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The Finnish Sauna

SAUNA, correctly pronounced "sow (rhymes with wow!) nah," is the only Finnish word in the English dictionary; it means "bath" and "bathhouse." Sauna has been a way of life in Finland, where it was invented, for over 2000 years. The Finnish sauna was originally a place for people to bathe, so it was positioned near to a source of water. However, as it was the only clean place with abundant water, it has also been used as a place for giving birth and healing the sick. In Finland today there are approximately 2 million saunas, over half of these are in private ownership, a large number considering the population is only 5 million.

Other cultures throughout history have had their own versions of the sauna;

- The native American Sweat Lodge or Inipi
- The Russian Bania
- The Turkish Hammam
- The Japanese Mushiboro
- The Temescal of Mexico.

Originally the nomadic people of Finland used very primitive saunas. They heated holes in the ground and then covered them to make a warm place for bathing. This hot room later evolved into the smoke sauna. A smoke sauna has a fireplace with no chimney, built by piling stones together, usually without using mortar; the fire heats the stones directly, taking several hours to heat up and the smoke exits the room through a small hole just below the roof. Smoke saunas were built and used as late as the 1920's, after which they almost disappeared as new types of heaters were developed.

Most modern heaters use electricity since it is easy and relatively cheap. The feeling in a wood-heated sauna is somewhat different from that of an electric sauna and many still prefer them. The wooden sauna has lately won new appreciation and the art of building wood - heated saunas, even smoke saunas has been revived in Finland.



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When saunas became popular in Finnish homes they were originally separated from the main house, the sauna building often being a single room used both for washing below and as a warming heat treatment on benches placed above. As living standards improved, the washing room was separated completely from the hot room. Running water made washing easier, thus allowing placement of the sauna away from water sources such as lakes or wells. In many modern Finnish houses the sauna is a main part of the bathroom and nearly all apartments are built with saunas in place.

Settlers erected the first Finnish saunas built overseas, in the Delaware River valley in America in 1638. Now Finnish saunas are at the centre of a major world-wide export trade.

Using a Finnish Sauna

Taking a sauna in Finland is a sociable occasion and also forms part of every day home life. Many Finns have saunas at their summer homes, by the thousands of lakes in Finland and for them a sauna is not complete without a refreshing swim. In the winter, sauna veterans will even make a hole in the river ice and dive into the icy water (temperature of approx. 3 to 5 Celsius)

Some people prefer to enter the sauna naked and others prefer to use a swimsuit or towel.

In a sauna or spa it is usual to be provided with towels and gowns so the client has a choice and many establishments provide single sex saunas as well as mixed. Many users will wear a swimsuit to maintain their modesty. To benefit from a sauna you will need at least half an hour, preferably an hour to allow ample time to relax.

When visiting a spa and using a sauna or having other forms of treatment, you will be required to fill in a health questionnaire to ensure that you have no condition that requires permission from a medical practitioner before having the treatment. There should be a list of contraindications positioned prominently for every client to read before entering the sauna in addition to a set of guidelines in safe use of the sauna.

Sauna procedure

- Begin by taking a shower as this helps to maintain a hygienic environment and remove perfumes, body lotions etc.
- Enter the sauna and sit on the lower bench if you prefer a lower temperature and the higher bench if you prefer it hotter.
- Relax for five minutes and let the heat permeate the body and open the pores.
- The air moisture may be adjusted by throwing water on the stones of the heater. The steam produced will make the room feel hotter.
- After ten minutes, rest in the relaxation area to cool down, or take another shower.
- Return to the sauna a few times, taking time to relax and enjoy the heat.
- Finally shower to cleanse the body of perspiration.
- Allow twenty minutes to cool down and dry properly before dressing.
- Drink plenty of fluids preferably water to re-hydrate

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The air can be relatively dry, so water can be sprinkled over the stones to increase humidity. The air must never be completely dry, however, since it could be harmful to the respiratory system.

Splashing water on the benches has a cooling effect, since the evaporating water will take heat out of the air.

As with showering, taking saunas very often, may dry your skin, so you may want to use a moisturising body lotion after a sauna.

The sauna experience is a personal one and it is important to listen to your body and do as you feel best.

If you are reasonably healthy, you can bathe in a sauna as often as you like without worrying about health effects. As long as the sauna is used in a sensible way it is thought to be entirely safe. If you are worried or have health limitations, it is important to consult your doctor before having a sauna.

People who should avoid the sauna completely are those :

- With a fever
- Who have inflammatory disease
- Who have injuries
- With contagious disease
- Under the influence of alcohol

The Benefits of Sauna

- Increases body temperature
- Soothes and relaxes tired muscles
- Helps to relieve mental fatigue
- Relieves tension and stress
- Provides a cardiovascular workout - Helps condition heart
- Increases metabolic rate
- Improves circulation and temporarily lowers blood pressure
- Provides temporary relief for arthritic pain
- Promotes healing and releases natural pain killers, Beta Endorphins and Norepinephrines
- Increases resistance to illness
- Burns calories
- Helps maintain clear, healthy skin as the body's impurities are excreted through perspiration providing an improvement in skin colour and texture.
- Promotes a wonderful feeling of well being

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Finnish Sauna Terminology

Löyly

This is the Finnish name for steam or vapour. To increase the humidity in the sauna, water is thrown on the stones of the stove, *Löyly* is the resulting steam. The steam is hot (nearly 100° C) and causes the room temperature to go up temporarily. Since water carries heat much more efficiently than air, the change is felt instantly. The steam is hottest near the roof and bathers sometimes react by bending down to avoid it.

Vihta or Vasta

Vihta is the name given to a thick bunch of birch twigs, approx. 40 cm in length. Traditionally they are used to slap on one self to promote blood circulation and cleanse the skin. The vihta is not used as a whip, although it may appear so to the inexperienced sauna user, it is not supposed to hurt, but to make the skin tingle for a while.

Traditionally the vihta is made in the summer, just before the Midsummer's Feast, by cutting birch twigs that have a lot of leaves and tying them together. It should be a thick bunch of young, tender branches. It is important for it to have many leaves, as they make the slapping softer and more pleasant

