

# History of the Finnish Sauna and the Nordic Bath

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## FINNISH SAUNA

### History of the Nordic Bath

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A foreigner's view of the Finns savusauna in 1799.  
Giuseppe Acerbi, the Italian traveler, is shown peering  
in on the left. From Sweat, copyright Mikkel Aaland .



The Finns go back thousands of years to central Asia when nomadic tribes began their migration eastward and northward, to populate southwestern Russia, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, and finally Suomi, as they call their land.

## ORIGIN OF THE SAUNA

When BC met AD the itinerant Finns were establishing fur trade with Central Europe and gave up their wandering ways. As their numbers increased, they moved inland, turning to the soil for sustenance. Anthropologists know little about the Finns before the Middle Ages; therefore, the origin of the sauna is in question. Have they always had some form of sweat bath? Were they the progenitors of sweat bathing across Europe and Asia? Did they share the idea with American Indians before they crossed the Bering Straits?

Most researchers agree that Finns always had some form of sweat bath, as did most peoples around the world. It was the simplest and most efficient way to satisfy people's innate need to keep clean. When the Finns were nomadic, they probably used a portable sweat lodge similar to those carried by the American Indian and still seen among nomadic tribes in central Asia. Once the Finns settled, they may have erected underground sweat houses, forerunners of the savusauna.

*2011 Update: Build Your Own Sweat*

*I just released a new eBook titled How to Build Your Own Sauna & Sweat. It's available for instant download (\$9.99) for the Kindle and the Nook (more formats to follow).*

## FOREIGN INTEREST

Until the 16th century, Finnish bathing habits went virtually unrecorded. During the Middle Ages sweat bathing was popular throughout Europe. Finland was merely a quiet buffer between the Swedish and Russian empires and had little cultural influence in Europe. The sauna was, therefore, inconspicuous.

The Finnish sauna's profile began to grow when the Reformation made the European bath house almost extinct. Only did Finnish, Russian and Scandinavian peoples continue their traditions of sweat bathing.

In the 1500s Klaus Magnus wrote: Nowhere on earth is the use of the bath so necessary, as it is in the Northern lands. There you find both private and public baths extremely well equipped. Private baths belong to highly placed persons and are built in the vicinity of fresh running water and beautiful gardens and herbs. Public baths are built in towns and villages and in such a large quantity as the number of people living there make necessary. It is not as Poggio claims in a letter to Leonardo Aretino: that naked people of both sexes meet with inappropriate notions. He probably means the people in northern Germany, especially near the Baden area, who are rather loose with their morals. Among these people there are some who are so loose and degenerate in the hot baths that they even drink and sleep and allow themselves all kinds of evil and other foolishness in the baths. If such immodest creatures were found with their customs in Nordic bathing places, they would immediately be carried out and thrown into the deep winter snow drifts with the risk of being smothered. In the summer they would be thrown in ice cold water and left some time without food.

## **SWEDEN AND NORWAY**

In the early 18th century, Sweden's bastu (bath house) conforming to central European standards, had its meaning altered. It lost its functional use in society and became primarily a Christmas custom, otherwise used only for therapeutic reasons.

While the church forced the demise of sweat bathing in the rest of Europe, the opponents of the sweat bath in Sweden were a coalition of economists who maintained the bastu wasted firewood, and doctors who blamed it for the spread of venereal disease. Their claims were not unfounded. Swedes traditionally took a bastu every day which consumed a considerable amount of firewood. Furthermore, the bastus rotted faster than other buildings, seldom lasting more than twelve years, and in need of constant renovation. Swedes realized their source of wood was not inexhaustible. Venereal disease was certainly spread through the baths. As with baths elsewhere in the world, prostitution hid behind the bastu's facade.

Sweat bathing in Norway suffered a similar decline. The creation of linen underwear, easier to wash than bodies, contributed to the loss of bath house popularity. During the 1700s, while under Swedish rule, Finns were under great pressure from the Swedes to abandon the sauna. Propagandists warned against its harmful effects claiming they caused convulsions, tumors, premature loss of vision, and were particularly dangerous for children. With a spice of racism, some Swedish doctors claimed the sauna caused the skin to shrivel, wrinkle and brown, just like Finnish old folk.

