

# SAUNA RENAISSANCE

AS SAUNA BATHING PICKS UP STEAM IN THE UNITED STATES, TAKE A LOOK AT THE HISTORY, ARCHITECTURE, HEALTH BENEFITS AND CULTURE OF THIS ANCIENT NORDIC TRADITION.

BY TAYLOR HUGO





## MUST-SEE SAUNA

### **wa\_sauna**

Designed by goCstudio architecture + design firm in Seattle, wa\_sauna welcomes water-lovers to take a sweat bath while floating on Pacific Coast lakes. [gocstudio.com/wa-sauna](http://gocstudio.com/wa-sauna)

PHOTO BY KEVIN SCOTT

## IT'S A COLD NIGHT IN DECEMBER;

the kind of night where you can feel a chill in your bones and every breath becomes visible in the icy air. But the temperature is of little consequence as you trek through the snow that crunches underfoot, anticipating the warmth that awaits. When you arrive at your destination and open the door, perhaps you are greeted by solitude, or perhaps the friendly faces of others. Sprinkling water on the rocks to produce a fresh burst of steam, you take a seat on the lower or higher bench, depending on the level of heat you're comfortable with. You might stay in for 10 minutes, or maybe 30, before stepping out for a break and repeating the process all over again.

This process is an ancient ritual known as sauna bathing, and whether confined within a luxurious spa in the United States or a modest wooden box under the Northern Lights of Scandinavia, the feeling it produces is universal. "Sauna is the ultimate relaxation," says Dr. Eero Kilpi, a Finnish native and president of the North American Sauna Society. "Sauna is a way of life."

Though forms of sauna bathing, or sweat bathing, have existed for centuries throughout cultures around the globe (it's a banya in Russia, a temazcal in Mexico, a badstue in Norway) it was the Finnish term "sauna," one of the most commonly used Finnish words in the English language, that took hold — and for good reason. With a population of 5.3 million people, it's estimated there are at least 2 million saunas in Finland. That's one sauna for every 2.65 people!

Historically, saunas served a very utilitarian purpose. Entire villages would bathe in them together to avoid wasting firewood, and they were even used for giving birth and preparing the dead for burial. Today, however, saunas are more of a luxurious experience, a way to unwind at the end of the day. As the sweat bathing trend picks up steam, literally, in America, here's a look at the architecture, health benefits and culture that define the classic Nordic tradition.

### THE MAKING OF A SAUNA

In its simplest form, a sauna is made of wood and heated rock. While there are many variations, Kilpi says there are three main types in traditional sauna culture. As its name suggests, a wood-burning sauna relies on a stove to burn wood. The heat produced from the burning wood, in turn, warms the sauna rocks and the room. Similarly, smoke saunas are also heated using a wood-burning stove, but without a chimney — which makes it the closest model to what was used in ancient Finland. The lack of a chimney causes smoke to accumulate for a period of time before the room is ventilated and sweat bathing can begin. Finally, an electrically heated sauna, most commonly found in private residential properties, uses a remote to control the temperature.

No matter the type of sauna, there are three design elements sweat bathers should look for to ensure they are getting a proper sauna experience, says Mikkel Aaland, a dual citizen of Norway and the United States, and the author of “Sweat,” considered by many to be the definitive guide to sweat bathing throughout history and around the world. The first is a drain, to rid the sauna of fluids like cleaning products and excess water. A good ventilation system is also key, allowing the flow



## MUST-SEE SAUNA

### Rukan Salonki Ice Sauna

Find this sauna on top of Lake Salonkijärvi in Finland. Up to 10 people can experience the sauna at once, and there's a hole in the ice just outside the structure, should you desire a brisk winter swim.

[rukansalonki.fi](http://rukansalonki.fi)

of fresh air and preventing a stale, claustrophobic feeling. Lastly, Aaland says, there should be rocks in the stove. While many people in the United States are accustomed to seeing signs in health clubs or hotels that read, “Don't throw water on the rocks,” sauna experts say water is part of the authentic experience — and it's better for your health.

“There is a difference between the heat that comes off metal and the heat that comes off rock. Science has shown that when heat comes off a coil, it sends out positive ions that have a negative effect on your body, making you feel irritable and uncomfortable,” Aaland says. “When heat goes from electric coils into rocks, and water is sprinkled on the rocks, it creates a burst of steam, producing negative ions, which have a positive effect on our emotions and feelings.”

### SWEATING FOR YOUR HEALTH

Licensed psychologist Dr. Stephen Colmant has promoted the health benefits of sweat bathing since the 1990s, though he says people have

intuitively practiced the ritual as a healthy activity for 1,000 years. While working as a psychotherapist at a treatment center for Navajo Indian children battling disruptive behavior disorders and psychiatric problems from stress and neglect, he observed how well his patients responded to sweat lodges (the Native American version of saunas) and made it a regular activity in his treatment. He later wrote a book on the topic, “Sweat Therapy: A Guide to Greater Well-Being.”

“There's this muscle relaxation that is caused and people open up and disclose more,” Colmant explains of the positive psychological effects of sweat bathing, such as improvements in mental satisfaction, energy and relaxation, and a decrease in frustration and anxiety. “It also requires us to be more insightful and to look inward into what's going on with us. People feel like they are getting a release of negative emotions, a release of stress.”

But sauna is not just beneficial for our mental health — it has a positive effect on our physical well-being, too. In fact, sauna is frequently compared to cardiovascular exercise, in that it can help prevent lung, heart and skin problems; treat insomnia and promote better, deeper sleep; and even aid in pain relief from conditions like arthritis. “Sweating is a form of exercise,” Colmant says. “The key difference between sweating from exercise and sweating from sauna is that instead of muscle tension, you get muscle relaxation.”

