

## A Moroccan Dream

By Raoul Andrews

With the explosion of the Spa Industry world wide, certain parts of the world are emerging as leaders through the quality of their techniques and products. One of these is Morocco. The country has always had a history of exotic healing and beauty enhancement traditions and much like countries in Asia have their own culture of using local, natural products to treat various skin and hair problems.

The Henna has been used by Moroccan women as hair treatments and in creams for make-up. Khol has been used for centuries to give eyes that mysterious glow that inflames the look of Oriental women. Rhasoul is a clay from the plateau of Meknes, at the base of the Atlas Mountains which were part of the ocean thousands of years ago. This soil is full of marine oligo-elements that have incredible nourishing properties for the skin. Plants and spices used in cosmetics and Spa products are plentiful in Morocco.

Olive oils mixed with a number of essential oils and plant extracts have been used for centuries by this country's women. But mostly the "huile

d'Argan" or ARGAN oil is the one product that characterizes best Morocco's signature treatments. It is found only in that part of the world; even if some claim to have found argan bushes in South America! Argan bushes are a prickly type of cacti that produce a berry which is about 1/3 of an inch in diameter, has an enormous pit and a tiny layer of pulp. The oils used both for cooking and salads and cosmetic applications, are derived from crushing these pits. The oils derived from the crushing process are either used raw or cooked. The cosmetic usage is thru massages or simple application of the oil on the face or body. Various plant and fruit extracts are mixed with the oils to add to their specific therapeutic properties. In the South of Morocco, the region called "Berber Country" is where most of the Argan oil comes from.

During my visit to Agadir, a beach resort town not too far from the Sahara Desert, I visited the best local "Argan Day Spa". The Spa was designed along the concept of the "Ryad". A Ryad is a house inside of the walls of a city which will house entire families and their servants, some are huge and others small but whether palaces or simple villas they all share a small exterior entrance, usually a simple door that opens to a small corridor which in turn can lead to a very large patio with fountains, vegetation etc... Living room, bedroom, dining areas are spread throughout the



MOROCCO

## MOROCCO HAS A HISTORY OF EXOTIC HEALING



## MOROCCO



structure in meanders reminiscent of a labyrinth with mysterious nooks and niches hidden behind curtains and wooden screens. Many day spas in Morocco have been created in such Ryads and just as, many savvy tourists coming to this country prefer to go to Ryad Luxury boutique hotels; they also have discovered that the best Spa treatments are not found in the large hotels but in these small heavenly enclaves. The one I checked out is "Espace d'Argane". It is located on a small residential street away from the big hotels and tourist areas.

Entering from the bright sunny exterior, it takes a few minutes to adjust to the darkness of the Spa as it is lit by candles and very low intensity lights. You feel that you have entered a secret niche of a

harem in a "Thousand and one Night" Sultan's palace. The waiting area is a very comfortable oriental living room lined with sofas and deep arm chairs. An herbal tea of rosemary, thyme, lavender and other local herbs is offered and as you are sipping the elixir which is said to relax you, the Spa director comes and to help you choose which treatment you may want. The Menu is very simple as massages are the core of treatments offered, but here it is quality not quantity that is the name of the game. I chose a "two hour" package:

A young woman dressed in a beautiful "kaftan", the traditional Moroccan garb, came to accompany me to the treatment room. The room has beautiful drapes hanging on the walls giving the appearance of being in a "desert tent" the dim lighting and the flicker of the candles creates a very sensual ambiance and mood. Next to a massage table decorated with flowers is a large armchair where I am invited to sit after undressing and slipping into a thick Terry cloth bathrobe.

One of the attendants arrived shortly with a beautiful brass basin filled with warm water and rose petals from the "Dades Valley" where most of the rose essential oils used in the perfume industry come from. My feet were washed and massaged for ten to fifteen minutes. A delightful experience! Then I am invited to lie face down on the massage table and the masseuse helps me out of the robe. With my head in the "cradle" I see a brass bowl filled with flowers and rising from it was a delicious fragrance.

What followed was one of the best relaxation massages I have ever received! Far better than the ones I received in Thailand last year! The faint sound of Moroccan music in the background helped created that extraordinary "experience" one looks for in a top of the line Spa but which is not always there. Once the massage was over, I was left to relax for a few minutes while sipping on a

## HAMMAM – A PLACE FOR SOCIAL GATHERING



## MOROCCO

glass of awesome Moroccan mint tea. The oil used in the massage is that famous “argan” oil which is so good for the skin. My masseuse recommended I keep it on for the rest of the day; she simply wiped the excess of it with a towel.

