



*Suomi
Finland*
100

The swish of a birch whisk
and the scent of herbs

Welcome to a Finnish sauna



MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

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From hole in the ground to mobile sauna: a history of the Finnish sauna

There have been saunas in Finland since prehistoric times. Back then saunas were simply holes dug in the ground and covered with skins. Later on saunas were built from logs and were also used as temporary housing or drying barns.

Chimneyless smoke saunas were still common in rural Finland in the early 20th century. It was only after the war that smoke saunas with chimneys became more common. Nowadays saunas usually feature a stove heated with wood or electricity.

“Behave and remember your manners, or the sauna elf will drive you out.”

Saunas are present throughout a person’s entire life: the miracle of birth, the finality of death and the colourful life between the two. In the early decades of the 20th century, the majority of Finnish children were born in saunas. As the birth approached,

the mother-to-be and village midwife went into the sauna together. The mother tried her best to relax in the heat of the sauna. The midwife chanted spells to invoke supernatural powers to aid with the birth and gave the mother spirits to drink for strength. After the birth, the new-born was taken outside to look at the world. She or he was held up towards the sky and then lowered to touch the ground. This gave the baby a connection with the world and forces of nature.

In the old days, saunas were used to wash the dead as well as the living. All Hallows’ Day was a day of veneration and remembrance of the dead. Deceased members of the family were invited to the sauna to bathe and take part in a sacrificial meal on the floor of the sauna. On all Hallows’ Eve, the sauna was heated and the meal was set out on the floor of the sauna. As night fell, the man of the house went to receive his ancestors. The deceased stayed in the sauna overnight.

Sauna folklore also features a sauna spirit or elf living underneath the sauna stove. The sauna elf was believed to care for the sauna and saunagoers. The elves and spirits made sure that saunagoers behaved themselves and did not stay in the sauna into the wee hours of the night. Even today some people try to stay in the elves’ good books and take a bowl of rice pudding to the sauna elves at Christmas.

“Without bragging in the slightest we can truthfully say that on Christmas Eve we are the cleanest nation in the world.”

Ethnologist Sakari Pälsi

The sauna was also used to predict the future. A common way of predicting the future was to throw a birch whisk onto the roof of the sauna. A whisk thrown onto the roof by a young woman at Midsummer would show the direction from which her future husband would come to propose.

Sauna furnishings have remained surprisingly unchanged and simple for decades. Wooden benches are often placed at

the back of the sauna and the stove is located on the wall adjacent to the door. There is either no window at all, or it is small so that only a little light is let in.



A key part of sauna is throwing “löyly”. Löyly is created when water is thrown onto hot stones and the water is transformed into a hot steam that fills the upper part of the room. It is polite to ask permission from others before you throw löyly. Finns usually sauna naked, but you can also sauna wearing a towel. A sauna is a clean and peaceful place, and shouting and foul language are not appropriate.

In modern Finland there are many different kinds of sauna. Sizes vary from small apartment saunas to huge saunas that have a capacity of over one hundred people. There are many alternatives to the traditional sauna. For example, you’ll find tent saunas, ferry saunas and car saunas in Finland!

Birch whisks improve circulation

Silver birch
Betula pendula



Downy birch
Betula pubescens

The most important piece of equipment in a Finnish sauna besides the pail and ladle is the birch whisk, known as a "vasta" or "vihta" in Finland. In Eastern Finland the whisk is usually referred to as a "vasta", while in Western Finland it is known as a "vihta". The whisk is a bundle of birch twigs bound together and used to gently hit the skin. The lower branches of a young silver birch are the best for a whisk. A few downy birch twigs can be placed in the middle of the whisk for their scent.

The whisk should be bound together using downy birch. Winter whisks are best made after Midsummer but before the name day of Lauri (10 August) and always during a waxing moon. This way the leaves stay on the whisk better. Everyman's right in Finland does not cover the removal of birch branches, so you'll need to ask the landowner's permission. The use of a sauna whisk enhances the effect of the löyly, improves circulation, removes impurities from the skin and increases perspiration. In the olden days many medicinal herbs were used in sauna whisks, with the most common being juniper, willow and nettle whisks. It was also common to put a juniper or willow branch inside a birch whisk.

Relax your feet in a herbal bath

You can treat your feet to a herbal bath while you sauna. Before saunaing, add the herbs of your choice to soak in hot water. Just before you sauna, cool the water to a suitable temperature. Sit on the bench, dip your feet in the bath, and relax.

Suitable herbs include birch and juniper branches, rosebay willowherb, meadowsweet, yarrow, coltsfoot, lady's mantle, nettle, red clover and many others. Both fresh and dried herbs can be used in foot baths. An aromatic herb bath indulges all the senses and relaxes tired feet. The herbs are believed to have different effects: meadowsweet is calming, birch leaves help with water retention and yarrow stimulates circulation.



Cleanse your body with peat

Peat is a clean, natural product created in anaerobic conditions in mires. Peat is lifted from a depth of 2–4 metres, where it has accumulated various bioactive substances, such as humic acids, over thousands of years. In the sauna, peat can be used to relax and cleanse the body. Heat enhances the effect of the peat, which makes sauna an ideal place for peat treatments.