Like exercise, repetition is key. Colmant recommends sauna sessions two to three times a week to reap the benefits.

### SAUNA CULTURE TODAY

So what is it about sauna that has endured centuries and crossed cultures?

# 8 BENEFITS OF SAUNA

Aaland says there are three pillars that have upheld sweat bathing's popularity: the physical effects that feel good and do good for your body and mind; the social aspect, encouraging all barriers to be dropped as you experience sauna with others; and the spiritual component of feeling connected to the earth, air, fire and your body.

"I think people are really looking for authentic experiences in life now," Aaland says. "In sweat bathing culture, there is no agenda. It's authentic, it's real and your experience is real. There are very few things that are not only physically good for you, but also have social and spiritual components. When you put those three things together — whoa, that is something very powerful."

There is no doubt that sauna bathing is experiencing a renaissance of sorts — especially in the United States. In Minnesota, for example, the 612 Sauna Society recently raised nearly \$38,000 to build a sauna, and then created the nation's first sauna cooperative to manage it. Aaland is also reinvigorating his book "Sweat," first published in 1978, by bringing it to life in a television series called "Perfect Sweat," in which he tours the world to understand why people have historically sweat in various locations and why they continue to do so today. Filming started this summer and Aaland expects the series will be available on a streaming service like Netflix or Amazon once complete.

Although people in the United States still have a lot to learn about sauna, there has been progress. "We have delegated the bath to this shower world where it's quick and efficient and there is very little social aspect," Aaland says. "I'm excited to see that we're starting to break through that idea and realize that [sweat bathing] is healthy and very positive for the community."

## SLEEP BETTER

The calming effect of the sauna helps prepare you for a good night's sleep.



## RECOVER FASTER

Whether you are sore after a workout or have arthritis, sauna can ease your pain. The heat dilates the blood vessels, which increases the blood flow to the aching muscles to quicken recovery time.

## REDUCE STRESS

The heat relaxes muscles, releases endorphins and increases blood circulation — the perfect mix for diminishing stress.



## IMPROVE SKIN

The sweat flushes out bacteria and toxins to help cleanse the skin, and the increased blood flow promotes the growth of new skin cells.

## IMPROVE HEART HEALTH

Regular sauna use can help extend your life by protecting against heart disease and improving circulatory functions.



## FIGHT COMMON ILLNESSES

Sauna helps your body release more white blood cells, which fight ailments and kill off viruses. The heat and steam can also help relieve the symptoms of sinus congestion from allergies or a cold.

## PROTECT THE BRAIN

Recent studies suggest that sauna may lower the risk of developing dementia or Alzheimer's disease.



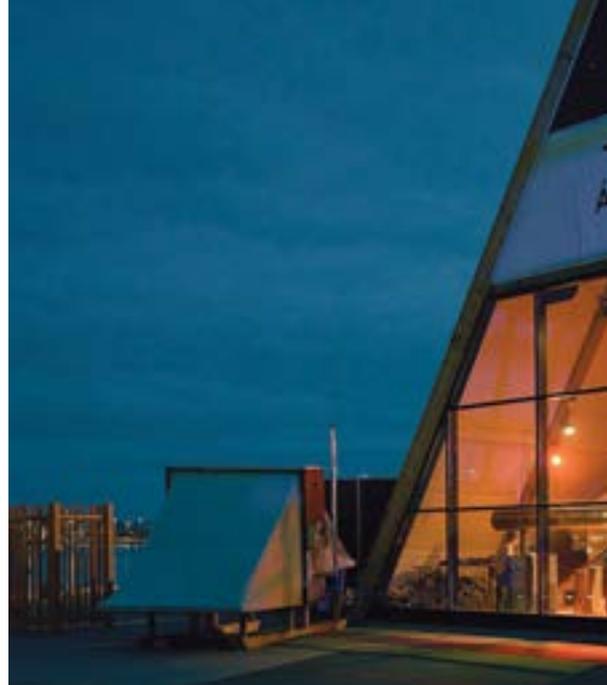
## CONNECT WITH OTHERS

Sauna creates a common space to connect with friends, family and new people. The small room encourages open, intimate conversations.



### Sauna Gondola

Sport Resort Ylläs in Finland boasts the world's only sauna gondola lift. After a day of hitting the slopes, guests can enjoy a sweat bath overlooking the Lapland landscape while being transported to Café Gondol 718's sauna at the top of the fell, where they'll be greeted by a fireplace, showers and a whirlpool. [sportresortyllas.com](http://sportresortyllas.com)



# MUST-SEE SAUNAS

THESE SAUNAS AROUND THE GLOBE ELEVATE THE SWEAT BATHING EXPERIENCE.



### Sinnenas Spa

At Sweden's Ästad Vingård — a multipurpose property that includes a hotel, restaurant, vineyard and spa — guests are able to sit by a crackling fire and get an up-close look at fish and other sea creatures in Sinnenas Spa's underwater sauna. [astadvingard.se](http://astadvingard.se)



### Sauna Árdna

As part of SALT, a years-long art and music festival in Oslo that runs through Oct. 31, 2018, visitors can take a sweat bath in Sauna Árdna, the world's largest sauna, which can accommodate up to 120 people at a time. [salted.no](http://salted.no)



### The Bands

Situated along the rocky shore in Kleivan, Lofoten, and designed by students in the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, this sauna is part of a larger project to restore and reimagine an abandoned fishing village dating back to the early 1900s. [scs.aho.no](http://scs.aho.no)



ad