



Scrubbed and massaged, covered in white soapy foam, I lie back on the heated slab of grey marble and gaze at dozens of star-shaped skylights in the domed ceiling above. Steam wafts. Ambient music soothes. A female attendant wrapped in a *peshtemal*, a traditional Turkish towel, slaps by in designer clogs.

I'm in the UNESCO-listed Zeyrek district of Istanbul inside Çinili Hamam, a 500-year-old Ottoman bathhouse, recently reborn after a 13-year restoration. The archeological process unearthed enough relics – pottery, stone carvings and tile (*çinili*) fragments, digitally reconstructed – to inspire an adjoining museum, which I visited before the hamam.

I drift off thinking about one of the *hamamiye* poems that are inscribed on the cobalt-and-turquoise tiles under the plaster here: *Hamamin alusu benzer cennete* (The space within the bathhouse is like Paradise).

I'm thinking, too, about the contemporary art exhibition in the newly uncovered Byzantine cistern, a warren of narrow corridors and low-lit alcoves beneath the hamam, when – whoosh! – a bucket of warm water is sluiced across my body. The attendant looms, smiling.

"Good?" she asks, guiding me over to a marble seat for a hair wash before patting me down with a *peshtemal* (like the *nalin* clogs, the handiwork of Turkish fashion designer Hussein Chalayan). I'm then led into the magnificent interior of the Cold Room for tea, biscuits and a lie-down.

TRAVEL TURKEY

Unearthed wonder

An Ottoman-era bathhouse re-emerges as a hub of so much more than soaking, writes Jane Cornwell.



Need to know

Opening hours

Zeyrek Çinili Hamam is open from Tuesday through Sunday between 8am–10pm. The last recommended time to book is 8.30pm.

Rates

Hamam treatments start at €105 (\$190) for 50 minutes. Museum tickets are 180 Turkish lira (\$6).

Exhibition

Where the River Burns by French artist Juliette Minchin runs until January 18.

New York and Istanbul. Redeveloping a hamam, she tells me, seemed like a logical business move.

"What are three things that people do when they visit Istanbul?" she says. "They eat Turkish food, drink Turkish coffee and go to a Turkish hamam."

A rare double hamam (the men's quarters are equally as lush), Çinili Hamam was built between 1530 and 1540 by Mimar Sinan, the chief imperial architect of the Ottoman Empire, after a late-life commission by the Ottoman navy admiral Hayreddin 'Redbeard' Barbarossa. Perched in hilly Zeyrek, then home to palace officials and military commanders, the building had an interior adorned with 10,000 tiles.

Most were ransacked; a few found their way to collections at the British Museum and its ilk.

Over the centuries, a succession of owners altered, remodelled and replastered. The hamam had been derelict for years when it was purchased in 2010 on the say-so of Yazgan's mother, Bike Gursal. "We wanted to continue the Turkish tradition of bathhouses as communal spaces and gathering places," says Yazgan.

"The architect said it would take three or four years to restore. But as our archaeological team peeled back the layers, locating the underground cistern, finding objects including Roman artefacts dating back to the fifth century, the timeline kept extending and it became an obsession.

"When we opened [in September 2023], it was as a multifunctional cultural complex that includes a museum and an exhibition program."

Technology and history meet in the museum, where tile fragments have been digitally reconstructed into their hexagonal originals.

A display case features rows of original



nalin clogs inlaid with mother-of-pearl, their varied heights signifying social standing. Projections on a wall recreate original hamam rituals, and display *hamamiye* couplets with English subtitles.

Down in the cistern, an exhibition titled *Where the River Burns* features the work of French artist Juliette Minchin, who conjures artworks from tin and wax.

It speaks to an art residency program in which international artists work with local artisans to create work that complements its confines.

"We are giving the city of Istanbul a new multisensory experience," says Yazgan, "and making the hamam ritual relevant for today's world." **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Zeyrek Çinili Hamam.

Clockwise from top: Inside Zeyrek Çinili Hamam; the women's Cold Room; the hamam retains architectural relics; ceramic fragments and artefacts in the museum. PHOTOS: IBRAHIM OZBUNAR, MURAT GERMEN; GIOVANNI EMILIO GALANELLO

