

Go Holiday Turkey Guide to the Turkish Bath



No trip to Turkey is complete without a trip to a hamam (Turkish bath), a tradition dating back thousands of years. In days gone by, hamams were the social centre, with many a woman using a trip to the hamam as the way to vet potential future daughters-in-law.

While modern-day plumbing has changed the habits of Turkish people in regards to attendance at baths, today, many Turkish people still put time aside to regularly visit a hamam. It is still common for groups of women to attend the hamam together as part of pre-wedding preparations.

Most towns in Turkey have a hamam, although in less-touristy areas there may be specific times for men and women to visit, so it pays to check before you go. In Istanbul, the large hamams have separate men's and women's sections so just turning up is no problem. In some of the touristy towns such as Selcuk they will often have a mixed hamam, so wearing a swimsuit is essential. But a word of warning – they can get very busy from about 4pm as tourists flock to the hamam to scrub away traveller's grime after a day of sightseeing – so try to schedule your visit for earlier in the day, before lunch.

For your first hamam visit, it is worth it to splash out and visit one of the big hamams like the Cemberlitas Hamam in Istanbul. It is also worth it to spend the extra on a massage so that you have the full hamam experience.

So what to expect during your hamam visit?

First of all, you will be given a peshtemal (a piece of cloth that looks a little bit like a cross between a sarong and a table cloth) and then shown to the change room. The change room may either be a communal change room, or you may get an individual cubicle to change in.

Generally, women don't need to wear a bikini top, (unless of course you are at a mixed hamam, which is quite common in coastal areas) but if you feel uncomfortable with this, then wearing a bikini or swimsuit is fine. However, you can expect the women to ask you to roll it down or remove your top when it comes to the scrub.

Once you have changed, you will make your way down to the steam room – make sure you wear the rubber slippers provided at all times when you are walking around or else you may be subject to a gentle "tsk tsk" from one of the hamam attendants.

Most Hamams have several chambers of varying temperatures - a hot room, a warm room, and a cold room. The main chamber has a big marble slab (usually round) which is where all of the scrubbing action will take place. Depending on which hamam you visit, you will either lie on the big marble slab to steam and open up your pores so your skin is ready for the scrub, or off to the side. Generally, the procedure is to lie on your peshtemal as if it were a beach towel.

As you steam, make sure you take the time to look around at the amazing architecture – most hamams have a domed roof with skylights. The acoustics in hamams are great too, and if you are lucky, the hamam attendants may even break into song as they wash their customers. I've heard many stories of people who have been at the hamam and felt as if they have stumbled into a private concert.

If you find yourself getting too hot while you are steaming, it is ok to get up and go to one of the basins at the side of the room and fill up the little silver dish with water and tip it over yourself to cool off. Once you have steamed for around 15-20 minutes, one of the hamam attendants will call you over and begin the process of making you the cleanest you have ever been in your life. First up is a scrub using a rough mitt called a kese.

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This doesn't hurt, but it is likely to leave you breathless – mainly because of the long rolls of black skin that will fall off you – and you are likely to protest that “I just showered” “how can I be so dirty?” Don't worry if your attendant doesn't speak a lot of English –without exception, they all have a finely tuned system of little slaps to the backside that will magically make your body roll over when it is time. Next comes the bubble bath without the bubbles – it is the most incredible sensation. This part generally includes a brief massage.

At the end of the soaping you will be rinsed off. If you are a woman, at this point the attendant will generally lead you over to a side chamber to wash your hair, invoking memories of your childhood and your mum washing your hair for you with the Johnson's and Johnson's no tears shampoo. Beware, they don't use conditioner, and so it pays to take some inside with you if you really want some (although you will have to use it after your official bath time is over).

Once your hair has been rinsed off, then you can choose to either stay on and get a little more steam, or make your way out to be wrapped in a towel and then go and enjoy a cup of tea in the cool room. If you have booked an oil massage, then you will be lead to the massage room after your wash.

It is customary to tip the hamam staff. As a guide, tip 5TL to the attendant who washed you and 5TL to the masseuse. It's a good idea to get dressed, then make your way back down to the wash area in your rubber slippers (wearing your “outside” shoes is a big no-no) to leave the tip.

After you have had a cup of tea and changed, it is back out into the sunlight where you'll need a moment to readjust as it really feels like you've just come from another world. Take it easy for the afternoon so you can keep that chilled-out hamam vibe for as long as possible. Enjoy!

Note: this guide was written based on the protocols at the Cemberlitas Hamam in Istanbul. All hamams have a slightly different way of doing business, but if you use this as a general guide you should be ok 😊

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