In 1756 the Royal College of Surgeons published a pamphlet entitled *The Necessary Guardianship and Care of Children, as is the Duty of All Christian Parents*. Evidently in close contact with God, these surgeons said, "Finland also has an insane custom whereby the mother goes to the sauna with her little child as often as every second day, which like all insanities leads to the child's early death, just as if she is wishing it on him". In 1751, Pehr Adrian Gadd wrote, "frequent saunas, the time spent in smoke huts, and the bitter smell of charcoal-burning seems to be the main reason that the people of that area regularly lose their sight before their hearing."

## **No Luxury for Finns**

The sauna was no luxury to the Finns and it would take more than a few such pamphlets to discourage their use. Most of the people lived off the land--a grudging land with a growing season of four months. There were few amenities. A farmer coming off his field in the early evening would slip into the same hut he used for drying malts and smoking meats. The glowing heat of the savusauna would relax his muscles and soothe his soul. He left rejuvenated, hungry for a large meal and maybe a dance at a neighboring farm.

In villages, it was common for farmers to take turns preparing the saunas. When it was ready, the farmer with cowl staff in hand, would knock on his neighbors' doors and shout, "Come, the bath is ready!"

Besides its social value, the sauna was the only place warm, germ-free and with plenty of water. The savusauna's smoke contained tannic acid that sterilized the surfaces. It was used as an infirmary where women gave birth, where blood cupping, blood letting and minor operations were performed by the barber, surgeon or village apothecary. (The letting of blood was infused with the same principle as sweating-- "letting out" the evil causing harm to the body.) The old Finnish proverb, "Saun on koha apteet" says "The sauna is the poor man's apothecary."

## SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

After centuries of temporal use, the sauna acquired spiritual significance. The sanctity of the sauna was supported by ritual and strict propriety. "These stubborn people," wrote an astonished Swedish economist in 1776, "even connect the sauna with their theology and think the sauna building is some kind of shrine." An old saying, still heard in Finland today, says, Jokaisen on kayttaydyttava saunaan samalla tavalla kuin kirkossa." ("In the sauna one must conduct himself as one would in church.") This strict reverence protected the Finnish sauna from the corruption that befell most other bathing institutions in Europe.

There is the old Finnish folk tale of a farmer who used the sauna to reduce his chances of going to Hell. Often told to children, perhaps to encourage them to bathe regularly, the story tells of a farmer with a passion for the sauna. He bathed so often that in time he could endure the highest heat the sauna had to offer. The hotter the sauna, the more he enjoyed it.

It became known around the land that this farmer enjoyed more heat than any sauna could produce. Eventually, the Devil himself heard of this farmer and made a special trip up to the surface of the earth to meet him "I hear you like the heat of a sauna," said the Devil. "Aye," replied the farmer, "that I do." "Well then, let me take you to a place where it is so hot you'll be begging me to stop it."

Excited by the Devil's promise of heat, the farmer went willingly. Upon passing through the gates of Hell, the Devil shouted to his imps to throw more wood and coal on the giant fire. "More heat!" yelled the grinning Devil. "We have a friend here who loves the heat." The farmer smiled and bowed to the Devil, thanking him for his generosity.

Soon Hell was afire. It was so hot on earth that old volcanoes erupted and the polar ice caps began to melt. The farmer smiled. "More heat!" the Devil screamed fretfully. "More heat for this dumb farmer!" By this time all the denizens of Hell had gathered around the farmer and watched him in awe. Then, glancing at the Devil, they whispered among themselves and chuckled. "More heat, more heat, more heat!"

The Devil was burning with embarrassment; the Devil's Hell was Heaven for the farmer. He simply smiled, again thanking the Devil for such a splendid time. Finally, in a fit of exasperation, the Devil screamed, "Out with you! I never want to see you down here again." So, the farmer returned to his farm, sad to lose the wonderful heat of Hell, but pleased to know his fate was secure. Thus Finnish children, wanting to go to Heaven, learned a way to avoid Hell.

