



Condé Nast Traveller

THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

DECEMBER 2024

*Making
tracks*

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DOLOMITES TO NEW ZEALAND'S OTAGO

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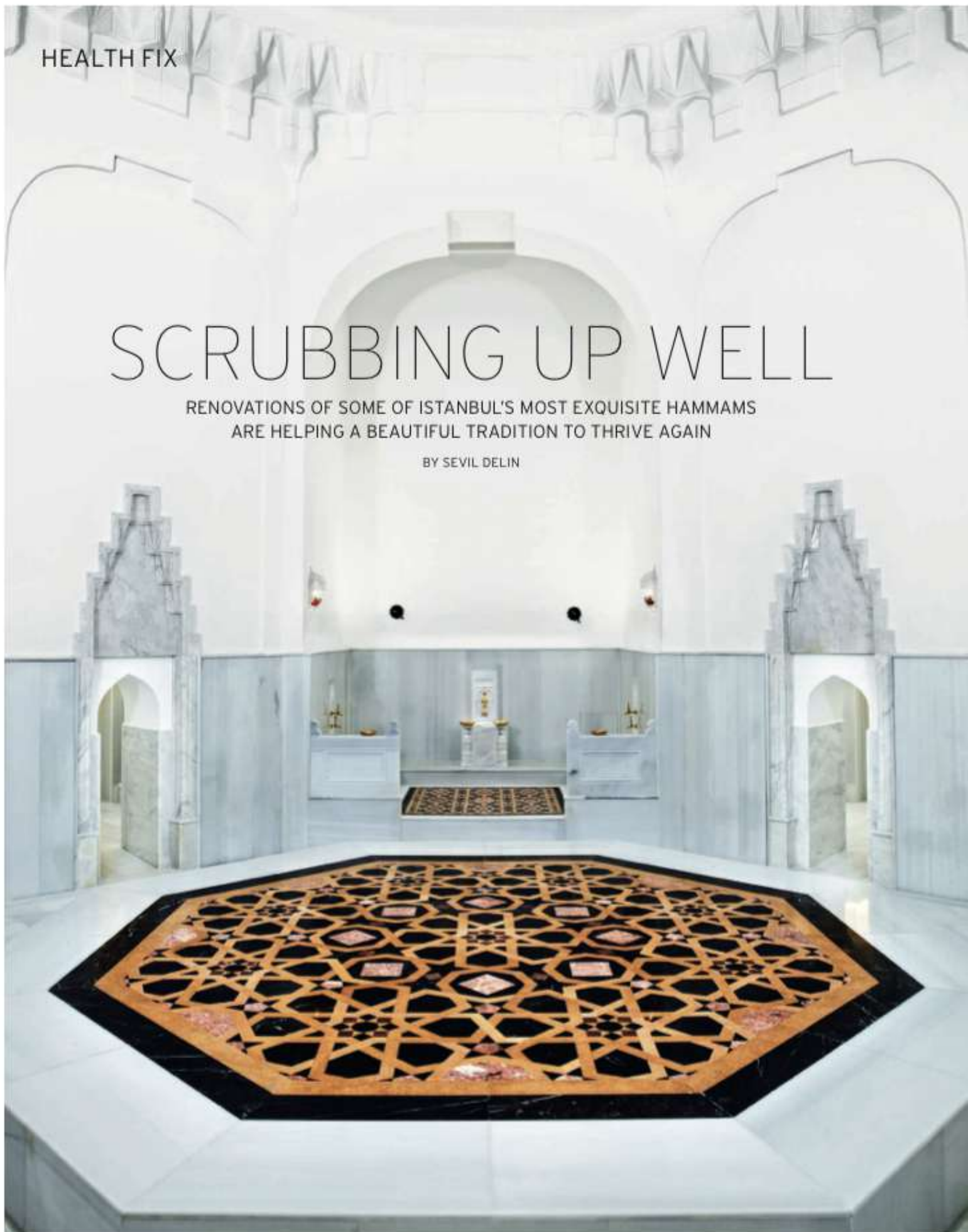
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HEALTH FIX

