



A GENTLE GUIDE · FREE E-BOOK

The Hammam Ritual *at Home*

Kese, olive oil soap and the Turkish art of slow, deep cleansing



TELLAK PRESENTS

The Hammam Ritual at Home

A short guide to the history of the Turkish bath, what exfoliation and warmth do for your skin, why olive oil soap has lasted for a thousand years, and how to bring the whole ritual into your own bathroom.

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This e-book is free to share in its complete, unaltered form.

This guide is for general wellbeing and information only. It is not medical advice. If you have a skin condition, a heart or blood-pressure condition, are pregnant, or are unsure whether heat or exfoliation is right for you, please talk to your doctor or dermatologist first.

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Welcome to the warm room

In the old bathhouses of Istanbul, the man who scrubbed your back was called the *tellak*. He was not a luxury. He was part of ordinary life, as regular as the bakery or the market. Once a week, sometimes more, people walked under the domes, let the heat soften them, and lay down on warm marble while a coarse mitt took away a week's worth of tired skin. Then they wrapped themselves in a thin cotton towel, drank something cool, and sat for a while doing nothing at all.

We named our company after him because that is what we want to give you: not a product to rush through, but a ritual you return to. Most of us shower in a few distracted minutes. The hammam asks you to slow down and pay attention to your own body.

This short book is our invitation. In the first part, we walk through the long story of the hammam, from Roman baths to Ottoman domes. In the second, we look plainly at what heat, steam and exfoliation do for your skin, including what they *don't* do. The third part is about olive oil soap, the oldest gentle cleanser in the Mediterranean. The fourth part brings everything home with a step-by-step ritual, a weekly rhythm, a body map, safety notes and care tips.

You do not need a marble hall to enjoy any of this. A bathroom, a little time, a kese mitt, a good bar of soap and a towel are enough.

Take your time. That is the whole point.

— *The Tellak team*

Contents

PART ONE · THE STORY

1. Six hundred years of steam	6
2. Inside a hammam, room by room	11
3. The tools of the bath	16

PART TWO · YOUR SKIN

4. How your skin renews itself	20
5. What the kese really does	22
6. Heat, steam and a quiet mind	26

PART THREE · THE SOAP

7. A short history of olive oil soap	30
8. Why olive oil soap feels different	33

PART FOUR · AT HOME

9. Preparing your space	38
10. The ritual, step by step	40
11. A body map, rhythm and skin types	44
12. Safety, care and questions	47

FINALLY

Meet the Tellak Hammam Set	50
Glossary · Checklist · Sources	54



PART ONE

The Story

Where the hammam came from, what happens inside, and the simple tools that made it work.

Six hundred years of steam

The hammam is older than the Ottoman Empire, and it has outlived it. Its real story is about people needing warmth, water and each other.

ROMAN ROOTS

Long before the first Ottoman dome, the Romans built public baths across their empire, from Britain to Syria. A Roman bath moved the visitor through a series of rooms: a cold room (*frigidarium*), a warm room (*tepidarium*) and a hot room (*caldarium*). The floors were heated from below by a system of hollow spaces and channels called a *hypocaust*, fed by a furnace. Bathing was social. People exercised, talked business, gossiped and relaxed there.

When the Roman world became the Byzantine world, the baths continued in cities like Constantinople. Over the following centuries, as the Islamic world grew across the Middle East and North Africa, people adopted the bathhouse and reshaped it.

FROM POOLS TO FLOWING WATER

Islamic bathing culture valued water that flows. Water poured over the body and away was considered cleaner than water you sit in with others. So the large Roman plunge pools slowly gave way to marble basins with running taps and to steam. You did not soak in a hammam. You sat beside a basin, ladled warm water over yourself with a bowl, and let the hot, humid air do its work.

The hammam also became closely tied to everyday religious life. Washing before prayer, and full-body washing at certain moments in life, gave the bathhouse a natural place beside the mosque. Many

hammams were built as part of mosque complexes, and their income often helped pay for the upkeep of the mosque, a school or a soup kitchen nearby.



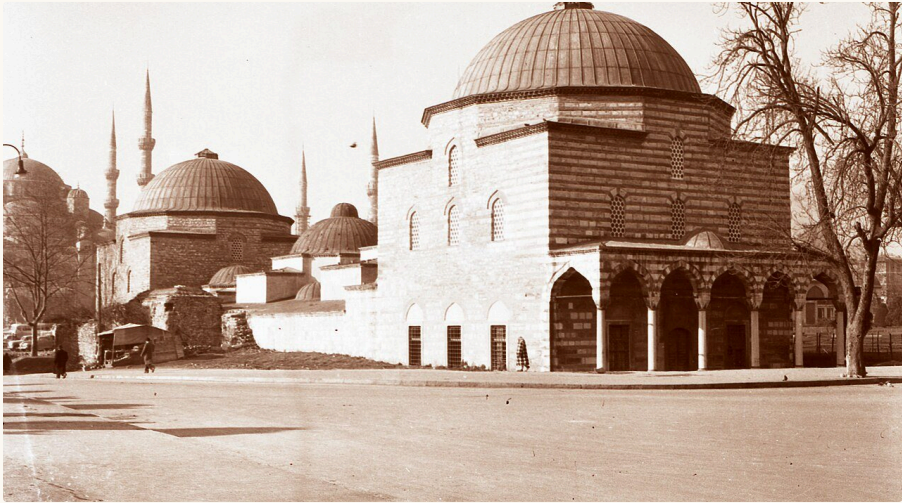
The domes of the Süleymaniye Hamamı, part of the great mosque complex designed by the architect Mimar Sinan in Istanbul. Photo: Dosseman, CC BY-SA 4.0.

THE OTTOMAN GOLDEN AGE

The Seljuk Turks brought bathhouses to Anatolia, and the early Ottomans built them in their first capital, Bursa, a city already famous for its natural hot springs. When the Ottomans took Constantinople in 1453 and made it Istanbul, they filled the city with new baths.

