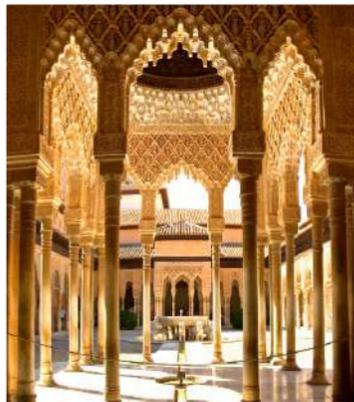


FOLLOW YOUR BLISS

The ancient ritual of the hammam offers the perfect antidote to today's supercharged world.

And there's no better place to try it than in stunning Andalucía.

By Charukesi Ramachurai



A LILTING MIDDLE-EASTERN MELODY PLAYED SOFTLY IN THE BACKGROUND. The mellow evening sunshine streaming in through high, tiny windows threw a mélange of shadows on the water. I was in the salt water pool at the hammam, eyes closed, floating in a state of bliss, the concerns and chaos of the world left far behind. Perhaps it was the healing touch of the salt, or the comforting warmth of the water, but my aches and pains were beginning to disappear.

I was booked for a two-hour treatment at the Aire de Seville Hammam in Spain's fourth largest city, the throbbing heart of the Andalusian region. In a nod to Seville's rich and long history, these baths are situated inside a 16th-century mansion, which in turn, sprang up on the foundations of a Roman ruin from the 1st-century AD.

cocoon. The therapist led me through a maze of doors, up a couple of floors, and then a few steps down, to the massage area.

While my heart had been set on a water ritual, in which the massage is conducted while you are partly immersed in water, I had to settle for an aromatherapy massage because most treatments were booked up. It is not for nothing that these traditional hammams have come to be one of Andalucía's major tourist attractions. There was little for me to complain about though, well before the massage began, I had already blissed out on repeated dips in the hot and cold pools by turn—as much a wake-up call for the nervous and circulatory systems as a tranquiliser.

While the very air that much of Europe breathes comes with a whiff of fascinating history, it does feel special to unwind in an ancient building repurposed into a luxury experience with modern facilities.

"Chica, please follow me," a voice broke into my reverie. Now, I had not been called *chica*—young girl—in a long time and I preened a bit before stepping off the salt pool

The basic experience at this hammam involved baths in four different kinds of pools, beginning with a brief sweat session inside the steam room, followed by alternating sojourns into the room with the hot pool (*bayt as-sajun*) and the cold one (*bayt al-barid*). I skipped the *bayt al-bastani* (tepid water). Getting out of the relaxing hot pool was an effort in itself, but the real test was getting into the cold one. While others around me swirled their toes hesitantly, I took the plunge, somewhat literally, submerging myself in the frigid water. The breathlessness lasted only a few seconds, but oh, that exhilarating feeling, like I had just aced some adventure sport! Half an hour of now-hot-now-cold later, I rewarded myself with a soak in the jacuzzi. After some fragrant and sweet mint tea came the brief spell of floating in the salted pool. And then the massage with lavender on a heated marble table where the skilled hands of the masseuse sent me into a state of stupor. When I eventually stepped out into a mild spring afternoon, Seville felt like the most beautiful place on earth.

This city can trace its origins back 3,000 years, to the Greek god Hercules. It has layers upon layers of history involving the Romans, Muslims, and Christians, each leaving their unique handprint still visible either in the architecture or food or performing arts. The baths—Baños Arabes—are a legacy of the Moors, who ruled over the region for 800 years and used them as social hubs.

Since I was following the Moorish trail in the Andalusian (from the old Islamic name of *Al Andalus*) region of southern Spain, I fetched up at Granada a few days later. Like Seville, Granada is the product of many centuries of multiple faiths and cultures intermingling. However, unlike the tidiness of Seville's jigsaw puzzle in which different elements fit neatly



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into one another, this town is a mishmash, the various influences piled casually on top of each other.

Given its location in the shadow of the Sierra Nevada mountains, Granada has had

an even longer and closer connection with water than any other town in Andalucía. Noticing the therapeutic properties of the pure mountain water, early Moorish settlers had set up several Arab-style bathhouses around the town, especially in the Muslim Albaycin neighbourhood.

Granada's best is Hammam Al Andalus, close to the bustling Plaza Neuva, somewhere at the base of the resplendent Alhambra Palace. Once again, the history of this site is overwhelming; originally a hammam in the 13th-century, it shut down in the last decade of the 15th-century when the Catholic rulers of Granada banned traditional bathhouses. It was then converted into a baker's workshop and got lost in the mists of time, until the doors of the current hammam reopened in 1998.

With its graceful arches at every doorway; vivid mosaics in geometric and floral patterns; and latticed windows, this hammam harks back to the days of the Moors. This time around, I wanted the authentic ritual—a Kessa massage with scrub gloves. In contrast to the strip and scrub approach of Turkish hammams, the Kessa is a smooth, relaxing ritual. I certainly felt less vulnerable with my swimsuit on and instead of begging for mercy, my skin began to respond to the gentle coaxing of the exfoliation glove. I had booked myself in for the last appointment of the day, which meant that by the time the soaking and scrubbing was over, Granada was ready to call it a day.

Out in the narrow lane leading to the main square, a group of tourists emerged, high from the Flamenco performance they had just seen. Me, I was also on a high of my own, but one caused by a rare sense of absolute wellness. ■

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(Clockwise from top left) A pool at the Hammam Al Andalus in Granada; a view of Granada from the Alhambra Palace; azulejo tiles at the Hammam Al Andalus; the town of Ronda in Andalucía; a courtyard in the Alhambra Palace.