

Sauna – A Finnish national institution

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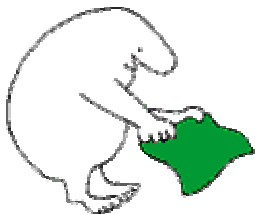
Having a sauna means more than just sitting on the sauna bench and sweating in the heat; it is a ritual with several stages. By following the guidelines below you will make your sauna session a relaxing and enjoyable experience.

How to enjoy the sauna

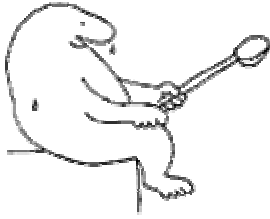
Reserve enough time says the Finnish Sauna Society's bathing guide. Since a group of real experts has compiled the instructions they are well worth following. The brief instructions may, however, need a few additional explanations.



Start the session by having a shower. This instruction probably exists for reasons of general hygiene, and is as such necessary. But showering or swimming in the summer before the sauna is also good for another reason. Bathing in a hot sauna is said to be more pleasant if your skin is wet. Many disagree, though, and bathe without wetting their skin because they want to feel the sweat forming on their skin. So, there are two schools of thought: believers in a wet and a dry skin. It's a question of personal taste.

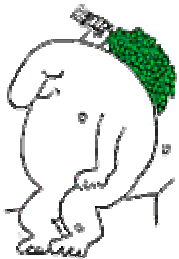


Use a bench cover to sit on, say the instructions, again probably for reasons of hygiene. A bench cover is also useful because the benches in a sauna get very hot, sometimes burning hot.



About the heat level, the advice is that **80-90°C (maximum 100°C)** is enough. Add humidity by throwing water on the stove. It is also good to know that you should stay in the heat only as long as it feels good. Competition about who lasts longest is unhealthy and contrary to the spirit of the sauna.

The sauna is a sweat bath. Many bathers know very little about sweating, though, and go about it in totally the wrong way by throwing two or three ladlefuls of water on the hot stones as soon as they sit down on the bench. What follows is a sudden heat shock, a real battering on the skin enough to stop the normal functioning of the sweat glands. It takes time to perspire properly. To sweat bathers need their body temperature to rise by a couple of degrees, a kind of self-induced fever. This takes 8-12 minutes, depending on the person's perspiration capacity. Raising the temperature of the sauna will not speed up the perspiration process. In this respect a sauna at 80°C is comparable to one where the temperature is 100°C. If the sauna is too hot and dry, the sweat dries as soon as it reaches the surface of the skin.



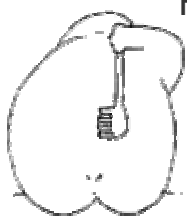
Continue bathing in the steam and finish off by beating yourself with a soft sauna whisk. The culmination of the steam bath, to beat yourself gently with a whisk of birch fronds, is when you have reached the high point of sweating.



A rapid change from hot to cold is not recommended.

That means a really sudden change! You need a suitable length of time to adjust first. Otherwise, too, cooling off and resting are an essential part of sauna bathing. The worst shortcoming of town saunas is the lack of a suitable terrace or balcony where the bather could cool off. The advantage of a waterside sauna is that you can plunge into the cooling water straight from the heat and exchange your steam bath for a watery one. In winter the bravest take a dip in icy water or roll in pure white snow. Only the rugged North can offer such wintry pleasures.

Before washing, warm yourself up, then after washing you can go back to the heat, say the instructions. Cleanliness is an essential part of sauna bathing.



Folk tradition recognizes all types of sauna, except one for washing in. Researchers have calculated that in the olden days only 2-3 litres of water was used per bather. Today things are different. Lots of water is used and far too much soap. Less would suffice, because the thorough sweating opens up the pores and cleans them of sebum, bacteria and all sorts of dirt. After sweating and a good rinse the bather is squeaky clean. Mothers should be particularly aware of this and not pester little boys with horrid washing routines!

The instructions allow **repetition of the sauna/cooling off process as many times as the bather likes.** Washing and swimming are followed by a gentle after heat. How many times should you go into the heat? As many as you wish. Once is enough if that's how you feel. Three times is perhaps the average moderate number. **Finish the bathing session by rinsing yourself with refreshing water.**



Then rest and drink something refreshing. Only dress after you have stopped perspiring altogether. After a sauna bath you should not be in a hurry to go anywhere. Even dressing can wait. Although you may have a heavenly feeling, you should keep your feet firmly on the ground. The Sauna Society, with its authoritative voice, therefore concludes its instructions to all bathers saying: **Before and while in the sauna avoid anything alcoholic and over eating. A light snack and a refreshing drink are the perfect ending to an enjoyable sauna.**