The most celebrated builder was the architect *Mimar Sinan* (c. 1490–1588), who designed mosques, bridges, schools and dozens of hammams. Two of his baths still stand close to the Hagia Sophia and are still visited today. One is the Haseki Hürrem Sultan Hamamı, built in the 1550s for Hürrem Sultan, wife of Süleyman the Magnificent. The other is the Çemberlitaş Hamamı, built in 1584.

Many Ottoman hammams were "double" baths, with separate sections for men and women built side by side, or a single bath that served men and women at different hours. Neighbourhoods had their own hammam, just as they had their own bakery and fountain. In the 17th century, the traveller Evliya Çelebi described hundreds of public and private baths in Istanbul alone.



The Haseki Hürrem Sultan Hamamı, by Mimar Sinan, in an early photograph. SALT Research, Flickr Commons (no known restrictions).

A PLACE FOR LIFE'S BIG MOMENTS

For women in particular, the hammam was one of the great social spaces of the city. A visit could last most of a day. Women brought food, fruit and children, and the bath became a place to talk, laugh, sing and look out for one another. Mothers sometimes noticed a future daughter-in-law there.

Important moments were marked in the bath. Before a wedding, the bride and the women of both families gathered for the *gelin hamamı*, the bride's bath, with music, sweets and henna. Forty days after a baby was born, mother and child were often taken to the hammam to mark the end of the first, protected period of life. Soldiers returning home,

travellers arriving in a new city and people recovering from illness all went to the hammam.

Visitors from Europe were fascinated. In 1717, the English writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu described a women's bath in Sofia in a letter, calling it a kind of "women's coffee house" where all the news of the town was told. Her letters helped make the idea of the "Turkish bath" famous in Europe.

"The hammam was never only about getting clean. It was about being looked after, and slowing down long enough to feel it."

THE TURKISH BATH GOES WEST

In the 1850s, the Scottish diplomat David Urquhart, who had come to love the hammam during his years in the Ottoman world, promoted it in Britain and Ireland. Together with the doctor Richard Barter, he helped open the first "Victorian Turkish baths" in 1856. Over the next decades, Turkish baths opened in cities across Britain, Europe, North America and Australia. A few of them still operate today.



The Çemberlitaş Hamamı (1584) near the Column of Constantine in Istanbul, still open to bathers.
Photo: Enrique Freire, CC BY 2.0.

THE HAMMAM TODAY

When modern homes in Turkey got their own running hot water in the 20th century, the weekly trip to the neighbourhood bath became less necessary, and many small hammams closed. But the ritual never disappeared. Historic baths have been restored, a new generation has rediscovered them, and in Turkish homes the kese mitt and a bar of olive oil soap are still ordinary bathroom items.

What has lasted is not the marble. It is the idea: warmth first, then a thorough scrub, then rinsing, then rest. That sequence works just as well in a small apartment bathroom as it does under a 16th-century dome. The rest of this book will show you how.

Inside a hammam, room by room

A traditional hammam is designed as a journey from cool to hot and back again. Each room has a purpose.

THE CAMEKÂN: THE WELCOME HALL

You enter into the *camekân*, a large, often domed hall. In the middle there is usually a fountain, and around the walls run raised wooden platforms and small changing cabins. This is where you undress, wrap yourself in a *peştemal* (a thin cotton towel), slip on wooden bath clogs and leave your everyday clothes behind. It is also where you return at the end to rest, wrapped in dry towels, with a glass of tea, a cool drink or a sherbet.



The wooden galleries of the camekân at Çemberlitaş, with peştemal towels hung up to dry. Photo: Fran Villena, CC BY 2.0.

THE SOĞUKLUK: THE IN-BETWEEN ROOM

Between the cool hall and the hot room is the *soğukluk*, literally the "cool place," though it is really just warm. It works as a buffer so that the body does not move suddenly from cool air into strong heat. Here are often the toilets and a place to get used to the warmth. At the end

of the bath, you pass back through it so your body can cool down slowly.

THE SICAKLIK: THE HOT ROOM

The heart of the hammam is the *sıcaklık*, the hot room. It is usually a high, domed space of marble and stone, warm and full of steam. The air is very humid, which makes the heat feel softer and more enveloping than the dry heat of a sauna. Light falls in through small round or star-shaped glass openings in the dome. People call them *fil gözü*, or "elephant's eyes". They let in daylight without letting the heat out, and in the steam they make soft beams of light.

Around the edges of the hot room are marble basins called *kurna*, each with taps for hot and cold water. You sit beside a *kurna* and pour water over yourself with a metal bowl, a *tas*. Small private alcoves, called *halvet*, open off the main room for people who want more privacy.



FIL GÖZÜ · "ELEPHANT'S EYES"

Small glass openings in the dome let daylight into the hot room while keeping the steam and warmth inside.

THE GÖBEK TAŞI: THE NAVEL STONE

In the centre of the hot room there is a large, raised marble platform called the *göbek taşı*, the "navel stone". It sits directly above the heat source, so it is pleasantly hot to lie on. Bathers lie here to sweat and relax, and this is where the tellak (for men) or the *natır* (for women) does the scrub and the foam wash.

Lying on warm stone in a humid room has a simple effect. Your muscles let go, your breathing slows, and the outer layer of your skin absorbs moisture and softens. This softening is what makes the next step, the *kese* scrub, so effective.

THE KÜLHAN: THE HIDDEN FURNACE

Out of sight, behind the hot room, is the *külhan*, the furnace. Traditionally it burned wood. It heated a large water tank and sent hot air through channels under the floor, much like the Roman hypocaust. Cold water from a separate tank was mixed in at the taps. The whole building was designed around this one fire.

THE TRADITIONAL ORDER

1. **Arrive and undress** in the *camekân*. Wrap in a *peştemal*.
2. **Warm up** slowly through the *soğukluk*.
3. **Sweat and soften** in the *sıcaklık*, on the *göbek taşı* or beside a *kurna*, for 15–20 minutes.
4. **Kese scrub** from head to toe.
5. **Foam wash** with soap whipped into a cloud of lather.
6. **Rinse** with bowls of warm, then cooler water.
7. **Rest** back in the *camekân*, wrapped in dry towels, with something to drink.