The peat is spread over damp skin and left to take effect for around half an hour in the heat of the sauna. The peat is kept damp using an atomiser or similar piece of equipment. To end, the peat is rinsed away with clean water. Peat treatments stimulate the metabolism and circulation, and promote skin regeneration, relaxation of the body, and the removal of waste products.

"If booze, tar, or the sauna won't help, the illness is fatal."
Finnish proverb



Round off a sauna evening with delicious food

On average, a person loses around half a litre of fluids through perspiration during a sauna. After saunaing, a great way to restore salt and fluid balances is by enjoying some delicious drinks and savoury snacks.

Refreshing bilberry and spruce tip drink

2 dl crushed bilberries
2 dl rinsed spruce tips
1 litre of fresh (spring) water

Mix together the crushed bilberries, spruce tips and water. Let stand in the fridge from morning until the evening sauna. Strain before serving, and enjoy cold. Please remember that Everyman's right does not cover the collection of spruce tips, so the landowner's permission is required.

Rowan leaf drink

10 litres of rowan leaves (fresh)
6 litres of water
50 g citric acid
1 kg sugar

Boil the water and add the citric acid. Pour the mix over the rowan leaves. Let stand for one day. Strain to remove the leaves. Boil the drink and add the sugar. Pour into heated bottles and fill to the brim. Keeps unheated in the fridge for two days. The drink can also be frozen. Dilute before serving.

Bilberry smoothie (1 portion)

100 ml sour milk
100 ml ice cream
1 dl bilberries
1 tbsp. bran

Mix the ingredients in a food processor or use a handheld immersion blender. Serve cold.

Green drink

Ripe banana

A handful of wild vegetables of your choosing:

- young dandelion leaves or flower petals
- leaves from a blackcurrant bush
- chives
- rosebay willowherb leaves, stems or flowers
- birch buds
- raspberry leaves
- young rowan leaves
- lady's mantle
- wild strawberry leaves
- bilberry leaves
- clovers
- young chickweed

And two glasses of water

Chop the greens, slice the banana, add the water gradually to the blender and mix into a thick drink.

"When thou goest to thy bathing, Have the brushes ready lying, in the bath-room clean and smokeless; Do not, linger in the water, at thy bathing do not tarry, That the father may not fancy, and the mother not imagine, Thou art sleeping on the benches, rolling in the laps of comfort."
Kalevala (translated by John Martin Crawford in 1888)

Rye berry rolls

4 pcs wide crisp breads
Approx. 1 dl unflavoured cream cheese
Approx. 1 dl lingonberries or other berries
1 ½–2 tbsp. sugar
Milk or water to moisten

Soak the crisp breads in milk for a moment until they bend. Pat dry with kitchen paper. Mix together the cream cheese, berries and sugar in a bowl. If you are using frozen berries, do not add the liquid from the berries. Spread the berry mix over the crisp breads, roll loosely and enjoy.

Nettle roll, makes approx. 12

1 litre of young nettles and water to boil
½ l water or milk
50 g yeast
2 tsp salt
3 tbsp. honey
3 dl graham flour
A good 600 g of wheat flour
50 ml rapeseed oil

Rinse the nettles carefully. Boil the nettles in plenty of water. Throw the water away. Blend the nettles using a handheld blender or chop them finely with a knife. Heat the liquid until lukewarm. Dissolve the yeast, salt and honey in the liquid. Add the graham flour. Knead the dough, gradually adding more flour until the dough is elastic and comes away from the edges of the bowl. Add the oil. Let rise in a warm place underneath a cloth for 30–45 minutes. Tip out the dough onto a floured surface and knead gently. Form rolls. Cover with a cloth and let rise for approximately 20 minutes. Bake at 225 degrees Celsius for 15 minutes.

Sauna quiz: test how much you know about the Finnish sauna

- How many saunas are there in Finland?
 - More than 2,000
 - More than 900,000
 - More than 3 million
- What else has the sauna traditionally been used for in addition to bathing?
 - Curing meat
 - Drying wheat and grains
 - Preparing malt
- How often do Finns sauna on average?
 - 1–2 times per month
 - 1–2 times per week
 - 3–4 times per week
- When is Finnish sauna day?
 - The first Sunday in June
 - The second Saturday in June
 - The first Saturday in July
- If you are making a whisk, which tree's leaves should you use?
 - Silver birch
 - Downy birch
 - Dwarf birch
- What are whisks traditionally tied with in Western Finland?
 - Bark
 - Birch twigs
 - A rubber band
- When preparing a herbal bath, why should you put nettles into the water first?
 - So that the nettle can colour the water enough
 - So that the nettle softens enough
 - So that the stinging hairs are destroyed
- What is the most significant bioactive substance in peat?
 - Phenolic acids
 - Humic acids
 - Benzoic acids
- What do sauna elves wish for most?
 - The highest possible temperature
 - Good jokes
 - A peaceful atmosphere for people to relax in

*“Come frost and troubles and all else –
that sooty sauna with open benches,
that is what keeps a person afloat here
in the valley of sorrow.”*

Author Ilmari Kianto



Correct answers: 1C, 2ABC, 3B, 4B, 5A, 6B, 7C, 8B, 9C