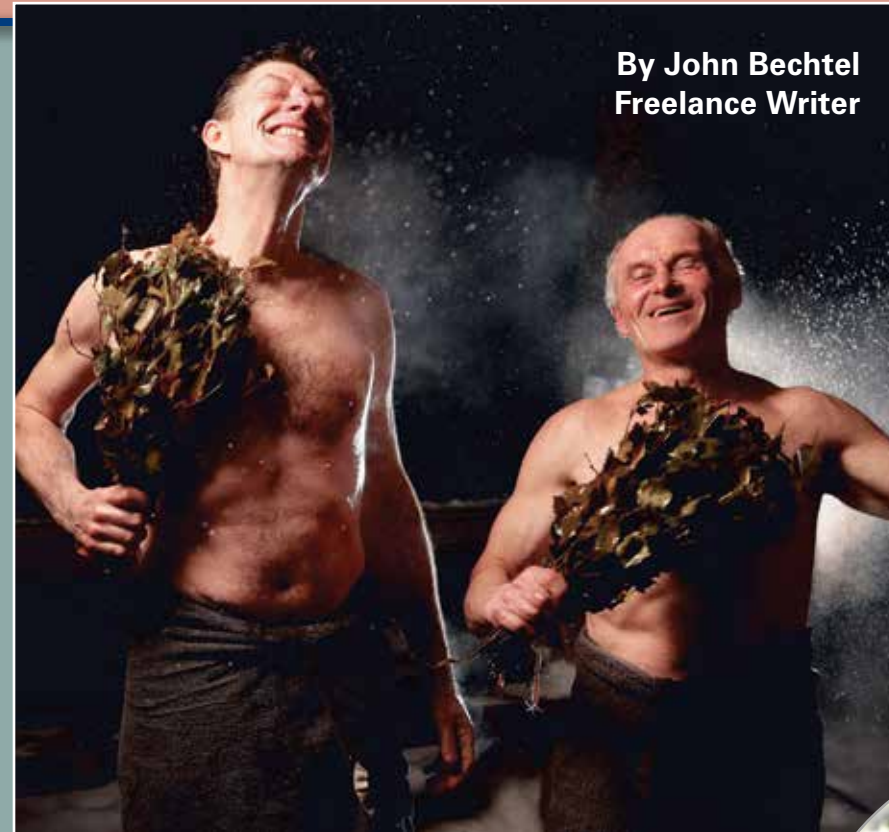


When does sweating become spiritual?



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Is this heaven? Two Finnish gentlemen relish a “whisking” in a local sauna. Whisking is a special form of sauna massage, which requires the presence of hot steam—includes waving, patting, drumming, stroking, splashing, and even striking a person’s body with a tool made of young birch twigs. Like other massage techniques, whisking has the same task—to warm and relax person’s body and assist emotional relaxation. Depending on one’s needs, whisking can vary from softly relaxing to rather hot and extreme.



Above: old wood carving of enjoying a good time together in the sauna.

Below: An inviting set of tools needed for a well-deserved, relaxing sauna: a bouquet of fresh young birch twigs, a dipper, and a towel, all presented beautifully in an essential water bucket, used to create “sauna steam” by splashing water from the bucket onto heated rocks.



Bathing and the use of heat to cleanse the skin and body of impurities took on mystical healing properties in many parts of the world from Asia to the Americas, from Finnish saunas to Turkish baths to the sweat lodges of the New World. But this is Finland we are talking about here, one of the most highly educated and technologically advanced populations on earth; certainly not a likely prospect for mass indulgence in hocus pocus.

What’s with the Finns and sauna?

And yet this country with 5.5 million inhabitants has 3.3 million saunas, one for every two people; enough for every home in the country, not to mention all the hotels, businesses, and public buildings. There are even saunas in underground mines for the workers. The average Finn goes to sauna at least once a week, and the

most devout go every day.

The sauna dates back a thousand years in northern Europe and has become closely associated in the international consciousness as a Finnish concept. Indeed, the word itself, sauna, is the only word in the Finnish lexicon that has achieved global recognition, and the Finns are the most ardent missionaries of its health and wellness benefits. When they speak of the sauna, it is often

in a tone of reverence, as befitting a religious experience.

