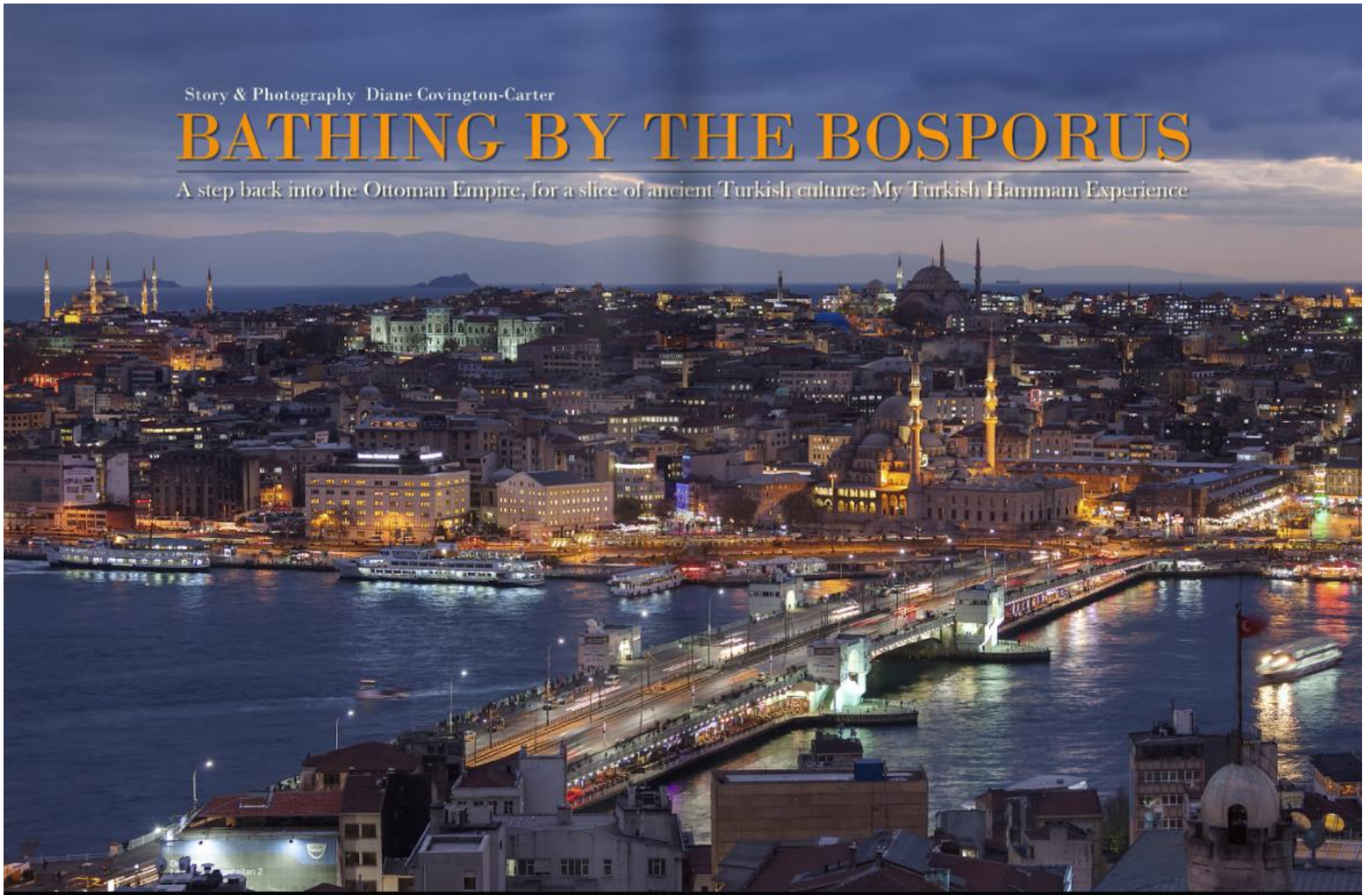


Story & Photography Diane Covington-Carter

BATHING BY THE BOSPORUS

A step back into the Ottoman Empire, for a slice of ancient Turkish culture: My Turkish Hammam Experience





We've all had our hair shampooed, but our bodies?
In the vibrant and historic Karaköy district of Istanbul, just up the hill from the sparkling Bosphorus, I climbed a steep street, stopping to gawk at the serpentine Camondo stairs on my right, that wound up to the street above.