THE TELLAK AND THE NATIR

In a traditional bath, the attendant was a skilled worker. The tellak learned the craft over years: how much pressure each part of the body could take, how to work quickly but carefully, and how to finish with a foam wash. Many tellaks also gave a short, firm massage. In the women's section the same role was played by the natir, who often knew every family in the neighbourhood.

The scrub itself follows a pattern that has hardly changed. The attendant works in long strokes along the arms, legs and back, always after the skin has been warmed and soaked. On softened skin, the kese lifts away what looks like little grey rolls. We will talk about what those rolls actually are in Chapter 5.

Then comes the part many people remember best, the *köpük*, or foam. The attendant dips a cotton bag into soapy water, waves it in the air to fill it, then squeezes it so that a thick cloud of lather falls over the bather. It is warm, light and almost weightless. After a firm scrub, it feels wonderful.



The resting hall of a historic Istanbul hammam, where bathers return at the end. Photo: Roser Goula, CC BY 2.0.

The tools of the bath

The hammam needs very little. Each of its traditional tools does one simple thing well, which is why they have lasted for centuries.

THE KESE

The *kese* (pronounced "keh-seh") is a mitt made from a rough, woven fabric. Historically, keses were made from materials such as goat hair, raw silk, or other coarse fibres. Today many are made from natural or plant-based fibres woven to a slightly rough texture. A good kese feels a little scratchy when dry, and firm but not harsh on warm, wet skin.

The kese is not a sponge and not a washcloth. It does not hold soap or make lather. Its only job is friction. On skin that has been properly warmed and soaked, it removes the loosened outer layer of dead cells in a way that a towel or loofah does not.

OLIVE OIL SOAP

The traditional hammam soap is a plain bar made mostly or entirely from olive oil. It is gentle and makes a soft, creamy lather rather than big bubbles. In Turkey, olive oil soap has been made for generations in olive-growing regions such as the northern Aegean coast. Olive oil soap gets its own part of this book (Part Three).



A kese mitt: a coarse, woven bath glove.



An olive oil soap bar.

THE PEŞTEMAL

The *peştemal* (often spelled *peshtemal* in English) is the hammam's towel. It is a thin, flat-woven cloth, traditionally of cotton or linen, often with stripes and finished with twisted tassels. Bathers wore one wrapped around the body in the hot room and used fresh ones to dry off afterwards.

It looks too thin to work, but it does. A *peştemal* absorbs water well, dries much faster than a thick terry towel, and takes up very little space. It also gets softer with every wash. That is why so many people now use them as bath towels, beach towels, travel towels and light throws.

THE TAS, THE NALIN AND THE KÖPÜK TORBASI

A few other small tools complete the traditional bath:

- **Tas:** a shallow metal bowl, often of copper or brass and sometimes beautifully engraved, used to pour water over yourself.
- **Nalin:** wooden clogs that keep your feet off hot, wet marble. Wealthy bathers once wore tall nalin decorated with mother-of-pearl.
- **Köpük torbası:** the cotton foam bag used to make the cloud of lather.

BRINGING THE TOOLS HOME

For a home ritual, you really need only three of these: the kese, the soap and the peştamal. The bowl, the clogs and the foam bag are lovely extras, but a shower and your hands work too.



The three essentials, together: kese mitt, olive oil soap and peştamal towel.

FROM TELLAK

We put together the Tellak Hammam Set around exactly these three essentials: an authentic Turkish kese mitt woven in Türkiye, a bar of olive oil soap, and a striped peştamal towel, packed together in one box. You will find a full introduction to the set at the end of this book.



TELLAK

PART TWO

Your Skin

What warmth, steam and a good scrub actually do, explained plainly and without exaggeration.

How your skin renews itself

To understand why the kese works, it helps to know a little about the outermost layer of your skin.

A WALL OF FLATTENED CELLS

Your skin has several layers. The outer one is the *epidermis*, and the very top of the epidermis is called the *stratum corneum*. It is made of flattened, dead skin cells held together by fats, a little like bricks held together by mortar. It is thinner than a sheet of paper, but it does an important job: it keeps water in and keeps irritants and germs out.

New skin cells are made at the bottom of the epidermis. Over several weeks they move upward, flatten, lose their nucleus and eventually become part of that outer wall. In young adults, this journey takes roughly a month. Then the oldest cells at the very surface are shed, one by one, in a process called *desquamation*. You lose a huge number of skin cells every day without noticing.

WHEN SHEDDING SLOWS DOWN

The process does not always run smoothly. With age, the cycle tends to slow. Dry air, cold weather, hot showers that strip oils, sun exposure and some skin types can also make dead cells cling to the surface longer than they should.

When that happens, skin can look and feel:

- **Dull**, because an uneven layer of old cells scatters light instead of reflecting it.
- **Rough or bumpy**, especially on the elbows, knees, heels, and the backs of the arms.

- **Flaky or dry**, even when you use moisturiser, because the cream sits on top of a layer of dead cells.
- **Prone to ingrown hairs**, when built-up cells trap hairs that are trying to grow out.

Exfoliation is the simple act of helping the body shed some of these old cells. There are two broad types. *Chemical exfoliation* uses acids, such as alpha- and beta-hydroxy acids, to loosen the bonds between dead cells. *Mechanical* or *physical exfoliation* uses friction, from a brush, a scrub, a washcloth or a mitt. The kese is a form of physical exfoliation, and it is one of the oldest in the world.

WHY WATER MATTERS FIRST

Dead cells at the skin's surface absorb water like a dry sponge. When they are hydrated by warm water and steam, they swell, soften and loosen. This is why the hammam always comes *before* the scrub, and why the kese should never be used on dry skin.

The hammam's genius was to combine the two: long, humid warmth to soften the outer layer, followed by firm friction to lift it away. Each one makes the other work better.

What the kese really does

A kese scrub is one of the most satisfying things you can do for your skin. Here is what you can honestly expect from it.