SCRUBBING UP WELL

RENOVATIONS OF SOME OF ISTANBUL'S MOST EXQUISITE HAMMAMS
ARE HELPING A BEAUTIFUL TRADITION TO THRIVE AGAIN

BY SEVIL DELIN





Clockwise from left: skylights in Çağaloğlu Hamamı; basin at Hürrem Sultan Hamamı; Çağaloğlu Hamamı's Ottoman architecture; soothing the skin; Zeyrek Çinili Hamam. Opposite: Hürrem Sultan Hamamı



FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE,
PEOPLE CONGREGATED UNDER
THE HAMMAM'S DOMED ROOFS

AS A CHILD I WAS ENCHANTED by my Turkish great-grandmother's hammam clogs that stood on a shelf in my parents' bathroom. I marvelled at their size, these tiny wooden slippers inlaid with mother-of-pearl and embellished with silver embroidery, and I wondered how she managed to walk, given their 9cm stilts that raised her feet off the wet floor. These were probably her bridal bath slippers, or nalin, worn only once, at her traditional prenuptial bathhouse ablutions. The gelin hammamı, or bridal bath, was an essential part of Ottoman marriage customs, and would feature food as well as singing and dancing.

Ottoman public baths were for every stratum of society. From cradle to grave, people congregated under the hammam's domed roofs, which were dotted with small protruding windows known as elephant eyes. The belief was that cleanliness was next to godliness, a concept expressed in the phrase, "temizlik imandan gelir", meaning "cleanliness is a part of faith". The hammam marked important milestones in life. New mothers stayed in bed for 40 days and ended their seclusion with a trip to the hammam; men headed to the steamer following circumcision or military service.

On their arrival in Asia Minor, the Ottomans found a squeaky-clean civilisation in the Byzantines. When they merged their bathhouse structure with Turkish bathing rituals, the Muslim observance of cleanliness, the hammam (derived from the Arabic word "hamm" meaning "to heat") was born. Contrary to Western exotic-erotic fantasies, segregation has always been the rule, be it separate bathing areas or a single space holding different schedules for each gender. For women a trip to the hammam was a rare opportunity to engage in social activity. It is said that a man forbidding his wife to go to the hammam was grounds for divorce.

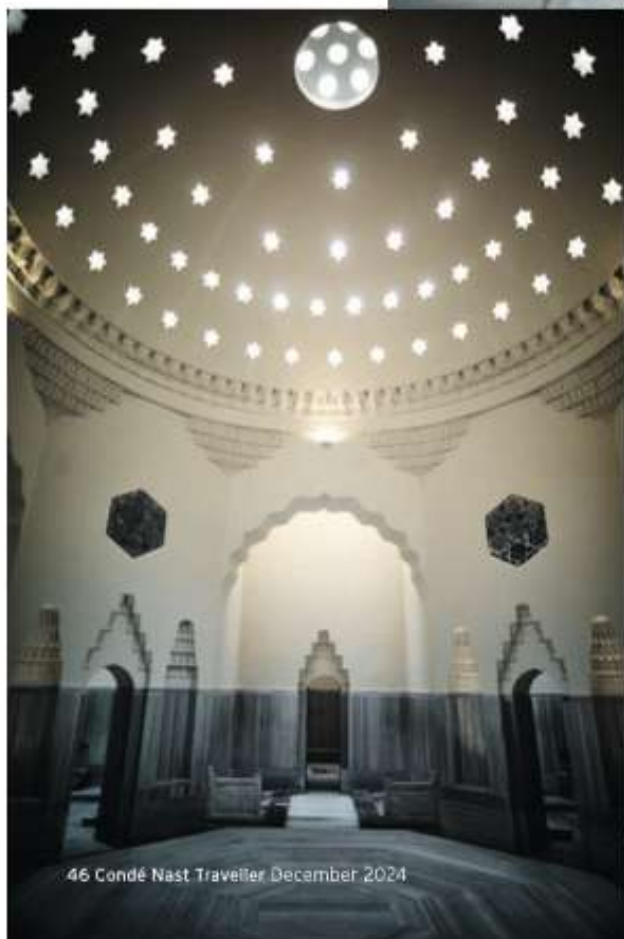
When the majority of Istanbul's homes became equipped with hot water, hammams lost their prominence. Yet while their place at the centre of social customs has gone, the past decade or so has seen a revival – and the ➤



