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ISTANBUL, Turkey — Like so many tired souls that had arrived before me at the Cagaloglu Hamam I was looking for a helping hand.

But we hit it off with a slap on the back and the twist of a neck.

Salih was my scrubber at the historic Turkish hamam (baths).

Did I say ouch?

He only spoke Turkish, I only spoke English, so we connected through body language. Salih made it known he was building momentum on my pretty much naked torso by fierce grunts and growls. His toothy grin emerged from under a thick black moustache.

Salih was going to Gumbyize this guy.

People have been coming to the Cagaloglu Hamam since 1741. Clients have included Florence Nightingale, John Travolta and Kate Moss (well, at least for a photo shoot). The hamam gets its name from the Cagaloglu neighborhood that is known for Istanbul's publishing industry.

Baths were popular in Istanbul in the 1700s because of water shortages and the Koran's pursuit of cleanliness. Cagaloglu was the last great hamam to be built before Sultan Mustafa III forbade their construction because of the demand for water and wood.

That is even longer ago than the Cubs last World Series championship.

The main entrance (camegah) to the hamam is off a narrow street. Guests walk down 10 marble steps and through two marble columns flanked by stalactite capitals, replicating the Roman baths that preceded the Istanbul experience. Featuring baroque and classical Ottoman Empire flairs, the Cagaloglu has survived storms and earthquakes.

The women's entrance used to be on a side street because men and women were not allowed to see one another. During the Ottoman days if a man was caught wandering over into the woman's section, he would be executed.

The Romans had created the baths partially as a place for sexy time. Another difference between a Turkish and Roman bath is that the Turkish version features hot and cold running water. Roman baths also had pools where Turkish baths did not because in the Islam religion stagnant water is recognized as dirty, except for a spa.

Once downstairs at Cagaloglu the bather chooses the service which ranges from a self-service job (about \$40 at the current exchange rate) to the “Deluxe Oriental” body scrub, shampoo and massage that I enjoyed from Salih (about \$80). Guests change clothes in one of 35 small cabins which look like something you might see in the Wisconsin Dells.

I took off my clothes and slipped into a blue and red fringed shawl (pestemal). I was handed a pair of wooden flip flops. I stumbled through another door and entered the bath house.

During the mid-1980s I visited the Russian and Turkish Bath House, 1914 W. Division, which will reopen this spring as the Chicago Bath House.

Those are a drop in the bucket to this hamam.

About a half-dozen half naked and beefy men were sprawled out on a circular slab underneath a Roman dome with small starlike windows.

The dome is supported by eight columns and eight arches. An ornate water jet spouts upwards from the middle of the circular slab. The smell of olive oil (soap and shampoo) permeates the dimly lit room. A few other older dudes leaned against the marble walls. I was told the set up is similar for the woman’s area.

It was hot.

I went into an even hotter room (hararet) to begin the sweat. I sat on heated marble bench which made me sweat even more.

“You sweat so when he scrubs you and the skin comes off easier,” English speaking assistant manager Hayrettin Akbay said in an interview

the guardian

THE BEST BATHHOUSE IN THE WORLD

Three Hundred Year
old Turkish bath

Cağaloğlu Hamamı

1741

ON AND OFF THE BEATEN TRACK
1.000 PLACES TO SEE
BEFORE YOU DIE

after my bath.

During the sweat I met a pale 23-year-old Turkish man who was at the hamam for the first time. He reinforced what I heard, in that the popularity of the traditional hamam is fading with Turkish young people. He said none of his peers had been to a hamam.

Newer hotels in hip sections of Istanbul now offer their own Turkish bath. I stayed at the beautiful Hotel Neirion, a 58-room boutique hotel (neorionhotel.com) which offers a Turkish bath, although I did not try it.

After 15 minutes in the hot room I emerged to find another Mike Ditka-looking Turk with a moustache pointing at me.

He said, "SIT!"

I obediently sat near a fountain. As I absorbed all the steam, it became clear why the Cagaloglu Hamam is in the bestselling book 1,000

Places to See Before You Die. I occasionally splashed cool water on my face. I was smokin', and this is when I began to think it was

amazing there were no waivers to sign about heart conditions, fainting and the-we're-not-responsible stuff you would see in the states. But

then Kaiser Wilhelm II bathed here, and he wasn't in the best of shape.

Just before Salih motioned me over to his corner I heard a loud squeal from a corner to my right.

A scrubber was "massaging" the 23-year-old Turkish novice by walking on his back. I later found out that this was an "endearing" term of indoctrination.

Salih called for me. I first laid down on the interior marble slab under the dome. Of course I told him I had a bad back. I rested my head on a square pillow, He massaged my front side, and said, "TURN OVER" and pummeled my back. He pulled my right leg up behind my head as far as it would go and then did the same with the left leg.

"COME," he said. We went to his corner where he gave me the body scrub with a

thick mitt (kese, made of natural fibers) and a very generous shampoo considering my lack of hair.

Olive oil soap has a long tradition at the hamam because of its inherent health benefits.

In the 1400s, the Prophet Of Islam Muhammad told his followers to use olive oil on their bodies, and he put olive oil on his head. According to the National Olive Oil Council of Turkey, last year the country produced 130 thousand tons of olive oil from 150 million olive trees.

That's a lot of olive love.

Olive oil also creates a rich and very creamy soap. Traditional hamam soap makers mixed the olive oil with lye and then add various colors and fragrances. "All our soaps have olive oil and no chemicals," Akbay said. Only one kind of soap is used inside the hamam, but the gift shop sells five different soaps.

Salih threw a large bowl of warm water over my head for the rinse. He did this a couple of times.

Salih pushed back the skin on the far right and far left of my eyes. He heartily massaged each of my toes and my thighs. At one time he was working so hard my shawl came undone.

This is not for the faint of heart.

No if and or butts about it.

The entire process took about 45 minutes.

"All the workers have been here 15, 20 years," Akbay said. "Salih is one of the best. When you're stronger, you're better." Salih was my sultan of slap.

About 45 men and women work at the hamam. The room is so hot, the employees work in shifts going in and out of the room. The hamam opens at 8 a.m. daily and closes at 10 p.m. "About seven of every 10 customers are women," Akbay said. "Because men really don't like

men touching them. There's Americans here in the summer, but politics changed things. I don't see French in here anymore. Once the war started in 2000, Americans stopped coming."

You could hang out all day at the hamam. The operation includes a barbershop an indoor and outdoor courtyard café that serves tea and fruit juices and a gift shop.

But the most important offering is a refreshing dip into the past.

