

The pink marble relaxation room at La Sultana spa

FULL STEAM AHEAD

Four very different spas define the breadth of Marrakech's hammam scene. **LISA KJELLSSON** puts them through their paces.

In Morocco a weekly hammam bath is a must, an integral part of life that is about so much more than simply having a wash. It's a way to decompress and purify the body before going to the mosque for the Friday prayer, and a form of mindfulness in itself. In the countryside and remote mountain villages most homes have their own little wood-fired steam room, but in cities like Marrakech people tend to visit a public hammam. The traditional cleanse has also been turned into an art form in Moroccan spas offering the same ritual involving *savon beldi*, a gooey soap made with crushed olives and olive oil infused with eucalyptus; a thorough scrub with a *kessa*, the traditional wash mitt; and *rhassoul*, a body mask of mineral-rich mud from the Atlas Mountains. I had the full works in four very different Marrakech spas and was steamed, scrubbed, oiled and kneaded from top to toe.

LA SULTANA

La Sultana is an oasis in the heart of the Medina, and one of the most gorgeous hotels I've stayed in, but the Royal Hammam (45 mins, £34) wasn't the pampering experience I'd expected. There is no steam, as "international guests aren't used to it" and when left to relax in the small and brightly lit pink marble room I just got bored. Despite my pleas the scrub was rather rough, and having too hot then freezing cold water chucked all over me while lying down was a bit of a shock to the system. It also meant I got soap in my eyes, which stung horribly. Thankfully the rest of my spa treatments were much better. La Sultana's signature massage with neroli-infused argan oil (50 mins, £59) is a classic spa massage that finally helped me relax, and the body wrap with argan cream (20 mins, £34), rich in vitamin A and E making it the perfect quick fix for dry or sunburnt skin, left me silky smooth. Rooms from £303; lasultanahotels.com ▶







Above: The hammam at Riad Farnatchi, where the menu includes a seven-plant rhassoul clay mask, rinsed off with rosewater

RIAD FARNATCHI

Every once in a while a treatment really blows my mind, and that's what happened at Riad Farnatchi's chic little spa. Holistic massage expert Ahmed Bihssi combines Moroccan, Ayurvedic and reiki techniques in a ritual involving warm neroli oil, known for its relaxing effect. Using heated herb poultices – with lavender, cloves, rose and rosemary, and sea salt to draw out negative energy – he applied tapping motions on pressure points to soften knotted muscles. Ahmed works intuitively to treat each client according to their individual needs, and in my case that involved attempting to unblock my solar plexus – ie releasing tension in my stomach – to rebalance my energy flow. I could tell from the sense of peace I felt afterwards that some deep healing had taken place (90 mins, £60).

Equally, Farnatchi Spa is the perfect hole-in-the-wall sanctuary to pop into for a reviving cleanse after sightseeing in the Medina. The Royal Hammam (60 mins, £46) is a steamy affair that includes a seven-plant rhassoul mask rinsed off with rosewater. *Rooms from £250; riadfarnatchi.com*

TIGMI

Set in the Berber village of Tagadert, 25 kilometres outside central Marrakech, Tigmi is a charmingly rustic retreat enveloped in a

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stillness you simply won't find in the city. The spa is the highlight – an intimate space where you can leave your worries at the door and surrender to the care of your bath attendant. Inside the cave-like hammam the air is hot and humid and I felt my body relax as it was coated in luscious savon beldi. A few minutes in a separate steam room allows the soap to seep into the pores before it is scrubbed off with an exfoliating wash mitt. To a hammam novice this can feel a little rough, but it is gratifying to see the dead skin come off in the process. Next a lavender-infused rhassoul mask was brushed all over my body, and a clay and silk powder mask infused with seaweed, rosemary and sage applied to my hair. I was left to relax for 15 minutes in the candle-lit hammam while the mud worked its magic. After a thorough

rinse, the Mineral Body Care ritual (40 mins, £42) ended with an invigorating dip in the plunge pool followed by a mini massage with neroli oil. I not so much walked as floated out of the spa. The following day I returned for an energising massage (45 mins, £34) and traditional Berber facial with hydrating peach extract (40 mins, £29), and by the end of my stay I felt reborn. *Rooms from £158; tigmi.com*

AMANJENA

Wellness is front and centre at all Aman resorts, not least its Moroccan outpost located in leafy Palmeraie, a 15-minute drive south-east of the Medina. The spa is a bit of a cultural melting pot but has several locally inspired treatments, and its signature Moroccan Bloom ritual (120 minutes, £211) is hammam heaven. The format is the traditional savon beldi application followed by a deep exfoliation and rhassoul mask to nourish and hydrate the skin, but also includes a white clay facial. It's all rinsed off with eucalyptus water before ending with an hour-long massage – either relaxing holistic or deep tissue. I also had a wonderfully decadent hair treatment and head massage (45 mins, £118) with heated argan oil infused with rosemary and geranium – super soothing and therapeutic for both the hair and scalp. *Rooms from £446; aman.com* ■



Clockwise from top: Ahmed Bihssi at Riad Farnatchi's spa is renowned for his holistic massage treatment; Massage therapy at Amanjena; Savon beldi, a soap made from crushed olives and eucalyptus; The hammam at Tigmi