1. SMOOTHER SKIN YOU CAN FEEL

The most immediate and reliable result is texture. After a proper kese scrub on well-soaked skin, most people notice that their arms, legs and back feel noticeably smoother, often for several days. Rough patches on the elbows and knees soften. Skin feels "new".

2. A BRIGHTER, MORE EVEN LOOK

When the uneven top layer of old cells is removed, skin reflects light more evenly. Many people describe a fresh, clean glow after a hammam. This is a cosmetic effect, but a real one. Dermatologists note that exfoliation can make skin look brighter and more even in tone.

3. MOISTURISER THAT WORKS BETTER

Oils and creams spread more evenly and feel more effective on freshly exfoliated skin, because they are not sitting on top of loose, dry flakes. This is why the end of the ritual always includes moisturising.



Long, firm strokes on warm, wet skin: the kese at work.

4. HELP WITH INGROWN HAIRS

Regular, gentle exfoliation can help prevent dead cells from building up over hair follicles, which is one reason some people get fewer ingrown hairs on their legs, bikini line or beard area when they exfoliate regularly. Do not scrub directly over inflamed bumps, and leave a day or two between shaving or waxing and a kese session.

5. SOFTER "CHICKEN SKIN"

Many people have small, rough bumps on the backs of the upper arms or thighs. This common and harmless condition is called *keratosis pilaris*. It happens when keratin builds up around hair follicles. Harvard Health notes that physical exfoliation is a reasonable first step for rough skin like this on the arms and legs. Exfoliation will not cure it, but it often makes the skin feel much smoother.

6. A BETTER BASE FOR SELF-TAN

If you use self-tanner, exfoliating a day before helps the colour go on more evenly and fade more evenly. Using a kese on the day you want to remove an old, patchy tan also helps lift it away faster.

ABOUT THOSE GREY ROLLS

The first time you use a kese properly, you will probably be surprised, or even a little shocked. Small, greyish rolls appear on your skin and in the mitt. Many people assume this is dirt, and feel embarrassed. It is not, or at least mostly not.

Those rolls are mainly dead skin cells from the outer layer, softened by the water, clumped together by the friction, and mixed with a little natural skin oil and whatever was on your skin's surface. Their greyish colour comes from being rolled up together, not from being dirty. Even the cleanest person who showers every day will see them.

This is also the honest limit of the effect. A kese removes dead cells that were going to come off anyway. It does not "detox" your body, and it does not reach deeper than the surface. That is fine. The surface is exactly where dullness and roughness live.

"A kese does not change who your skin is. It just lets your skin show itself."

WHAT A KESE WILL NOT DO

- It will not remove wrinkles or reverse ageing.
- It will not "remove toxins". Your liver and kidneys do that job.
- It will not cure eczema, psoriasis or acne, and it can irritate them.
- It will not give you better results if you scrub harder. Firm is good. Rough is not.

HOW OFTEN?

The traditional hammam was a weekly ritual, and that rhythm is still a good guide. A kese gives a strong exfoliation. Using it too often can

leave skin red, sensitive and dry, and can even weaken its protective barrier. General advice from dermatologists is not to physically exfoliate more than two or three times a week, and many people find that once a week is ideal for a full kese session.

YOUR SKIN	FULL-BODY KESE
Normal or oily, not sensitive	Once a week, up to twice if your skin is happy
Dry	Once a week, with rich moisturising after
Sensitive	Every 10–14 days, with light pressure. Test a small area first
Eczema, psoriasis, rosacea, active acne	Ask your dermatologist first, and avoid affected areas

Your skin is the best guide. Mild pinkness that fades within an hour is normal. Stinging, burning, red patches that last or broken skin mean you scrubbed too hard or too often. Give your skin a longer break next time and lighten your pressure.

FROM TELLAK

The Tellak hammam mitt is an authentic Turkish kese, woven in Türkiye. It is designed to be used exactly as described here: on warm, well-soaked skin, with long strokes and steady, gentle pressure, about once a week.

Heat, steam and a quiet mind

The hammam was always about more than skin. The warmth itself, and the slowness it forces on you, are half of the experience.

STEAM VERSUS A SAUNA

A Finnish sauna and a Turkish hammam are both hot rooms, but they feel very different. A traditional sauna is very hot (often around 80°C / 175°F) with dry air. A hammam is much cooler, typically around 40–50°C, but very humid. Because the moist air feels heavy and wraps around you, a hammam feels gentle and soothing rather than intense.

A MYTH ABOUT PORES

You will often read that steam "opens your pores". Pores do not have muscles, so they cannot open and close like doors. What warmth and steam do is soften the outer skin and the oil (sebum) in the pores, which makes cleansing easier and more comfortable. The result feels similar, but it is worth knowing the real reason.

WHAT HAPPENS IN YOUR BODY

When you sit in warmth, your blood vessels near the skin widen to release heat. Your skin flushes, your heart beats a little faster and you start to sweat. Many people find that tight muscles loosen and their breathing slows. Sweat itself is mostly water and salt, so it is important to drink water before and after.



Warm light inside the domed steam room of a historic hammam in Nicosia, Cyprus. Photo: AncientNicosia, CC BY-SA 4.0.

WHAT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT REGULAR HEAT BATHING

The best-known research on heat bathing comes from Finland, where saunas are part of daily life. A long-term study of about 2,300 middle-aged Finnish men, published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* in 2015, found that men who used a sauna more often had lower rates of death from heart disease over about 20 years. This is an *association*, not proof that sauna use caused the difference, and it was about dry Finnish saunas, not steam baths. Still, it suggests that regular, sensible heat exposure can be part of a healthy lifestyle.

There is also good evidence that a warm bath or shower in the evening can help sleep. A 2019 review of studies in *Sleep Medicine Reviews* found that bathing in warm water (about 40–42.5°C / 104–108.5°F) one to two hours before bed helped people fall asleep faster. The warm water draws heat to your hands and feet, which helps your core body temperature drop afterwards. That drop is one of the body's natural signals for sleep.

