

I vividly remember my first hammam. In a small spa, hidden in the winding streets of the medina in Marrakech I was heated, pummelled and pushed to within an inch of my life. On more than one occasion I was left gasping for breath when a bucket of water was thrown over me, my skin was scrubbed so hard it hurt, and part way through proceedings the disposable underwear I had been given to wear was unceremoniously ripped off, taking with it most of my dignity.

A pampering experience it was not, but by the end of the ordeal my skin was smoother and shinier than it had ever been.

While exfoliating body scrubs are a common addition to spa menus in the UK, hammams feature considerably less often so I was intrigued to try a Westernised version of the traditional ritual.

As soon as I stepped foot through the heavy dark wood doors of the Spa at Dolphin Square in London, it was clear that this experience was going to be vastly different from my ordeal in Marrakech.

The Spa at Dolphin Square has created a fairytale version of Morocco, with soft lights twinkling through lanterns, rich fabrics, pretty trinkets and heady aromas. And instead of crowds of people hustling and bustling through the souk, accompanied by the chatter of children and the cries of shopkeepers calling you to "have a shufti" in their shop, there was only the sound of gentle music tinkling away in the background, with therapists gliding almost noiselessly through the dimly lit corridors.

My Moroccan Majorelle treatment began, as all treatments at the spa begin, with a traditional hand cleansing using water drawn from Dolphin Square's artesian well - the only working well in Westminster.

From there I was taken to the salt-infused steam room to relax before the washing and scrubbing part of the hammam began. I lay on a marble bench in a dimly lit room while my therapist doused me with warm water before the traditional savon noir (black soap made from eucalyptus, crushed olives and olive oil) was applied and I was scrubbed from head to toe. Although she was vigorous enough to remove any rough or dead skin it was far from the near tear-inducing scrubbing I had received before, and for this I was grateful and able to lay back



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and enjoy the aromas and sensations in comfort. It was clear that although the treatment drew on the authentic Moroccan ritual, it had been adjusted to suit Western tastes.

Once clean and scrubbed I was taken to the tepidarium to enjoy a mint tea and a snack of dates and pistachios before my massage.

The massage was gloriously indulgent and also included a honey face mask to give a glow to the complexion and mineral-rich Rhassoul lava clay from the Moroccan mountains being massaged into my hair and scalp. By the end of the pampering, my skin was smooth and glowing and I was so relaxed I almost floated out.

The Spa at Dolphin Square may seem like a long way to go for a spa treatment but it is so much more than that. It is a whole experience and it's easy to see why it has scooped so many awards.

There's no need to do it all in a day though. The Dolphin Square complex also includes some rather lovely serviced apartments so you can stay a night or two (or even longer) to give yourself time to hit the shops and enjoy all that the capital has to offer.

The Moroccan Majorelle costs £110. A night in an apartment in Dolphin Square costs from £66. For more details on the spa or the apartments visit www.dolphinsquare.co.uk.

Home hammam

You can experience a hammam at home with this gorgeous home kit from Essence of Morocco.

Created from all natural ingredients, ethically sourced in Morocco to ensure it is as authentic as possible, it's a fantastic way to give your skin a treat.

Begin with the Moroccan Beldi Exfoliating Soap with eucalyptus essential oil to prepare the skin for deep exfoliation. Beldi soap has been traditionally made over many centuries using natural ingredients, the main ingredient being olive oil.

You then use the Moroccan Exfoliating Kessa

Glove to exfoliate the skin by removing dead skin cells, toxins and impurities. Blood circulation is stimulated, bringing more oxygen and nutrients to the skin.

Finish with the Rhassoul Clay Powder, a natural detoxing, cleansing clay full of minerals, perfect for cleansing both skin and hair. Its high mineral content helps draw out impurities and excess oils.

It also absorbs excess sebum, purifies detoxifies and tightens skin.

The Essence of Morocco Hammam Kit, left, is available from www.esofmo.com, priced £25.

