

MOROCCAN ROLE

North Africa meets west London in a bathhouse that's gone all out on the tiles. By ANNA MINTON



Right and above: Senft's hammam is decorated using Moroccan mosaic, or 'sillij' (his company, Habibi, can supply tiles and recommend craftsmen). The latticework screens, above, are from Rajasthan, in India, rather than North Africa, but blend seamlessly with the arches and intricate decoration

Take a look at these pictures. Now guess the location. Marrakesh, perhaps? How about Essauira or Fez? Sorry, you're way off. Try Paddington. Yes, Paddington, that bit of west London with a famous railway station that has never quite upped and come.

This extraordinary Moroccan-tiled hammam, or bathhouse, is the brainchild of Heinrich Senft and fills the basement of his converted factory home. One glimpse of the dark, dank former air-raid shelter would have been enough to put off most people. But not Senft. "It was a wet, horrible basement," he recalls. "But with a bit of imagination it seemed perfect for a hammam. I wanted to fill the space with the colours and warmth of the Mediterranean."

It wasn't an easy task. Months spent scouring London for Moroccan mosaic tiles proved fruitless, and it was only a trip to Fez in Morocco, where the tiles are produced, that finally yielded results. Through his contacts, he met a traditional craftsman who was willing to build the hammam, and embarked on what he describes as his "labour of love". The room took a year of almost daily effort as each mosaic tile had to be cut individually.

Only when the hammam was complete did Senft turn his attention to the rest of his home. Here, despite Moroccan touches — such as mosaic tiles on the gallery floor and in the second bedroom — the feel is essentially western. Venetian

and French antiques coexist with chunky sofas and sandblasted radiators from the salvage company Lassco. "I wanted to show that modernity can mix with warmth and antiques," he says.

But for Senft, it is the hammam that forms the centrepiece of the home. His involvement with the project was so all-encompassing that he ended up making a business out of bringing Moroccan designs to the UK. Together with his partner, Noureddine Somati, he recently opened Habibi, an interior-design shop in London, which specialises in Moroccan tiles, ranging from expensive, handmade and handcut tiles to much simpler (and cheaper) designs. Terracotta gardens, kitchens, bathrooms and fireplaces all lend themselves perfectly to this decorative style, he says. The shop is also stuffed with Moorish doors and windows, antique clay pots and the burnished metal lighting fixtures unique to Morocco. And, yes, they can even help you turn your own bathroom into a hammam.

"People want colour and Mediterranean inspiration," says Senft. "My experience showed me that the whole idea of Morocco works well in a grey city like London. I fell in love with it." Hence the name of the shop: *habibi* is the Arabic word for "beloved". ■

Habibi, 1c Greyhound Road, NW10 (020 8960 9203)



Left: divans for lounging are an important part of the hammam experience, and here giant cushions covered in striped fabric encourage relaxation. The textured terracotta finish to the walls was achieved by mixing cement with sand and red cement colour. For a wide range of striped fabrics, try Ian Mankin (020 7722 0997)

Above: while the hammam is decorated in warm tones and Mediterranean blues and greens, elsewhere in the house the focus is on comfortable neutrality, with off-white walls and natural-coloured sofas. Similar contemporary fireplaces are available from CVO Firevault (020 7580 5333) and the Platonic Fireplace Company (020 8691 5904 for details) →

Photographs by James Merrell