A RITUAL THAT SLOWS YOU DOWN

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the hammam is the simplest: it is a ritual. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. It cannot be rushed. For an hour, there are no screens and no tasks, only warmth, water and the steady rhythm of the scrub.

Simple self-care routines like this give the mind a break. Many people find that the repeated, physical actions of washing and scrubbing work almost like meditation, because they keep attention on the body and the present moment. Ending the ritual wrapped in a towel, resting with a warm drink, tells your body that it is safe to relax.

A WARM WORD OF CAUTION

Heat is not for everyone. If you have a heart condition, low or high blood pressure, are pregnant, have recently drunk alcohol or feel unwell, talk to your doctor before using hot rooms, very hot baths or long steamy showers. At home, keep water comfortably warm rather than very hot, keep a glass of water close by, and get out slowly if you feel dizzy.

At home you will not recreate the full steam of a marble hot room, and you do not need to. A warm shower with the door closed, or a warm bath, gives your skin the softening it needs and your mind the pause it deserves.

A photograph of an olive grove in Gömeç, Balıkesir, Türkiye. The image shows a wide expanse of olive trees with dark, gnarled trunks and dense, silvery-green foliage. The ground is covered in dry, brownish soil with some low-lying green plants. The sky is a pale, overcast grey. The text is overlaid on the lower left portion of the image.

PART THREE

The Soap

From olive groves to the bathhouse: the oldest gentle cleanser of the Mediterranean.

A short history of olive oil soap

Long before bottles of shower gel, the people of the eastern Mediterranean washed with hard bars made from olive oil, and many still do.

BORN WHERE THE OLIVES GROW

Olive trees have been cultivated around the eastern Mediterranean for thousands of years. Wherever there was more olive oil than people could eat, there was a reason to turn some of it into soap. Lower-grade oil, or oil from the end of the pressing, was boiled with an alkali made from plant ashes, and the result was a hard, long-lasting bar.

ALEPPO AND NABLUS

The Syrian city of Aleppo has been famous for its soap for many centuries. Aleppo soap is made from olive oil and laurel (bay) oil. It is cooked, poured, cut into cubes, stamped with the maker's seal and then left to cure, often for months. As it ages, the outside turns golden while the inside stays green.

The city of Nablus in Palestine has a similar tradition of pure olive oil soap, made in large soap factories for centuries and sold across the region. Both soaps are among the ancestors of the bar of olive oil soap you might use today.



Aleppo soap, olive and laurel oil. Photo: Donald Trung, CC BY-SA 4.0.



Marseille soap cubes. Photo: Simon A. Eugster, CC BY-SA.

CASTILE AND MARSEILLE

Many historians believe that soaps like Aleppo's travelled to Europe in the Middle Ages through trade. Soapmakers around the western Mediterranean began making their own versions. In Spain, the Crown of Castile produced olive oil soap on a large scale and exported it across Europe. The name stuck: "Castile soap" came to mean a mild soap made from olive oil, and it is probably the first white hard soap ever made.

In France, Marseille became the great soap city. In 1688, a royal edict known as the Edict of Colbert set rules for how Marseille soap should be made, including the use of pure olive oil. Marseille soap, traditionally sold in large stamped cubes, is still made today.

OLIVE OIL SOAP IN TÜRKİYE

Türkiye's own olive oil soap tradition lives along its olive-growing coasts, especially around the northern Aegean, near towns such as Ayvalık and Edremit, and in the southeast, where people also make soap from the oil of the wild pistachio (*bittim*). For generations, a bar of plain green olive oil soap was the natural partner of the kese in the hammam.



The olive harvest: nets are laid under the trees to catch the fruit. Photo: Petro Stelte, CC BY-SA 4.0.

WHY IT LASTED

Olive oil soap survived for a thousand years because it is simple and it works. It is made from an ingredient people already had, it lasts a long time, and it is gentle enough to use from head to toe. It was a soap for everyone: for washing bodies, babies, hair and even clothes.

In a world of complicated products, its simplicity is exactly what makes it appealing again. A short ingredient list is easy to understand, and a good bar of olive oil soap feels honest in the hand.

Why olive oil soap feels different

If you are used to foaming shower gels, your first wash with olive oil soap may surprise you. Here is why.

HOW SOAP IS MADE

All true soap is made by the same basic chemical reaction, called *saponification*. Fats or oils are mixed with an alkali (today, usually sodium hydroxide for bar soap). The alkali splits the oils apart and turns them into soap and *glycerin*. When soap is made properly and allowed to cure, no active alkali remains in the finished bar.

Different oils make very different soaps. Coconut oil makes big, bubbly lather but can feel drying. Animal fats make hard, white bars. Olive oil is rich in a fatty acid called *oleic acid*, and it makes a soap that is known for being mild.

GENTLE LATHER, NOT BIG BUBBLES

Pure olive oil soap makes a soft, creamy, low lather instead of a big bubbly foam. Some people notice a slightly silky or "slippery" feel when it is wet. This is normal and is part of its character. Lots of foam is not the same as cleaning power. A smaller, creamier lather cleans skin perfectly well.

GLYCERIN: THE QUIET HELPER

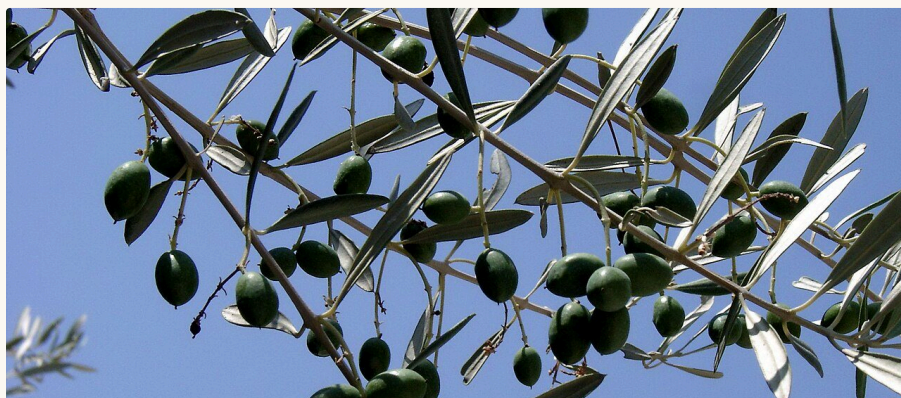
Glycerin is a *humectant*, which means it attracts water. That is why it is used in so many moisturisers. In traditionally made soaps, the glycerin produced during saponification usually stays in the bar. Many mass-produced soaps have it removed. Glycerin left in a soap can help skin feel less tight after washing.