Sauna as a religious experience

In the simplest terms, sauna is the practice of heating rocks and then throwing water on them to create steam, followed by several cycles of sweating profusely and then immersion into icy water. In ancient times, throwing water on the rocks was a sacrificial rite to the chief pagan god, Yli-Jumala, or Zeus.

The modern word for steam, löyly, means “spirit” in Old Finnish. Today, the quality of the löyly defines the entire experience for Finns.

Long ago sauna users often brought a rock that had human features into the room and placed it with the other stones, and the hollows of the eyes and mouth of the stone would fill with water and when this stone was sufficiently heated, it would let out a dull sound, the sigh of a spirit.

Imagine an ancient group of people, sparsely scattered throughout vast expanses of forest in the very cold Far North, where for months there was uninterrupted darkness. The sauna was the warmest part of their small and primitive homestead, the safest place, and the healing place. It was where the pregnant women went to birth their babies, where they held their naming

ceremonies, and it was where they intuitively took their sick; it was where they got married, and it was where they laid out their dead. It was where they washed off the dirt, blood, and gore when they came in from the elements or skinning their animals, and it was where they cooked their meals. It was also where they smoked their meat and dried their grain. In many functional ways the sauna became the focal point of their existence. The sauna was where they got clean. The sauna was where they kept their fire, and fire was their survival.

Sauna as the focal point of Finnish life

By association with the most important events of their lives, the sauna became a sacred place, and rituals developed. It was where they purified their body and their souls, and perhaps even the use of the birch branches to slap their bodies was a form of mortification to appease unhappy, inscrutable, whimsical gods,

a penitence, or an act of submission and humility. Or maybe the smells and touch of the branches brought them into closer communion with the life-sustaining but also often brutal nature all around them, and of which they were a part. Perhaps they became accepting and fatalistic in the face of hardship. Even during the period of the midnight sun, the sauna was dark and induced reverence. It was a place of refuge, of quiet contemplation, where you could solve problems or let your mind blank out suffering and pain. It was a place for quiet.

Sauna as a “peak experience”

Many centuries went by before the Finns (and the rest of the world) learned that high heat kills germs, that steam opens the bronchial airways and relieves arthritic pain, that 30% of the body’s impurities pass out through the skin, and that birch brings health

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Old style “smoke sauna” had no ventilation, and walls were blackened from the soot and smoke from the fire that kept the sauna hot.



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benefits to the kidneys and the slapping of the skin improves circulation. And only much later did they become aware that the value of the sauna went far beyond its calculated healthful utility, but that part of its seeming mystery was the achievement of what Abraham Maslow once identified as a peak experience. So perhaps the Finns, and the rapidly growing numbers of sauna aficionados can be forgiven for likening the experience to death and rebirth, a humbling ordeal that leaves them wiser and calmer, and with a deeper understanding of their own limits.

The origin of sauna

Did the Finns invent the sauna? It would be difficult to say that because the widespread use of the sauna long predates a Finland as we know it. At one time saunas were common all over Europe. It is thought that the original sauna was a hole in the ground, with a fire built at the bottom of the hole that heated stones placed there, with animal skins placed over the hole. It would only have been a matter of time before someone noticed the effect when water was splashed on the stones, causing steam to rise. Eventually saunas elsewhere became associated with prostitutes and vice, but not in Finland.

Appropriating sauna as a distinctly Finnish brand

It can be said, however, that the Finns have definitely stamped the sauna as their brand and there are reasons to believe the Finnish sauna is unique and special. It is different from the sweat lodges of the American Indians, of both North and South America, in the Finnish insistence on quiet in the sauna. The sweat lodges are often appreciated for the exact opposite; the opportunity to commune with others about ones challenges and anxieties, without confession; the opportunity under the influence of heat and steam to unburden oneself. This is definitely not the Finnish experience.

The Finnish experience is not about the sauna as a place for chatter or cell



Early saunas were primitive structures built underground, looking much like what pioneers in America used as root cellars for storing and preserving potatoes or canned goods. They have come a long way from their origins.

phones. The sauna is treated more as you would church. It is not a place for arguments. Men sit in saunas naked with men, and women with women. The only exceptions would be husbands and wives who take sauna together, or entire families who take it together, at least until their children become teenagers. In most places in Finland sauna is not about sex or orgies or indecency. It is a way of life that distinctly reflects Finnish values.