HEALTH FIX



Clockwise from bottom left:
Zeyrek Çinili Hamamı;
Kılıç Ali Paşa Hamamı;
bath time; Hürrem Sultan
Hamamı; exterior of the
Kılıç Ali Paşa complex



restoration of several historical hammams, such as the giant-domed Kılıç Ali Paşa Hamamı, built in 1580 by famed Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan in Tophane (Cervantes may have worked on its construction as a prisoner of war). There's also Sultanahmet's Çağaloğlu Hamamı, which now has a fine dining restaurant, Lokanta 1741, perched on its arched roof. Across from Hagia Sophia, Hürrem Sultan Hamamı – erected by Sinan in 1556 for the wife of Süleyman the Magnificent – has been restored to its full imperial splendour.

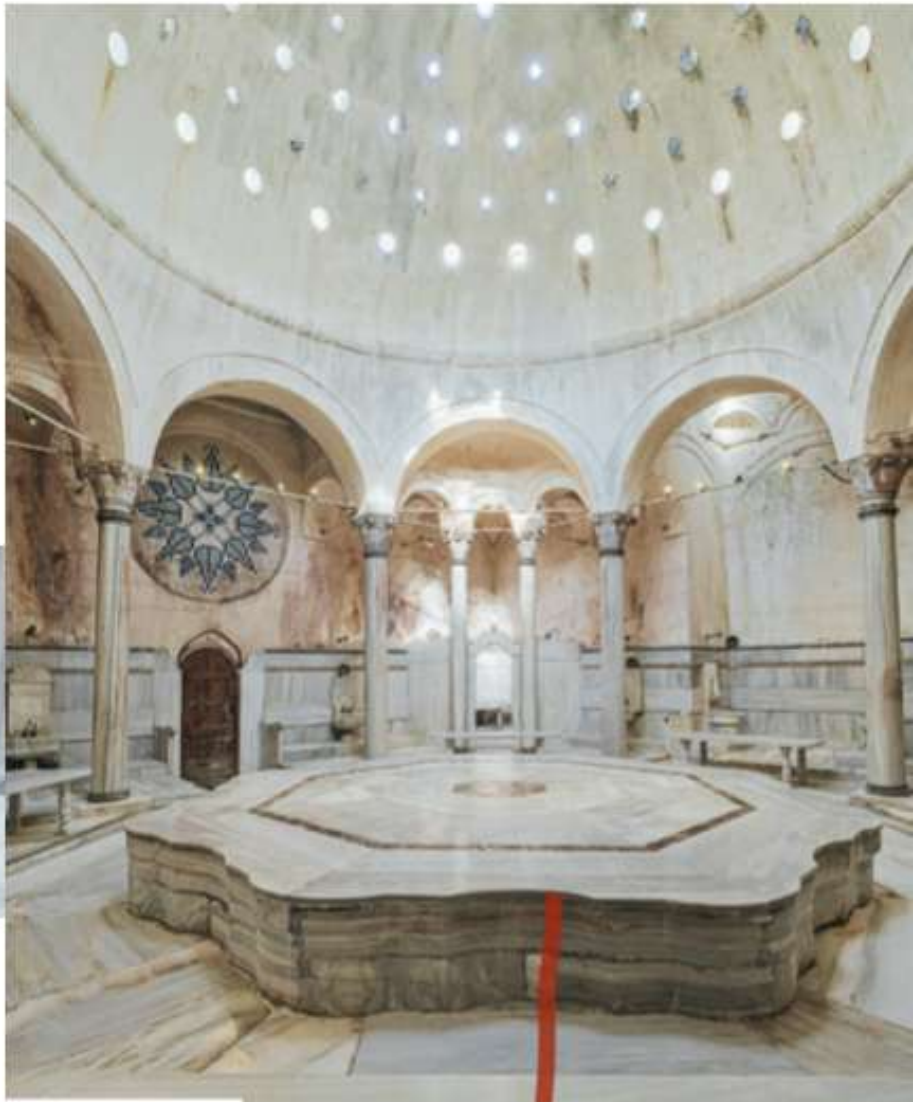
So embedded are hammams in today's culture that they are now an obligatory feature in many of Istanbul's most important hotels, such as the Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at the Bosphorus, Çırağan Palace Kempinski Istanbul and Six Senses Kocataş Mansions. The Stay Boulevard Nişantaşı's subterranean Stay Spa in upscale Nişantaşı contains a mini pool, therapy rooms, sauna and a reassuringly authentic hammam with white marble walls and brass taps.