THE VALUE OF CURING

Traditional olive oil soaps are left to cure, sometimes for many weeks or months. During curing, water evaporates and the bar becomes harder, milder and longer-lasting. A well-cured olive oil bar can last much longer in the shower than you expect.

AN HONEST NOTE ABOUT PH

All true soaps are alkaline, usually with a pH of around 9 to 10, while the surface of your skin is slightly acidic. This is true of olive oil soap too. For most people, healthy skin quickly returns to its normal balance after rinsing. If your skin is very dry or sensitive, keep your washing short, rinse well and moisturise afterwards. That is exactly what the hammam ritual does.



Olive branch with fruit. Photo: Hans Bernhard (Schnobby), CC BY-SA.

WHY IT BELONGS IN THE HAMMAM

After a kese scrub, your skin has just had its outer layer of dead cells removed. This is the moment to be gentle. A harsh, very foamy cleanser can sting freshly exfoliated skin and leave it tight. A mild olive oil soap washes away loosened cells and sweat while staying kind to your skin. That is why the two have been used together for generations.

HOW TO USE IT

- Wet the bar and rub it between your hands, or on a washcloth, to make a soft lather.
- For a hammam-style foam, rub the bar into a cotton bag or a soft cloth, fill it with air and squeeze.
- Wash in gentle circles. You do not need to scrub with the soap. The kese has already done that work.
- Rinse well with warm water, then finish with cooler water.

MAKING YOUR BAR LAST

- **Let it drain.** Keep the bar on a dish with slats or holes so it can dry between uses. A soap that sits in water turns soft and wastes away.
- **Keep it out of the stream** of the shower.
- **Cut it in half.** Use one half while the other keeps curing and getting harder.
- **Store spare bars** in a cool, dry place, unwrapped or in paper, so they can keep breathing.



The Tellak olive oil soap bar on a slatted wooden dish, which lets the bar dry between uses.

FROM TELLAK

Our olive oil soap bar is made to be the gentle partner to the kese: a simple, olive oil-based bar for the foam wash that follows your scrub. Give it a draining dish, keep it out of standing water, and it will keep you company for many rituals.

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is sitting in a hammam, wearing a white bathrobe. She is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The background shows a stone wall and a white towel hanging on a rack.

PART FOUR

At Home

Everything you need to bring the hammam ritual into your own bathroom, step by step.

Preparing your space

A home hammam is less about equipment and more about intention. Ten minutes of preparation turns an ordinary shower into a ritual.

CHOOSE YOUR TIME

Give yourself about 45 minutes to an hour, without rushing. Many people love a weekend morning or a quiet evening. An evening ritual is especially good if you want to sleep well, because the warm water and the calm afterwards help your body wind down.

WARM THE ROOM

Close the bathroom door and window. Run the hot shower for a few minutes before you get in, so the room fills with a little steam. If your bathroom is cold, heat it a little beforehand. Warm air makes everything more comfortable, and it helps your skin soften.

GATHER EVERYTHING FIRST

Nothing breaks a ritual like stepping out dripping to look for something. Before you begin, place within reach:

- ☐ Your kese mitt
- ☐ Your olive oil soap, on a dish
- ☐ A peştemal or a soft towel (two, if you like a dry one for resting)
- ☐ A glass or bottle of water
- ☐ Your favourite body oil or moisturiser
- ☐ A bowl or jug, if you want to pour water hammam-style

SET THE MOOD

Dim the main light, or use a soft lamp or a candle placed safely away from towels. Choose quiet music, or silence. Put your phone on silent

and leave it outside. If you like, prepare a pot of tea or a cool drink for afterwards. Turkish tea, mint tea, or water with lemon all fit well.



A peştemal folded and ready. Light, absorbent, and quick to dry.

BATH OR SHOWER?

Both work. A **bath** soaks your skin more completely and feels closer to the slow pace of the hammam. A **shower** works well too, especially if you let it run for a few minutes to warm the room and you sit or stand in the warm water long enough to really soften your skin.

The ritual, step by step

Seven simple steps, in the same order the hammam has followed for centuries: warm, scrub, wash, rinse, wrap, nourish, rest.

1 DRINK AND BREATHE · 2 MINUTES

Drink a glass of water. Stand in the warm bathroom for a moment and take a few slow breaths. Let the day go.

2 WARM AND SOAK · 10–15 MINUTES

Get into a warm bath, or stand under a warm shower. Do not use soap yet. Simply let the warm water and steam soften your skin. If you are in a shower, keep the water flowing over different parts of your body, or step out of the stream now and then and let the steam do the work. Your skin is ready when the fingertips start to wrinkle a little and your skin feels soft.

3 KESE SCRUB · 10–15 MINUTES

Put the mitt on your dominant hand. Wet it, but do not add soap: the kese works on clean, wet skin. Starting with your limbs, use long, firm, steady strokes along the length of each arm and leg. Work in the same direction a few times over each area, and you will start to see the small grey rolls of dead skin lift away. Rinse the mitt often.



The kese, ready. Wet it, but use it without soap.

FOAM WASH · 5 MINUTES

- 4 Now take your olive oil soap and make a gentle lather, with your hands, a washcloth, or a cotton bag filled with air for a hammam-style cloud of foam. Wash your whole body in slow, light circles. After the scrub, your skin should be treated softly.

RINSE, WARM TO COOL · 2–3 MINUTES

- 5 Rinse thoroughly with warm water, pouring with a bowl if you have one. Then, if you enjoy it, finish with a few seconds of cooler water. It feels refreshing and wakes up your skin. Go only as cool as feels pleasant.