I had booked a Turkish hamman, a centuries-old cleansing custom, and chose Tarihi Cesme Hamami, 1720. The numbers, 1720 represented not a street address, but the year that Grand Admiral Kaymak Mustafa Pasha, the naval commander of the Ottomans, founded this hamman. In 2017, the hamman underwent a complete restoration, preserving its original structure and is now tucked inside the Galata Istanbul Hotel MGallery by Sofitel.

Previous page: The view from the Karaköy district of Istanbul, (Galata Bridge) photo provided by the 10 Karaköy Hotel.
Left The famous Camondo stairway, in the Karaköy district of Istanbul.
Right: Looking down on the hamman area, preserved in the hotel.



In the hotel lobby, I took an elevator down to the hammam area, and as soon as I entered, I could feel its ancient roots. I walked down stone walkways and stairs, passing through wooden doors so low that I had to duck, a reminder that people were shorter three centuries ago. In a courtyard, a giant, 300-year-old dome with small holes dotting its surface let sunlight into the hammam room.

After I changed into a terry cloth robe and a paper thong, an attendant led me to the warm and steamy treatment room. There, Sara, a young Ethiopian woman guided me to a heated marble slab. I lay down wearing only the paper thong, but it was just Sara and me, so I felt comfortable. Sara began by gently scrubbing me all over with a loofa.

She rinsed me with warm water, using an antique metal basin to scoop the water from a trough. The ritual felt right, slow, and soft.

Sara then scrubbed me with a soft cloth, warm water and soap that made bubbles; it felt like being in a bubble bath without the bathtub. As she rinsed me again with warm water from the antique basin, I noticed how she took her time, moving back and forth, to the trough with the basin, the sound of her scooping up the warm water, her footsteps back to me and then the warmth as she poured the water onto me. The rhythm created a soothing pattern that allowed me to slow down and relax.

As she shampooed my hair, I looked up at the 300-year-old dome with its holes letting in sunlight, just as so many others had done before me, through the centuries. Sara made more trips to the trough with the basin, for more warm water to rinse out the shampoo.

She washed my face, then poured the last warm water rinse, all over. When I stood up, she gave me a final, refreshing, cool water rinse. As she rubbed me dry with a thick, soft towel, I felt buffed, polished, sparkly clean and relaxed.



Top: Antique metal basin to scoop the water from a trough

Bottom: The 10 Karaköy Hotel, Istanbul. Photo provided by the 10 Karaköy Hotel.

Right:-Fountains in the courtyard of the hammam.

After, wrapped up in my thick terry cloth robe, I settled into cushions on a deep, soft sofa, my feet not touching the marble floor. Turkish music played in the background and water flowed in a nearby small fountain. An antique tray, with a small teapot filled with spicy herbal tea, vintage teacups, water, and pomegranate juice, had been set out on a low table for me to enjoy. I could sit and relax as long as I liked.

As I sipped the herbal tea and breathed in its earthy fragrance, I relished the experience I had just had. I'd had my hair shampooed many times, in a busy modern hair salon. But my body? And in a clean and private space? I can't remember being cared for like that.

I washed my daughters and then my granddaughters with loving care, but being tended to so gently and thoroughly myself, as an adult, no. It felt tender, intimate, and nourishing. I felt grateful to have experienced a slice of ancient Turkish culture, in a space that held so much history. It felt like I had stepped back

in time, just for a short while, into the Ottoman Empire, with its slower pace and gentle customs.

The comfort of it stayed with me as I wandered back to my hotel and throughout my remaining days in Istanbul. I can even feel it again now, as I remember it.

IF YOU GO

10 Karaköy Hotel, a renovated classical icon from the 19th century, offers bountiful breakfasts, elegant and comfortable rooms, and a location convenient to all the important sights of Istanbul. At BahaneON10, the hotel's terrace restaurant, you can enjoy food, music and entertainment while experiencing a stunning view of Istanbul and the Bosphorus.

Tarihi Cesme Hamami, 1720, Winner of the World Luxury Spa Award, Luxury Hammam, Europe, 2022. A five-minute walk from the 10 Karaköy Hotel or the Karaköy tram stop.

