



# THE JOY OF STEAM

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Sex, wine and the baths may ruin our bodies, but they make life worth living.  
- Ancient Roman gravestone

Arriving in the Sultanahmet district of [Istanbul](#), built above the ruins of the Greek city of [Byzantium](#) and the [Roman](#) capital of [Constantinople](#), I already felt like I'd traveled halfway back in time to the ancient world. Then, in tea houses all over the city, I found dog-eared leaflets advertising the pleasures of Cagaloglu *Hamam*, the city's oldest bath house:

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN A TURKISH BATH? IF YOU HAVEN'T,  
YOU'VE MISSED ONE OF LIFE'S GREAT EXPERIENCES AND  
NEVER BEEN CLEAN!

The sales pitch added that [Kaiser Wilhelm](#) of Germany, the composer [Franz Liszt](#), [Florence Nightingale](#), and [Cameron Diaz](#) had all enjoyed steam baths here. No less than 138 films had been shot within the *hamam*'s walls, and it had been the subject of innumerable newspaper stories.

THE PRESS HAS MUCH PRAISED THIS BATHING HABIT!

How could I resist? For anyone interested in how the traditions of antiquity have survived to the modern day, a visit to a Turkish bath is essential: The Islamic *hamam* is possibly the most striking link we have to a key social practice of the [Greco-Roman](#) world.

Two thousand years ago, if you were visiting any city in the Roman Empire, you would be roused by the melodious bass of a copper gong resounding through the streets at dawn, announcing the opening of the *thermae*, or heated public baths - a sound, [Cicero](#) rhapsodized, that was sweeter than the voices of all the philosophers in [Athens](#). These ancient baths were far more than mere palaces of cleanliness: They were the Western world's first entertainment complexes, featuring gyms, massage parlors, restaurants, community centers, and tourist information offices. They were the ideal place to meet locals or get travel tips. In those palatial halls, citizens

of all classes lolled by pools, met friends, played ball games, relaxed, flirted, drank wine, and even had elegant candle-lit dinners. And like nightclubs or gyms today, a city's baths were unofficially graded: Some were chic, others *declassé*; some were expensive, others cost only a copper; some were magnificently designed, as large as cathedrals, decorated with enormous mosaics of [Neptune](#) and his dolphins, others grim and charmless, with bare walls and drafty changing rooms.

In short, a visit to the baths was the ideal way to enter the social life of a strange city.

Modern [Turkey](#) offers a unique connection to this ancient tradition: Two thousand years ago it was the Roman province of [Asia Minor](#), and it the only place in the [Mediterranean](#) where the historical line back to the *thermae* is unbroken. In Western Europe, the habit of public bathing did not survive the collapse of the Roman Empire: During the [Middle Ages](#), good Christians showed their repugnance of earthly matters by refusing to wash, remaining smelly, squalid, and flea-bitten until the late nineteenth century. But in the Eastern half of the Empire, soon known as Byzantium, the great Roman baths stayed open, and were even more popular after the [Ottoman Empire](#) conquered Turkey in the fifteenth century AD. Islam adhered to the ancient obsession with personal cleanliness, as well as the Greco-Roman tradition of bathing in public. Of course, there were some changes: Total nudity was forbidden under Islam; men wore loincloths, and women were provided with separate baths. But the connection is still powerful. In modern Turkey, many bath houses even still stand on the original classical sites. In fact, the very name "Turkish bath" was given by British visitors to Constantinople in the sixteenth century, who saw the ancient Roman *thermae* still in operation and incorrectly assumed they were an Ottoman invention.

Today, there are over 60 baths still officially registered in Istanbul. Sadly, these last *hamams* are under siege, as Turks in the big city increasingly prefer Western-style bathing in the privacy of their homes. Young Turks find steam rooms decidedly *outré* - several warned me that they were dens of disease and foot-rot, frequented only by country bumpkins, geriatrics, and hustlers. And yet the venerable institution staggers on.

Visiting Istanbul was obviously my chance to experience this ancient tradition. Still, I found myself delaying: The embarrassing fact was, I'd never had a massage, let alone visited an actual bath house. But by the time I'd