WRAP AND PAT DRY · 2 MINUTES

- 6 Wrap yourself in your peştemal. Pat yourself dry instead of rubbing. Your skin has just been exfoliated, and it will thank you for a gentle touch.

7

NOURISH AND REST · 10–15 MINUTES

While your skin is still slightly damp, smooth on a body oil or moisturiser. This is when it absorbs best. Then wrap up in a dry towel or robe, sit or lie down somewhere comfortable, and drink a glass of water or a cup of tea. Do not rush to the next thing. This rest is part of the ritual, just as it was in the *camekân*.

Warm · Scrub · Wash · Rinse · Wrap · Nourish · Rest

YOUR TECHNIQUE, IN DETAIL

- **Pressure:** firm and steady, like a good massage. Never so hard that it hurts or stings.
- **Strokes:** long and straight along each limb. On the back and stomach, larger, sweeping strokes work well.
- **Repetition:** two to four passes over an area is usually enough. When the rolls stop appearing, move on.
- **Rinse the mitt** regularly so you are always working with a clean surface.
- **If nothing comes off,** your skin probably needs more soaking. Go back into the warm water for a few minutes.

REACHING YOUR BACK

The back was always the *tellak's* job, and it is the hardest area to reach alone. Three ideas:

- Ask a partner to scrub your back. It is one of the oldest acts of care in the hammam.

- Reach over your shoulder with one hand and up from below with the other, as far as feels comfortable.
- Do not worry about perfection. Your back will still benefit from the soak, the soap and the moisturiser.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR FACE?

The skin on your face is thinner and more delicate than the skin on your body. A full-strength body kese is usually too rough for it. If you want to exfoliate your face, use a softer, smaller mitt made for the face, with very light pressure, no more than once a week, and avoid the delicate area around the eyes. If you have acne, rosacea or sensitive facial skin, ask a dermatologist before exfoliating your face.



Tellak also makes a smaller face mitt, sold separately on gettellak.com.



The full Tellak Hammam Set.

A body map, rhythm and skin types

Different parts of your body need different pressure. Here is a simple guide, from head to toe.

AREA	PRESSURE	TIPS
Arms	Medium to firm	Long strokes, wrist to shoulder. Go a little more gently on the inner arm.
Elbows	Firm	Small circles. Elbows are often the roughest area.
Back of upper arms	Medium	A good spot for rough bumps. Be patient, not forceful.
Shoulders and back	Firm	Large, sweeping strokes. Ask for help if you can.
Chest	Light	Gentle, slow strokes. Thinner skin here.
Stomach and sides	Light to medium	Slow circles in a clockwise direction.
Legs	Firm	Long strokes from ankle to hip, front and back.
Knees	Firm	Small circles, like the elbows.
Inner thighs	Light	Delicate skin. Very gentle.
Feet and heels	Firm	Heels can take plenty of pressure. Go gently on the tops of the feet.
Neck	Very light	Or skip it.

Face, intimate areas	None	Do not use a body kese here.
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YOUR WEEKLY RHYTHM

The kese is strongest when you use it as a weekly ritual, not a daily habit. Here is a simple rhythm that many people enjoy:

WHEN	WHAT
Once a week	The full ritual: soak, kese, foam wash, rinse, moisturise and rest.
Every day	A short, warm (not hot) shower with olive oil soap. Pat dry with your peştamal and moisturise.
Mid-week (optional)	A gentle kese pass on rough spots only, such as elbows, knees and heels.
Before a big day	A full ritual two days before an event, wedding or holiday, so your skin has time to settle.
Before self-tan	The full ritual the day before applying self-tanner.

THROUGH THE SEASONS

- **Winter:** skin tends to be drier. Keep the water warm but not hot, and use a richer moisturiser after your ritual.
- **Spring:** a good time to start a weekly ritual and smooth skin after the winter.
- **Summer:** exfoliated skin can be more sensitive to the sun. Do your ritual in the evening, and use sunscreen the next day. Never scrub sunburned skin.
- **Autumn:** help a fading summer tan go evenly with a weekly scrub.

ADAPTING TO YOUR SKIN TYPE

SKIN TYPE	YOUR RITUAL
Normal	Follow the full ritual once a week. Adjust pressure by area.

Dry	Soak a little longer. Use lighter pressure, keep water warm rather than hot, and apply oil or a rich cream right after drying.
Oily or prone to body breakouts	Weekly kese can help keep skin feeling clear and smooth, but never scrub over active, inflamed spots.
Sensitive	Patch-test on a small area of the forearm first. Use very light pressure, scrub once every 10–14 days, and keep the session short.
Mature	Skin is often thinner and drier. Use gentle pressure, soak well and moisturise generously.

THE FIRST TIME

For your very first ritual, go gently. Soak well, use light to medium pressure, and pay attention to how your skin feels that evening and the next day. Then you will know what pressure and rhythm are right for you.

Safety, care and questions

A few simple rules keep the ritual safe and your tools fresh for a long time.

WHEN TO SKIP THE KESE

- On **sunburned**, broken, cut or irritated skin.
- On **active eczema, psoriasis or rosacea**, or inflamed acne, unless your dermatologist says it is fine.
- For a day or two after **shaving, waxing or laser hair removal**.
- If you use **retinoids** (such as tretinoin or retinol) or strong acid products on your body, as your skin may already be more sensitive. Ask your doctor.
- On areas with **moles, warts, skin infections** or rashes.
- If you have **diabetes or poor circulation**, check with your doctor before exfoliating your legs and feet.

WHEN TO BE CAREFUL WITH HEAT

- If you are pregnant, or have a heart condition or low or high blood pressure.
- After drinking alcohol, or if you feel faint or unwell.
- With young children or elderly family members, who can overheat more quickly.

If in doubt, ask your doctor. A gentle, warm, short ritual is always better than an intense one.

CARING FOR YOUR KESE

- After each use, rinse it thoroughly in warm water to remove all skin cells.

