hammam, the mix of hot, steamy air and soothing hum of activity lulled me into a rather sleepy state.

Relaxation was the object of the exercise, of course, as I experienced my first traditional Turkish bath at historic Cagaloglu hammam, one of the oldest in Istanbul. A soapy scrub, a dip in the pool and a rather firm massage later, I emerged feeling genuinely refreshed and ready for Istanbul’s nightlife.

A tradition passed down through the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires, the hammam is a central part of Turkish culture and an absolute must for any visitor. But where should they go, how can you book it, and how can Brits overcome their natural reluctance to strip off in public?

**GRAND DESIGNS**
The magnificent baroque-style Cagaloglu has a real sense of history, but it’s by no means

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**FAST FACT**
Traditional hammams have separate areas or different opening hours for men and women

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Istanbul’s oldest bath: the elegant Cemberlitas hammam dates from 1584, Sultan Selim hammam from 1577, and Galatasaray from 1715, all with elaborate designs befitting their historic status. Many adjacent mosques, underlining the significance of cleanliness as a preoccupation to worship. They don’t come much finer than Aya Sofia. Harun Sultan Hammam, built in 1556 by Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan. In a prime spot between the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque, the bath has a colourful history – in use until 1910, it was closed and used as a storage facility then carpet bazaar – but regained its spot as Istanbul’s most exclusive bath in 2011 when it reopened following a £5 million restoration. Akin Koc, managing director of Anatolian Sky Holidays, says: “This is one of the very best examples of a Turkish bath. Also known as Roxelana’s Bath, it was built in the 16th century at the request of the wife of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. The restoration has been beautifully completed using marble and comprises hot, warm and cold rooms, as well as a restaurant and cafe. A visit here is an absolute must.”

These public baths are the most traditional, but many hotels have incorporated hammams into their own spa facilities. The Mori Istanbul holds a delightful top-floor spa with two Turkish hammams, a Roman bath and vast relaxation area. Suitably chilled, guests can move outside to a roof terrace for superb views. Beach holidaymakers can also enjoy the experience in a local hammam or hotel spa. For the latter, Deniz Feneri Lighthouse is a 30-room boutique on the Kas peninsula, where the dome-shaped roof of the hammam is a focal point of the hotel’s natural stone design. Available through Exclusive Escapes, this property offers a quiet escape thanks to its secluded spots, private waterfront and top-notch dining.

Likewise, the lofty ceilings of the hamman at Kempinski Hotel Barbaros Bay, jutting into the pool complex and flooding the baths with natural light, make this a particularly soothing experience. Choose from 45-minute treatments starting at £70 – a hammam with traditional kese scrub or a salt and olive oil scrub – or a 90-minute hammam journey with an extra clay body mask.

**Total Tranquillity**

While a hammam is a good start, clients who want a sense of calm throughout their holiday can opt for a hotel with a focus on peace and quiet.

The Hotel Mori Hemithea owes its name to the Greek goddess of healing, which explains the philosophy behind its rejuvenating spa. As well as a traditional Turkish bath, it offers aromatherapy, Tha massage and anti-cellulite treatments. The beachfront jetty, outdoor pool and sunbeds also allow guests to admire its Hisaronu Bay setting, and if that doesn’t soothe away stress, nothing will.

A split-level infinity pool is the standout feature of Grand Yazici in Bodrum, where a large spa comprises three Turkish baths, a traditional Ottoman massage and a Turkish bath and gulet cruise.

**Cover Up**

As well as a chance to scrub up, the Turkish baths were a social gathering – the ancient equivalent of a natter in Costa Coffee or a pint in the pub – but for many Brits, the thought of stripping off in front of strangers can be embarrassing. D-Hotel Mars on the Dotca peninsula has a peaceful hammam with private individual scrub rooms, a relaxation area and more of a western spa-style experience for those who prefer their privacy during the bathing ritual. Rates start at £375 for a Deluxe Sea View Room with breakfast. The opulent Grand Azur in nearby Marmaris, featured in Olympic Holidays’ Gold & Platinum Collection, also has a private hammam with scrub and massage options and individual saunas, steam and massage rooms. Those looking to experience a spa as a couple need look no further than Mehmet Ali Aga Mansion in Dotca, where Exclusive Escapes offers free private use of the wood-fired Turkish baths plus a 45-minute massage. TW

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**Sample Product**

Classic Collection Holidays offers seven nights’ B&B at the Hotel Mori Hemithea from £1,497 based on departures in late September for two sharing, with flights and private transfers. classic-collection.co.uk 0800 008 7288

A week’s B&B at the Grand Yazici starts at £859 with Anatolian Sky Holidays, based on travel in October, with flights to Bodrum and transfers. anatoliansky.co.uk 0844 273 3585

Exclusive Escapes offers seven nights with breakfast at the Kalkan Regency from £800, including flights to Dalaman, transfers, a beach club. Exclusive Escapes offers free private use of the wood-fired Turkish baths plus a 45-minute massage. Exclusive Escapes offers free private use of the wood-fired Turkish baths plus a 45-minute massage. Exclusive Escapes offers free private use of the wood-fired Turkish baths plus a 45-minute massage.