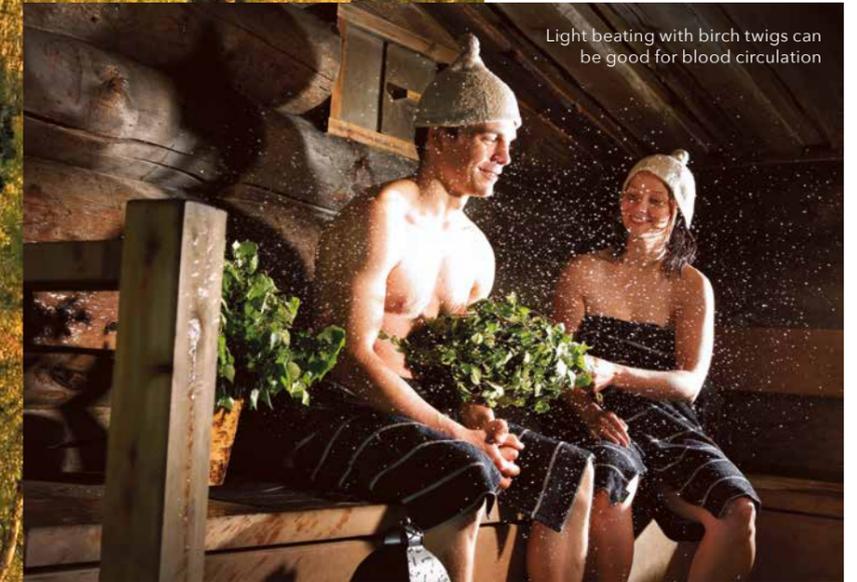


SONG OF THE SAUNA

In Finland, the sauna is not just a bathing ritual, but also a place for healing and spending quality time with loved ones. Charukesi Ramadurai discovers its joys firsthand

A country cottage with an attached sauna



Light beating with birch twigs can be good for blood circulation

Year after year, Finland keeps coming out tops in lists of the world's happiest countries. And after spending a week in that country, I discover the secret: sauna (which is pronounced "sao-nah").

The traditional bathing and cleansing ritual that unites Finns of all ages and classes is the answer to this Scandinavian society's physical and mental well-being. There are more than two million saunas in this country of some 5.5 million people, meaning they are pretty much everywhere: from small huts in the countryside to sprawling centres in luxury hotels; from the terrace of office buildings to the basement of apartment complexes. There are even floating saunas and sauna cable cars.

The sauna is where family get-togethers are held, friends catch up and business deals are negotiated. In the past, women even gave birth in the sauna. As Matti Markkanen, Sauna Chief at Löyly, a popular public sauna in Helsinki, describes it, "the sauna is more than a hot room to sweat in; it is something magical that really brings us all together".

If there is one thing I hear repeatedly from personal and professional acquaintances in Finland, it is this: "For us Finns, sauna is a way of life." There are some who spend time in the sauna every single day, and others whose idea of a weekend getaway is going to their cottage by the lake that, needless to say, comes with its own sauna. It is an activity practised through the year, regardless of how hot or how cold it gets outside. In the sauna, it is always a sizzling 80 to 90°C.

Despite my initial hesitation, I find it surprisingly easy to relax in the sweltering heat when I finally get to experience this for myself. I sit with a small group of four female friends on the wooden benches. They chat in low voices, occasionally breaking out into laughter before retreating into companionable silence. The temperature is controlled by a stove stacked with heated stones in the middle of this set-up powered by electricity – traditionally, though, the sauna is heated by a wood fire. From time to time, my Finnish friend gets up to pour a ladle of water over the stones from a container kept close to the stove. The stones hiss and sizzle (the steam is known as *löyly*) before spreading a fresh round of muggy heat around the room, engulfing us all in its comforting embrace.



A dip in icy cold water after the heat of the sauna is a wake-up call for the senses

PHOTOS: VISIT FINLAND (MAIN); SAUNASAARI.FI (SAUNASAARI VIEW); KARI YLITALO/VISIT FINLAND (FAMILY IN SAUNA); HARRI TARVAINEN/VISIT FINLAND (THE REST)



Above: Sauna is a family activity for both adults and kids
Left: Saunasaari island offers up natural beauty, traditional Finnish saunas and warm local hospitality

It is when we step out after 10 minutes of this sweaty experience that the real surprise comes. Custom dictates that the heat is to be followed by cold, and this means anything from standing under a shower to doing a lap in the swimming pool. If I want to do it like the locals do, I could jump into a lake. In the bone-chilling winters, this involves leaping into a hole cut into the frozen surface of water or, as an alternative, rolling around in the snow. Heat, cold. Heat again, then cold. Repeat until the body finds its equilibrium. Alternating being two extremes of temperature is believed to be excellent for the circulatory system, with some diehard sauna fans gently beating their bodies with birch twigs to soften the skin and to get the blood flowing.

Over various sauna sessions in different settings, I channel my inner Finn and try all of these – even though I am repeatedly assured that there is no one correct way to experience the sauna and that it is entirely up to me. While the express showers and lazy laps in the swimming pool are delightful, the dip in the lake proves much harder to take. Even in peak summer, with the sun shining late into the night, the water at Lake Saimaa is freezing, and after the heat of the sauna, it comes as a shock to my system. But then again, that is the whole point: to wake up all the senses.

Research has shown that sauna bathing indeed has multiple health benefits, such as enhancing cardiovascular health, strengthening the immune system, reducing muscle stiffness and pain, and promoting restful sleep. For the

Finns, though, spending time in the sauna is not just about physical cleansing or mental relaxation – although these are important benefits of the ritual – but also about strengthening familial and social bonds, as well as clearing the mind of unwanted baggage. In other words, sauna is a meditation of sorts – a practice of mindfulness.

“After the sauna, you feel as if you have been born again,” says Carita Harju, Executive Manager at Sauna from Finland, a network of sauna businesses around the country. “Not only will you feel better, you’ll also wish to make the world a better place for yourself and for others. At its purest, the Finnish sauna experience provides a chance to be present with all your senses. You can hear the sounds of nature, see the colours and experience the beauty of the world around you, feel the gentle caress of the heat, and savour the different scents.”

The sauna is by no means a modern invention; some sources date this practice back 10,000 years, when it began as an earth pit covered with animal skin or a hole in the ice filled with hot stones. While the basic principle has stayed the same, several innovations have been introduced over time, with saunas now including steam, aroma and other therapeutic practices. This year, sauna bathing became Finland’s first nomination for the Unesco Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. And why not? As Harju says: “No passwords, emails or addictive social media apps are needed for the sauna. Everyone who opens the sauna door is treated equally, so you can just kick back and enjoy the heat.”

SUBLIME SAUNAS

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RUKAN SALONKI SAUNAS

rukansalonki.fi/en/saunas
For those seeking a more unique experience, there is the “ice sauna”, which is built from large blocks of ice lifted from the lake surrounding Rukan Salonki’s cottages. Jump into the frozen lake nearby in between your sessions in the heat. Available from end Dec till end Mar.