

JOIN THE FINNS IN THE SAUNA

If you want to understand Finland and its people, getting familiar with sauna is a good starting point.

Sauna is such a big part of Finnish culture it can't be compared to anything else. For Finns, it is a must at regular intervals, and if they go too long without sauna, they'll start feeling incomplete. For centuries, it has been a place for physical and spiritual cleansing, for getting bare in all senses of the word, and entering the core of humanity. Sauna is a way of life in Finland – toddlers take their first turns in sauna at only a few months old, and from then on, never stop.

Sharing a sauna with someone is about bonding, about discussing real issues – no small talk. In Finland, major decisions are made in saunas, not boardrooms. Throughout history, there has been no Finland without sauna.

It is said that there are enough saunas in Finland to easily accommodate all 5.4 million Finns simultaneously. It's true, since estimates place the number somewhere between two and three million. There are saunas in studio apartments, at summer cottages and public swimming pools, gyms and hotels,

on boats and buses, you name it – Finnish embassies abroad have their own saunas built and there's even one inside the Parliament in Helsinki.

Sauna is the only Finnish word that has been internationally accepted in other languages, and there's no other word Finns would want more recognition for – it is the perfect nominator for Finland, its people and culture.

Having a sauna can mean anything from a quick 10-minute steam session to a social event lasting several hours. Especially at a summer house, you heat up the sauna and pop in and out whenever you feel like it with swimming, barbecuing, lawn games and general socializing in between.

In the winter, the freezing temperatures provide interesting contrasts and supplementary activities to steaming hot saunas. Dipping in icy lakes and rolling in the snow are said to be good for blood circulation, but most do them simply for the incredible rush.

Most saunas are private these days, but there are still public ones left in bigger cities. They used to be popular when workers didn't have their own and would gather to their

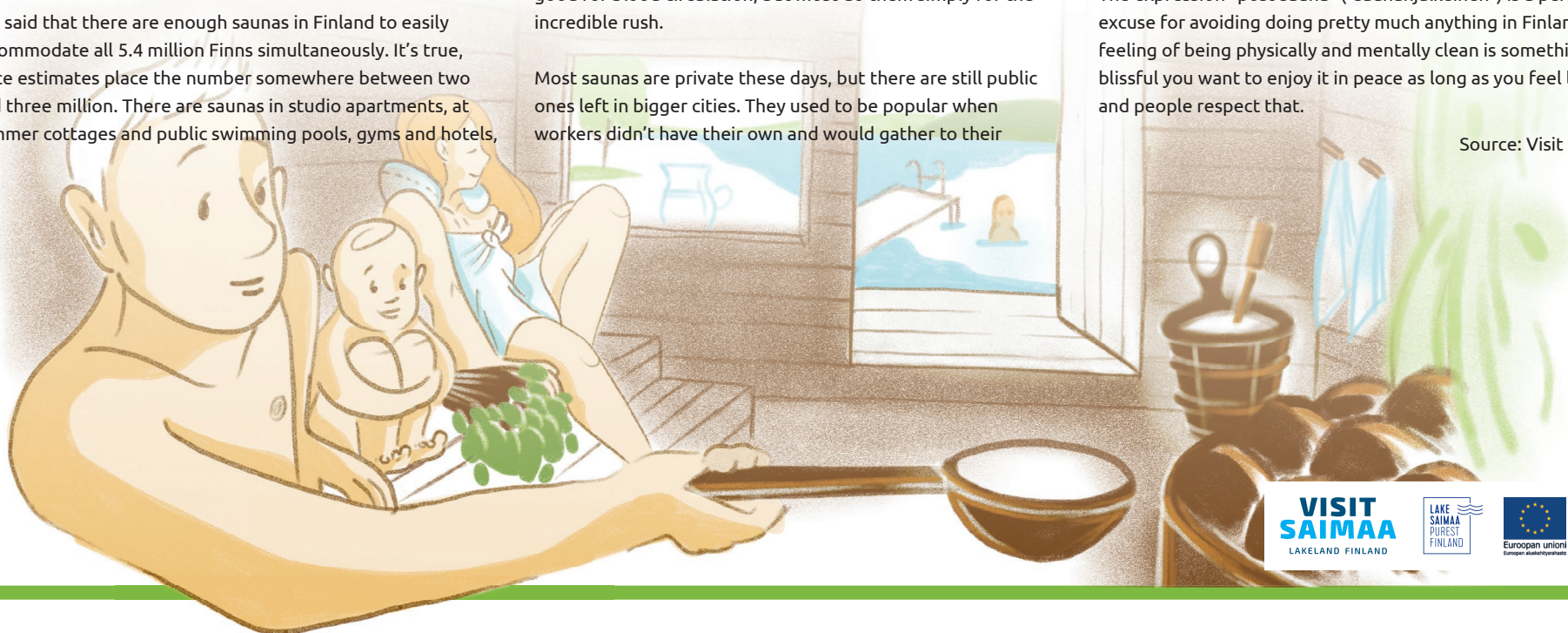
neighbourhood sauna for a good sit in the steam. Finns don't actively seek contact with people they don't know, but saunas have always been exceptions: in there, all are equal, and strangers can get into unexpectedly deep conversations with each other.

