

## GETTING NAKED IN MARRAKESH

**BY MAISIE WILHELM**

Now, I'm pretty squeamish about foot fungus and the idea of communal bathhouses conjures images of gratuitous nudity that makes Alice squirm. So we hadn't planned on visiting a hammam during our 10-day trip to Morocco, even though we were both intrigued.

But when the friendly man running the riad in Marrakesh asked us if we wanted to go to the hammam with his sister, the milky-skinned Hasna who made our morning pancakes, we decided that an invitation to go with someone who could show us the ropes was too enticing to pass up.

With no common language besides Gesturish, Hasna beckoned us to follow her through the medina's labyrinthine streets, toting rolled plastic mats in a large bucket. Hasna haggled with a merchant for savon noir, or black soap—the color of maple syrup and the consistency of petroleum jelly.

The hammam entrance was a doorless archway leading into a series of domed rooms tiled in mosaic zellij. Hasna spoke to the toothless lady sitting at the entrance and then motioned to us to undress in the changing room where another smiling young woman — wearing only underwear briefs — showed us what to do. Following their lead, Alice and I stripped. For a culture that expects conservative dressing from women, the hammam provided quite a peep show. This was the most skin I had seen during our trip. Alice wore a one-piece suit. Flip-flops were a must for me.

The steam made the dark rooms mysterious. Women filled large buckets from a spout and sat chatting and washing themselves or their children. They stared at us — the only Westerners — curiously.

So many breasts probably made Alice uncomfortable; I had to take a deep breath before sitting on the wet plastic mat on the floor. Hasna and her friend doused us with warm water. They shoved the thick and gloppy blackish soap at us, smiling. To say it released an intensely earthy smell is an understatement. They nodded. We looked at each other, shrugged, and smeared handfuls all over. Hasna and her friend smiled widely.

For them, this was a weekly ritual. I remembered what our guide in the Fez medina had said — many Moroccan homes don't have bathrooms since they use the hammams. We'd never seen anything like it.

As the soap softened our skin, I thought 'So this is how Hasna gets her glow'. The stench of savon noir is worth it if you come out of the hammam feeling like butter.

Then Hasna and her friend slipped on gloves the texture of rough sandpaper and vigorously rubbed us everywhere. Alice and I winced under their rough treatment. When Hasna's friend noticed the grayish dead skin cells peeling off me, she giggled, and laughed at us. We suddenly understood why all the women had glistening skin. Weekly sandblasts will do that to you.

Three layers of skin lighter, we left feeling giddy (and milky). We'd just been through the ringer with Hasna's expert exfoliation, and survived our first hammam experience.