But the mother of all hammams is Zeyrek Çinili Hamam, built 500 years ago. "Çinili" (meaning "tiled") references the 10,000 blue-and-white İznik tiles that originally lined the building's interior. Located in Zeyrek, a Unesco World Heritage neighbourhood, the hammam was designed by Sinan and commissioned by the infamous pirate (and later navy admiral) Hayreddin Barbarossa. Sailors taken captive by Barbarossa were probably conscripted to work on its construction in the 1530s, and left their mark by scratching graffiti drawings of their naval vessels onto the plaster walls of the basement. Sadly the tiles were sold off in the 1870s (although fragments still remain on the walls), some of them finding their way to the collections of the V&A, Louvre and British Museum. The missing tiles were replaced by a palimpsest of frescoes, and the structure fell into ruin.

This year Zeyrek Çinili Hamam welcomed back bathers following a painstaking 13-year, £11.5 million restoration headed by mother-daughter duo Bike Gürsel and Koza Güreli Yazgan of The Marmara Hotels group. British Cypriot fashion



Clockwise from top left:
 pure relaxation; Cağaloğlu
 Hamamı's central area;
 Hürrem Sultan Hamamı;
 Zeyrek Çinili Hamamı;
 basin there



**A BATH AT ZEYREK ÇINILI
 HAMMAM IS EXACTLY THE SAME
 AS IT WAS CENTURIES AGO**

designer Hussein Chalayan was enlisted to devise the nahn slippers as well as a bespoke collection of uniforms, towels, robes and ready-to-wear pieces. When I met up with Chalayan, he described the Çinili project as a masterpiece "surpassing any previous hammam encounters... the harmony of space, light, carvings and patina was impossibly beautiful, and the design process was inspired by my fascination with the art of wrapping a towel around the body".

Many of Chalayan's designs are unisex, as is the hammam: uniquely in the city, Zeyrek's men's and women's hammams will run a rotating schedule, allowing patrons to experience both sections. Today, a bath at Zeyrek Çinili Hamam – in fact, at all of Istanbul's hammams – is exactly the same as it was centuries ago. The elaborate bathing process can take hours, so bringing a friend is a must. The first step involves undressing and wrapping yourself in a peştemal (a thin, super-absorbent cotton towel). Next, a lie-down for a few minutes on a heated marble slab to relax the muscles and flush out toxins. Then an attendant bathes you, scrubs you with a kese mitt, washes your hair and gives you a sudsy massage. They dry you off and wrap you head to toe in a fresh peştemal, before depositing you on a day bed in the cold room near the fountain, with a drink and snack.

When I got married in Istanbul in 2006, I dreamt of blending Eastern and Western wedding traditions with a "hen hammam" but was put off by the paucity of venues, which were all in a run-down state. Today I would be showered with choices. Perhaps I'll plan a sororal Turkish baptism to mark our 20th anniversary, under the star-shaped windows of Zeyrek Çinili Hamam's white domes. This time I'll bring my great-grandmother's nahn with me. kilicalipasahamami.com; cagalogluhamami.com.tr; hurremsultanhamami.com; zeyreckinilihamam.com 📍

