

SAUNA: the naked truth

Many people have misconceptions about sauna baths and Adam Meng goes to Finland to get the bare and steamy facts.

Born in the sauna and die in the sauna — that's what they say about the sweating bath that is so Finnish.

I had several misconceptions about sauna, as many people do, before I went to Finland: Sauna is a Finnish invention, sauna is on the upper rung of the lifestyle ladder, and sauna is morally suspect. None of these, it turns out, are true.

Sauna is said to be the only Finnish word that has made its way into English. Though it is often associated with Finland, it was not invented by the Finns, according to The Finnish Sauna Society.

Some say the sauna tradition was passed on from the Swedes and Russians who ruled Finland for years. When most European bathhouses were shuttered — for reasons of hygiene and morality — they remained open in remote areas like north Russia, Estonia and Finland.

Bathhouses were recorded in Europe during medieval times, but Finnish bathing habits were not documented until the 16th century. It is generally believed that the first wooden sauna was built in Finland in the 19th century.

Whoever the inventors, it is the Finns who have made the most of the tradition; sauna is part of national identity.

As to the sauna-status symbol, any notions of sauna tradition as elitist will go up in steam once you're in Finland — a country with 2 million

saunas and 5.3 million people.

Though sweating baths are found from Turkey to Russia and from Mexico to India, Finland's high ratio is unrivaled.

Saunas are found at the average Joe's home, corporate headquarters, the Parliament building and way down 1,400 meters into the Pyhäsalmi mine. They say taking a sauna is as common as having a meal. It was and still is for every man, and woman, not just for the elite.

Spirit of sauna

Now for the naked truths and questions: With all those naked people in steaming room, is there anything steamy going on?

No, is the emphatic answer from sauna enthusiasts.

Across cultures, anything related to birth and death is sanctified. Sauna is no exception.

In the old days, Finnish brides would take a sauna before going to the altar. Women used to give birth in the sauna as it was the most hygienic place on a farm: Sauna smoke contains tannic acid, an antibacterial polymer. And saunas were the place to go when people were ill, and many people died in saunas. Then women would wash the bodies of the dead in the sauna. In folklore, sauna is the home of the sauna elf, or spirit of sauna.

The sauna has been so charged with a divine steam that, as a Finnish saying goes, you should behave yourself in a sauna as you would in church. Shouting and swearing are prohibited. Relieving oneself in a sauna is definitely taboo. So is that steamy act.

But clothes are definitely prohibited, towels are allowed.

Families go to a sauna together, but when the children get older, they go separately. In public saunas, men and women have separate areas. Mixed saunas are not uncommon for younger people, but they are not for older people or for formal occasions.

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