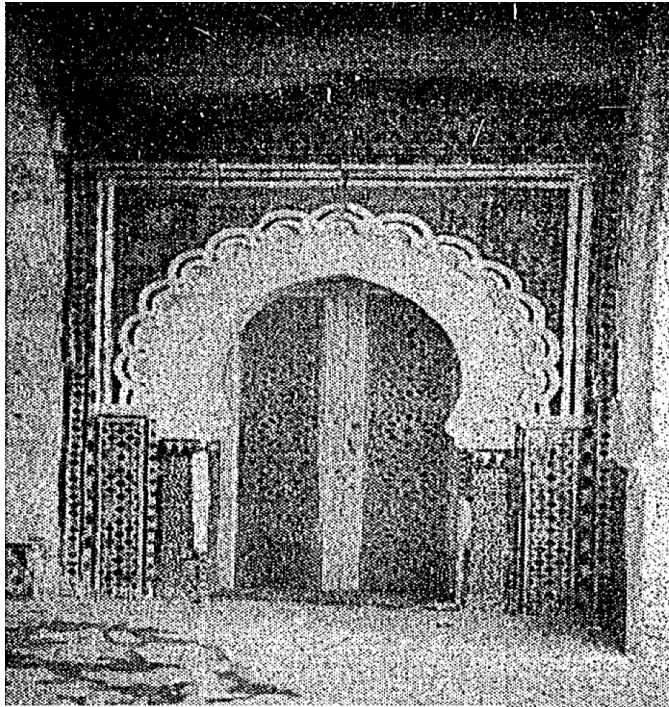


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## Taking To the Baths In Morocco, Scrubbing Off the Years

By Lee Haas Norris  
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Take a sponge bath on the floor with a bunch of unknown women whose languages I couldn't even understand? Ordinarily a pushover for unexplored possibilities, I wasn't sure I was up for this one.

But my oldest daughter, Kate, a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, is very persuasive, as I rediscovered while visiting her. She has adapted well to a culture in which few homes have Western-style bathrooms. Like Most of the female population, she bathes frequently in a women's *hamam* or public bathhouse, and one morning in Marrakesh, she and her friend, Amy, urged me to go to the hamam with them. "Think positive, Mom, think cross-culture, you won't regret it," Kate coaxed, hardly acknowledging my ambivalent response.

Before we set out they presented me with the accoutrements I'd need: a plastic bag big enough to hold washcloth, bar soap, shampoo, hair brush, deodorant, body lotion, a

bath towel, clean underwear. Nothing odd here, but wait, there was more: a plastic soup-bowl-sized dish, a mug filled with jellied brown "country" soap, a rolled-up pink plastic mat two feet square and a black hamam mitt with a texture not unlike that of steel wool. The Moroccan equivalent of flip-flops was the footwear of choice.

From the outside, the women's hamam didn't look much different from the other low, yellowish cement buildings in our medina neighborhood. Once inside the entryway, where you can buy midget plastic pillows of shampoo and soap from someone's enterprising grandma in case you have forgotten your own, I thought at first I'd walked into the changing room of a third-world Y. The low-watt bulbs overhead; the damp smell; the benches full of women and children dressing and undressing; the bags and the bath towels—all bespoke a somewhat skewed familiarity. It was the day before the Aid, the feast marking the end of Ramadan, and the room was packed. Even in the dim light, the women putting their clothes back on almost seemed to glow, and despite the noise, the whole place radiated mellowness.

Total nudity is considered bad form at the hamam: I followed my daughter's lead and took everything off but my underpants. We staked out a section of bench for our clothes and towels, picked up our bags of washing gear and selected empty buckets from a supply by the archway to the bathing rooms. Kate paid the female hamam manager one dirham to keep an eye on our possessions and two more for the use of the hamam (about 30 cents total).

Steam and echoing voices arose as we flip-flopped our way among shadowy outlines of recumbent women. The only light came from a hole high up in the domed ceiling and the tiles felt wet and slick "What's the matter, Mom? You look a little shell-shocked," Kate observed kindly, sensing my tension.

My eyes began to adapt to the dark. On one side of the room, across from all the bodies, I could make out a waist-high trough half-filled with water; more was pouring in from the faucets. Amy told me to find places for us while she and Kate went to fill the pails. Such confidence they placed in me! But when I finally discovered a small patch of floor space, the women surrounding it smiled at me, backing up a little so I could unroll the mats. When Amy and Kate returned they plopped down one pail filled with water hot enough to brew tea and another filled with lukewarm. They got more for themselves, then showed me the routine.

We used the plastic dish to pour hot water over our bodies, then coated ourselves with country soap, leaving it on to soften the skin while we shampooed and rinsed our hair. Then we rinsed off the country soap. After two or three trips for more water, the real work began. "Think you're clean?" my daughter asked. "Start scrubbing."

I stretched the hamam mitt over my right hand and followed her example. Stupefied, I looked at the thick rolls of gray dead skin sloughing off my legs, my stomach and

everywhere else I could reach. I rinsed it all off with the tepid water. "Now that you've loosened the dirt a little, take that mitt and scrub some more," Kate instructed. This time a second grimy layer peeled away. A third pass with the mitt took more off and left my skin tingling.

Between bouts of scrubbing I watched the Moroccan women. You couldn't call their bodies, most of them, anything but fat and soft—and they seemed perfectly happy with them. Nobody hurried. Movements looked purposeful, efficient and relaxed. Little girls, and boys too young for the men's hamam, were getting patiently cleansed by adults whose talk was punctuated with bursts of raucous laughter. Translating for me what they could overhear, Kate and Amy briefly categorized the subject matter: family, neighborhood gossip, recipes, who's coming to dinner for the holiday and the latest episode on the nightly Egyptian soaps.

Out on the street these same women, some of them veiled, would reassume the second-class status their culture demanded of them. Inside the hamam, their only sanctioned meeting place away from home, they had another life. That might not sound like much in the way of liberation, Kate said; it took living in the country a while as an outsider to appreciate.

After the fourth scrub we refilled our pails and headed into the next room for a final wash with our own bar soap. Sisterhood was alive here: The woman in back of me washed my back with her soap, I washed hers with mine. I was mellowing fast in all that heat and goodwill, the steam seeping into my body, no more dead cells sloughing off. Just what was it I'd thought I couldn't handle? It was only after we packed up and walked out into intense sunlight that I saw for myself what my daughter had hinted at. Three decades before I'd sprung for a pre-wedding facial at an expensive Madison Avenue salon. My entire skin now looked and felt as exfoliated as my face had then. I'd say eight years had come off. I still have my mitt. I use it after a bath Sometimes, but the results are never what they were that morning in Marrakesh. Some things you just can't replicate—especially when all you have to work with is shiny American plumbing and privacy.

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[illustration by Lee Haas Norris]

In Marrakesh, the women's hamam is a cross-cultural experience behind a typical Moroccan doorway.