As I was about to leave I was invited to browse through the displays of retail products and all the different creams and oils offered were explained, their composition and usage described. It was like being a kid in a candy store...I walked out with a half dozen different products which will make great gifts for my friends! Of course I kept some for myself! So, there it is perfection in the raw. No “licensed therapists” or “ISPA” certified Spa managers! just human compassion and a history of great hospitality and awesome healing techniques.

## The Naked Truth

By Janelle Coutts

The Hammam is a tradition found in Moroccan communities as a place for social gathering and ritual cleansing. This custom is fashioned after the ancient Turkish baths which used hot steam rooms and water to promote good health. But, the Hammam is doused with Moroccan flavor using massage techniques and products such as local

oils and herbs to inspire beauty and treat various hair problems.

I had the opportunity to visit this beautiful North African country to visit some friends in the coastal and resort town of Agadir. I was thrilled when my hostess invited me to join her at the local Hammam for her bi-weekly cleansing and exfoliation. What I experienced there was certainly short of extraordinary.

We entered an inconspicuous white building and descended marble stairs into the locker room. I was immediately greeted by my attendant, Fatiha, whose enthusiasm about my visit made me very excited. I was a little uncomfortable though because she was completely naked! And after a few moments of introduction, I was asked to disrobe completely as well! Imagine a Moroccan girl in such a situation and it's understandable why I was a bit shy to do so until, I realized that everyone around me was naked and didn't seem to care. I took a deep breath and went for it. With nothing but water slippers, I followed Fatiha through the three chambers of the Hammam, each one increasing in temperature and humidity. I reserved my mat in the hottest room.

As I looked around, there were women everywhere. In the hottest room alone there were



## HAMMAM – A PLACE FOR RITUAL CLEANSING



MOROCCO

25 to 30 women washing their hair and bathing each other while chatting about the latest news, family and friends. This reminded me of America's Starbucks phenomenon or what would have been the beauty parlor experience in my grandmother's day, everyone fully clothed, of course. Here in Morocco, women commune in the Hammam! The treatment began with a hot water rinse and an application of henna that was left on for about 5 minutes, which left a bronzed, sun-kissed glow on my skin. This is a diluted form of the same henna that is commonly used for staining the hands and feet for traditional Oriental celebrations. The women in the Hammam were also using the henna as a treatment to soften their hair and enhance the color. Fatima washed off the henna thoroughly and then carefully led me by the hand, so I wouldn't crash onto the very wet tiled floor (no risk management here!), to my location in the warm room. We both sat on the floor and she started the treatment by applying *savon noir* to my arm and neck. This is the essential product used in every Hammam, a black soap made with an olive-oil base and essential oils. It has a delicious aroma that fills the entire Hammam and leaves the skin feeling like silk.

Fatima used the *savon noir* in combination with the *kiis*, a natural fiber exfoliation glove that removed all of the dead skin from my body. This was no ordinary exfoliation! I watched as layer after layer of my dry, dead skin floated toward the community drain in the center of the room. The local women seemed amused by the copious amount of dead "white" skin accumulating all around me and even Fatima strongly encouraged me to come back for another scrub before I left town to take care of this problem! Apparently I



don't scrub hard enough in the shower, did I know? Gradually, Fatima covered and scrubbed every inch of my body, applying the *savon noir* and then rubbing with the *kiis*, in a deliberate, gentle rhythm that she has mastered over the last 15 years working in the Hammam.

Following the exfoliation, Fatima shampooed my hair and gave me a divine scalp massage, rinsing and rinsing with hot water. I was then introduced to another local product used in the Hammam called *rhassoul*. This is a special clay found in the Atlas Mountains that is rich in trace elements and nourishing properties for the skin. I was given a FULL body massage with *rhassoul*, including buttocks, stomach and breast massage and it was like I had found Paradise. No massage I have ever experienced in America with full drying could ever compare to this level of true massage, relaxation. Fatima has an understanding of the body that no "massage school" could teach!

I was completely washed off and several buckets of cold water were splashed over my face. This was shocking at first but resulted in an awakening that prepared me for my exit. My towel was brought to me and I was led back to the locker area where an attendant brushed my hair and even applied body lotion to sooth and protect my now glowing, clean skin!

I realized while getting dressed that I had arrived as a stranger but was leaving as a friend. I spent over an hour with dozens of women that I could hardly communicate with and yet it was the most inspiring, unifying experience of my life in Morocco! The elements of community, acceptance and caring for one another are essential to the Hammam as the *savon noir*, henna and *kiis*. At the Hammam in Marrakech, I have given a cultural gift that I will cherish forever.

In the Hammam, you are who you are and you have the freedom just to be...simple, true. ■