

Sauna: sanctum of sweat, spirit

From B1

There can be cycles of saunas: steaming up and then plunging into ice-cold water, then doing it again in a hotter sauna, then in another.

Though the original sauna was a modest burrow in the earth, a dugout, in which a pile of stones was heated for bathing, modern saunas have all the amenities: a hot room, a washing room and a dressing room.

There are wood-burning saunas and electric stove saunas.

At The Finnish Sauna Society, which is the oldest (founded in 1937) and largest among Finland's 2,500 such establishments, there are five traditional wood-burning saunas, including three smoke saunas without chimneys, and one modern electric-stove sauna, accommodating 60-80 people at a time.

In the Helsinki establishment, the hot rooms are heated to three levels, 80 degrees Celsius, 120 degrees, and 170 degrees, says Kristian Miettinen, executive director of the society. Women usually take the 80 degrees.

Sensational sweat

However, sauna culture doesn't encourage competition in ability to stand the heat. Saunas are supposed to be enjoyable, not to be endured, and the steam, from water poured on hot stones, is for soothing, not suffering.

For me the most amazing part of the sauna is not the heat, but the shocking chill of diving into an ice hole in a lake after sweating.

When Miettinen pointed out of the lounge window at the frozen seawater where the sauna taker will dive or swim, I literally shuddered at the idea: Still steaming all over, you dash out of the sauna room, run along a pier in air temperature of minus 20 degrees Celsius and dive into the hole freshly cut from ice more than 10 centimeters thick.

Anyone who thinks a mere minus 2 degrees is cold in Shanghai will enter a whole new world in Finland.

Then I (fully clothed) was given a tour by Miettinen. I dropped into several hot rooms, including the 170-degree one, and then — wearing just a sweater — we went outdoors to see a man in a diving wet suit cut a hole in the ice with a heated spade.

The guy in the wet suit then stepped into the hole, dropped into the icy water and then made a "V"-sign.

It was here, Miettinen said, that then US Vice President George Bush "made a reasonably handsome swimming in the ice-cold water with his hosts." That splash on January 24, 1983, followed a warm-up in all five saunas, including about four minutes in the hottest one.

For security reasons, Bush didn't submerge himself until six of his bodyguards dived under to make sure there was no danger.



▼ A handmade mesh of *kiuas*, or sauna stones, is displayed at a show room of the IKI-Kiuas Oy, a family-run business, in Helsinki. — Adam Meng



◀ An outdoor jacuzzi where bathing after ice hole diving is enjoyed, at Kelo Syöte at the foot of the Iso Syöte hill in northern Finland. — Pauli Särkela



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Samuli Kerman, head of IKI-Kiuas Oy, a family-run business producing handmade products like stone mesh, stones, stove and other sauna products, at his office in Helsinki. — Adam Meng

The Finnish Sauna Society is built on a promontory in the Gulf of Finland, and Russia and Estonia are only a few kilometers away from the ice hole area.

Bush is just one of the celebrities that visited. Others include European royalty.

Chinese businessmen are in the habit of treating their partners with a big feast to celebrate a successfully concluded deal. It is said that their Finnish counterparts, as well as politicians, will invite their rivals to a sauna, where they will discard their clothes together with protocol, inhibitions and hostility — all going up in steam. After a tough negotiating session, visiting a sauna is a sign that talks are going well.

In Finland, an invitation to sauna is common, both for business people and casual friends. If you don't feel like it, feel free to say no, as most hosts will not be offended.

But more often than not, the invitation to a sauna is hard to resist. I was recently invited to sauna

in Kelo Syöte at the foot of Iso Syöte hill.

About one hour after a good meal, which is a guarantee of energy, I throw off my clothes in the dressing room and take a short shower. Then I take a disposable towel in the dressing room.

I step into a sauna room, spread the towel on a bench and sit down. After we warm up for several minutes, our host, Yuha Kuukasjärvi, throws a ladle of water on the *kiuas*, the hot stones in the stove, and with a powerful hiss, up floats the *löyly*, or the steam, which is considered the spirit of sauna.

Yuha's son, Matti, three, sits on a lower bench, where the temperature is a bit lower.

Several minutes later, we're covered all over in sweat that trickles down. It's like the moment when you jog into the last leg of a long run. Then another ladle of water on the *kiuas*. (By then, Matti is gone from the hot room.)

The whole room is filled with steam as the temperature rises to about 75 degrees. I just sit there,

enjoying the amazing sweating that takes away the whole day's fatigue and winter cold.

About 15 minutes later, Yuha says it's ice hole time. I throw a towel over my shoulder and step out of the sauna room into the chilly night darkness. A sensor light in the courtyard turns on, illuminating the frozen wooden jetty leading to frozen Kovalampi Lake.

I trot my way out, hunched over and shivering in the wind. My soles turn sticky as my warm feet touch the snow-covered jetty and melt a thin layer of the thick ice. Carefully, I find the slippery steps at the side of the lake, and — slowly, slowly I inch down into the water. I can't help but gasp when I enter the water — Yuha had suggested breathing steadily, as you would when you practice tai chi.

Now the water comes to my neck and I count: O-n-e! T-w-o! T-h-r-e-e! F-o-u-r! F-i-v-e! S-i-x! Oh, Stop! I scramble up the wood steps, find a railing, gallop to an outdoor jacuzzi and immerse myself. Only when I am up to my jaw in warm water can I recall that

swell feeling of ice hole diving. Now, my hair turns spiky as the sweat freezes up in the night wind. I ruffle it and throw warm water onto my head.

After lazing a while in the jacuzzi, I charge into another, hotter sauna, at more than 85 degrees.

More sensational steam. More sensational sweat. Better prepared now, I dash out and plunge into the ice hole again!

Another wow and back to the outdoor jacuzzi. Then another session of sweating. Feeling contented, I take a shower, sit in the dressing room to cool down and get dressed.

After that, I spend some time reliving the chilled sweetness of a dream come true: the real sauna, Oh Yeah.

The only thing I missed in the real Finnish sauna is the *vihta*, the sauna whisk made of a bunch of leafy fragrant birch twigs used to beat yourself gently for massage. They say it relaxes the muscles and stimulates blood circulation.

I'm looking forward to another sauna, one with *vihta* whipping.