- Squeeze out the water, then hang it up by its loop to dry in a well-ventilated place, ideally outside the shower.
- Wash it regularly, by hand with a little soap or according to its care label, and let it dry completely.
- Do not share your kese with other people. Each person should have their own.
- Replace it when the texture becomes soft and worn, or if it starts to smell or looks discoloured. With weekly use, many people replace their kese every few months.

CARING FOR YOUR PEŞTEMAL

- Wash it before first use. A peştemal becomes softer and more absorbent with every wash.
- Wash with similar colours at a moderate temperature, with mild detergent.
- Skip the fabric softener, which can reduce absorbency.
- Line-dry when you can. It dries remarkably fast.
- If a tassel comes loose, gently re-twist it rather than pulling it.

CARING FOR YOUR SOAP

Keep it on a draining dish, out of standing water, as described in Chapter 8. A dry bar between uses lasts much longer.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is it normal to see grey rolls on my skin?

Yes. They are mainly softened dead skin cells, not dirt. See Chapter 5.

Nothing came off. What went wrong?

Usually your skin was not soaked long enough. Spend more time in warm water. It also happens if you exfoliated recently.

My skin turned pink. Is that okay?

Light pinkness that fades within an hour is normal. Lasting redness, stinging or sore spots mean too much pressure. Be gentler next time.

Do I use soap with the kese?

No. Use the kese on wet, clean skin without soap. Wash with the soap afterwards.

How often should I do the full ritual?

About once a week for most people, less often for sensitive skin.

Can men use the kese?

Of course. In the traditional hammam, men had a tellak and women had a natır. The ritual has always been for everyone.

Can I use it on my face?

Not a body kese. Use a softer face mitt with very light pressure. See Chapter 10.

Can I use the kese on my children?

Children's skin is delicate. Use only very light pressure on older children, and check with your paediatrician if you are unsure.

Can I use my peştamal at the beach?

Yes, it is perfect for the beach, the pool, travel and the gym because it is light and dries quickly.



THE HAMMAM, IN ONE BOX

Meet the Tellak Hammam Set

Everything you need for the ritual

We built the Tellak Hammam Set so that anyone can bring the hammam home, with three essentials chosen to work together.

THE TELLAK HAMMAM MITT

1 An authentic Turkish kese, woven in Türkiye. It is the heart of the ritual: firm enough to lift away dull, dead skin on warm, wet skin, and made to be used once a week, week after week. It has a loop so you can hang it to dry.

THE OLIVE OIL SOAP BAR

2 A simple, olive oil-based bar for the foam wash after your scrub. Gentle, with a soft, creamy lather, it is the traditional partner of the kese.

THE PEŞTEMAL TOWEL

3 A light, flat-woven Turkish towel in cream with olive-green stripes and twisted tassels. Wrap up in it after the ritual, then take it to the beach, the gym or on your travels.

All three arrive together in one box, made in Türkiye. Together, they are made to give you what the hammam always gave: a deep-clean feeling, smoother skin, and a slow, unhurried moment that is just for you.



The hammam mitt



The olive oil soap



The peştemal towel

CHOOSE YOUR SET

The Tellak Hammam Set comes in four versions, so you can stock up on the pieces you use most:

- The Set: mitt, soap and peştemal
- Set + extra soap
- Set + extra mitt: so you can share the ritual with a partner, or always have a fresh one ready
- Set + extra mitt & soap

A GIFT THAT SLOWS SOMEONE DOWN

The Tellak Hammam Set is a thoughtful gift for anyone who needs to unwind: a busy friend, a new parent, a partner, a parent, or yourself. It arrives in one box, ready to give. Add this little book, and they will have everything they need to begin.



DISCOVER THE SET AT [GETTELLAK.COM](https://www.gettellak.com)

A small glossary

Camekân

The entrance and resting hall of a hammam, often with a fountain.

Fil gözü

"Elephant's eyes": small glass skylights in the dome of the hot room.

Gelin hamamı

The bride's bath, a celebration held at the hammam before a wedding.

Göbek taşı

"Navel stone": the heated marble platform in the centre of the hot room.

Halvet

A small, private alcove off the hot room.

Hamam / hammam

The Turkish word is *hamam*. In English, it is usually spelled *hammam*.

Kese

The coarse exfoliating mitt used for the scrub.

Köpük

Foam. The cloud of soap lather made with a cotton bag.

Kurna

The marble basin with taps where bathers sit and pour water.

Külhan

The furnace that heats the water and floors.

Nalın

Wooden bath clogs.

Natır

The female bath attendant in the women's section.

Peştemal

The thin, flat-woven Turkish bath towel (also *peshtemal*).

Sıcaklık

The hot, steamy main room of the hammam.

Soğukluk

The warm in-between room that eases the change in temperature.

Tas

The metal bowl used to pour water.

Tellak

The male bath attendant who gives the scrub, and the name of our company.

Your ritual checklist

BEFORE

- ☐ 45–60 quiet minutes set aside, phone on silent
- ☐ Bathroom warmed, door closed
- ☐ Kese, olive oil soap, peştemal, water and moisturiser within reach
- ☐ No sunburn, fresh shaving or irritated skin today

DURING

- ☐ Drink a glass of water
- ☐ Soak in warm water for 10–15 minutes, no soap
- ☐ Kese: long, firm strokes on wet skin, rinsing the mitt often
- ☐ Foam wash with olive oil soap, in gentle circles
- ☐ Rinse warm, then cool if you like

AFTER

- ☐ Wrap in your peştemal and pat dry
- ☐ Moisturise while your skin is still slightly damp
- ☐ Rest for 10–15 minutes with water or tea
- ☐ Rinse and hang your kese, and put your soap on its draining dish
- ☐ Next ritual: in about one week

FURTHER READING

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A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

This book shares general information about traditional bathing and skin care. It is not a substitute for advice from a doctor or dermatologist. Results from exfoliation are cosmetic and vary from person to person.

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WARM · SCRUB · WASH · REST

*"Take your time.
That is the whole point."*

Bring the hammam home with the Tellak Hammam Set: an authentic Turkish kese, olive oil soap and a peştemal towel, in one box.

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