The practice of Finnish sauna

It is common to drink an herbal tea before taking the sauna because it facilitates sweating. You remove all jewelry, watches, and contact lenses. You do not wear a swimming suit in the sauna. The heat and cold cycle is usually repeated three times, and the entire process can take two hours or more, including time to rest between cycles, to achieve the real gestalt of sauna. Upon entry into the sauna, you generally do not pour water on the stones. You might sit on the bottom bench, because heat rises, and it gets hotter on the higher benches. You have a towel beneath your butt. You are naked. You might sit there for only five minutes, then leave to take a room temperature shower. You get up slowly so as not to get dizzy. You may choose to rest for a while before returning to the sauna.

Eventually you return, put some water on the rocks, and sit on a higher bench. You stay longer this time, maybe ten minutes. You break into a sweat. The temperature is maybe 176-194 degrees. This time when you leave, you either take a cold shower or dive into a lake or roll in the snow. You



Herbal tea facilitates sweating in the sauna.

can do snow angels if you like. You will probably not even notice the cold before returning to the sauna. This time you want to sit on the very top bench, which will be about 3 ½ to 4 feet from the ceiling, where it is hottest. You will remain about 15 minutes. It is so hot you will probably not want to talk at all.

You will lose a lot of fluids, and you will expel mineral salts and disperse lactic acid and toxins through your skin. You will want to rehydrate with water or juice, but definitely not alcohol. The sauna does not dry out your skin. In fact it will most likely improve your complexion once you cool off.

The sauna is not a Turkish bath

A sauna is different from a Turkish bath, which achieves virtually 100% saturation humidity. There is steam in the sauna when you splash water on the rocks, but it is temporary and then disperses. In the Turkish bath the steam is so thick you cannot see the person sitting next to you. You become enveloped in a dense moist fog.

The gestalt of Finnish sauna

If you are going to walk out on lake ice to jump into an ice hole to cool off, be sure to put a pair of socks on to walk across the ice, because the skin on your feet will stick to the dry ice. By the end of the third cycle you want to immerse yourself in water that is just short of frozen. You may find it to be a religious experience, death and resurrection. You will never remember it as a simple bath. Your skin will tingle and you will never have felt more alive. The Finnish sauna is not to be underestimated. It is more than the sum of its parts. It is more than being about clean, safe, relaxed, just the right temperature, the perfect smells and mood lighting. The Finnish sauna is the embodiment of the Finnish people, their character, values, and world view. It is one of the oldest traditions in their culture. They have sauna tours, sauna diplomacy, sauna yoga, scenic sauna, sauna therapists, tent saunas, peacekeeping saunas, and now they have the World Sauna Forum.

Sisu and sauna

Finland is moving aggressively to appropriate the sauna as a cultural

brand, so that when people anywhere in the world think of sauna, they think of Finland. There is a Sauna from Finland association, and in this centennial year, they have organized a World Sauna Forum event in Jyväskylä. In an effort to revitalize the commercial success of their sauna industry, Sauna from Finland has created an Authentic Finnish Sauna Experience quality certificate. They are seeking to make the Finnish brand the world standard of excellence for the industry. So far there are over 160 Finnish companies collaborating in this marketing effort. They are selling well-being, relaxation, and balance. They have a sauna and related products for every situation and they are seeking to internationalize their famous sauna heritage.

The Finnish commercial culture has been dominated by the 4s's for a long time: Sisu, Sauna, Saarinen, and Sibelius. If you are a regular reader of this magazine, you know what at least three of those are. Once again the Finns are taking what they know best and exporting it to the world. Sisu is the courage and persistence to let the world know how good their sauna experience really is. After all, it's been laboratory tested on 5.5 million people.



The Finnish sauna culture promotes husbands and wives taking sauna together.

A new touch: unlike traditional saunas, modern saunas are much lighter and more open, with glass windows that allow participants to be one with nature as they enjoy the view of the surrounding terrain.