Still only a few decades ago, the sauna used to be a gateway in and out of this world: women would give birth in saunas, and upon a person's death, the body would be given a final wash there. Saying sauna is an important piece of Finnish culture is an understatement.

As you become familiar with sauna, you might want to explore further. There are several types of saunas, the most common being electric, wood-heated and smoke saunas. Healing has been an integral part of sauna for ages, and there are scores of sauna-related wellness treatments available.

The expression "post-sauna" ("saunanjälkeinen") is a perfect excuse for avoiding doing pretty much anything in Finland. The feeling of being physically and mentally clean is something so blissful you want to enjoy it in peace as long as you feel like, and people respect that.

Source: Visit Finland



10 SAUNA TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

What exactly do you do in a Finnish sauna and what not?

There is nothing more Finnish than sauna, and many Finns think you cannot grasp Finland or its culture without bathing in a sauna. However, Finns understand that foreigners have certain inhibitions and concerns when it comes to stepping in a heated box with no clothes on. Have a look at our tips below and you need to worry no more.

- 1 Sauna is good for everybody. Only newborn babies and people with serious health conditions should avoid sauna. Everybody else can enjoy it with no worries and in Finland, you are more than likely to, several times over!
- 2 Finnish sauna has nothing to do with sexuality, and suggesting it does, will not score points with Finns. It is a place for physical and mental cleansing, and many suggest one should behave in a sauna as they do in church. That is not to say you should not relax – just kick back and take it easy.
- 3 Getting invited to a sauna is an honour. If you have a reason to decline, fair enough – but it better be a good one! Bathing in sauna with people is somewhat of a bonding process – when you are bare in all senses of the word, you are sure not to hide anything. It is said that in Finland, the most important decisions are made in the sauna, not in meeting rooms.
- 4 Coloured lights, aromatic fragrances and relaxing music have nothing to do with Finnish sauna. Real Finnish saunas are dimly lit, there is no music or smells except for fresh birch and natural tar.
- 5 Yes, Finns go to sauna nude, even with people they do not know. Don't worry – we've seen our fair share of naked human bodies and it's not a "thing" for us. It is natural and there is

The sauna elf
Last bather should always ensure there is some heat left for the sauna elf, as he always bathes last



no shame in it, but if you find the thought unbearable, Finns will understand you wanting to wear a swimsuit or a towel.

- 6 Families bathe in the sauna together, regardless of gender, but when in a mixed group, women and men normally go to sauna separately. It is perfectly fine to ask people and discuss who should go with who.
- 7 A "vasta" or "vihta" (the name depends on the region) is a bundle of fresh birch twigs that you gently whip yourself with. It sounds strange, but is really good for your skin – you will feel the difference afterwards.
- 8 There are no rules for how often you should throw more water on the stove. Whenever you feel like another wave of steam, go for it.
- 9 You will most likely sweat quite heavily in the sauna, so be sure to drink plenty. Water is probably best for you, but beer and cider is often enjoyed by Finns whilst in the sauna. Roasting sausages either on an open fire or in tin foil directly on the stove is another key part of the Finnish sauna experience.
- 10 There are no real rules when it comes to sauna. The most important thing is to relax, socialize, have a couple of drinks and enjoy the blissful post-sauna feeling of having cleansed both your body and mind.



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