## BIRTH SAUNA

Finns used the sauna for rites of passage. In the sauna children were born, women went through the purification ritual before marriage, and old people often dragged themselves there to die. Even today, many middle-aged Finns boast of being born in the sauna. John Virtanen, in his book, *The Finnish Sauna*, gives a personal account of this tradition.

*The people of Arima were still in bed that cold October morning while my mother lingered over her first cup of hot coffee in a crowded one-room home. Her children slept soundly in one wide bed, and Father had hardly opened his eyes. The arrival of the tenth child was imminent as Mother wrapped herself in a warm*

*blanket and then went down a narrow, rocky footpath toward her favorite smoke sauna, lighting her way with an old lantern and feeling the frost through her thin leather shoes. The doctor and the hospital were miles away and far beyond her reach. After a few painful minutes she found the privacy and warmth of the sauna where she would deliver her baby. The sauna was dark. She lit the handmade candle which rested on the window sill and hung the lantern on a hook by the door. The charcoaled walls had witnessed the marvel of birth before. Opposite the benches stood the large kiuas, source of the sauna's heat, built by a master mason of natural red rocks and formed in a shell to contain over a square yard of fist-sized, blackened stones. The kiuas radiated the pleasant heat which filled the sauna, warming the walls and enveloping the benches and platform. For a long 280 days my mother had carried a child in her womb, and now she allowed her blanket to slip to the floor and climbed the three steps to the platform. Once again the sauna would provide the warmth, the quiet, the peaceful though primitive environment in which to give birth. The midwife who came along washed the baby boy, and there I saw my first candlelight and cried my first sound.*

## **19TH CENTURY**

Although the sweat bath had disappeared in Europe and much of Scandinavia, the Finns continued with their saunas through this time, and in some of the backwoods of the Swedish north.

In the 19th century, European travelers took interest in the bath of the Finns. Many accounts were written. I particularly like the description by the Frenchman, Paul B. Du Chaillu in *The Land of the Midnight Sun* (1899):

*One of the most characteristic institutions of the country is the Sauna (bath house), called Badstuga in Swedish. It is a small log-house, built very tight, with no windows, having a single aperture above to let the smoke out; in the centre is an oven-like structure built of loose stones, under which a fire is kept burning till they are very hot; then the fire is extinguished, and the women clean the place thoroughly of ashes and soot, the smoke-hole having been in the meantime closed. A large vessel filled with water is placed within, a number of slender twigs, generally of young birch trees, are put into it, to be used as switches. The bath-house stands by itself, and at some distance from the other buildings, for safety in case it should take fire. Every Saturday evening, summer and winter, all over that northern country smoke is seen issuing from these structures. It is the invariable custom for all the household, on that day, to take a bath, for the work of the week is ended and the beginning of Sunday has come. After washing, all put on clean linen and their best clothes. The stranger, the passing inhabitant of the cities, does not bathe with the people, for they are shy: he may have his bath, but all alone. It was only when they had come to regard me as one of themselves that I was allowed to accompany them; then the neighbours, old and young, would often come to bathe and keep company with Paulus. I remember well my first bath en famille. One Saturday afternoon a couple of young fellows, friends of mine, as the girls were giving the last touches in cleaning the badstuga shouted, "Palulu, take a bath with us to-day!" "Yes, do," exclaimed therest of the company, among whom were the father and mother of the large family. The weather was piercing cold, the ground covered with snow, and I was glad that the bathing place was within a stone's-throw of the dwelling. From my window I noticed several maidens wending their way with rapid steps towards it, in a costume that reminded me of Africa, minus the colour. I did not wonder at their speed, for the thermometer stood below zero. Soon three rather elderly women took the same route from a neighbouring farm, but the two oldest were clothed with old skirts around their waists; other young women followed, and all were quickly lost to sight behind the door, which they shut at once. "They must be about to hold a sort of levee in the bath," thought I. Several aged men then made their appearance, followed in quick succession by younger ones, and children of all sizes; none had on any clothing whatever, and they also joined the throng inside. When I saw the field clear, I thought it was time to make a rush for the building. I emerged from my room at a running pace, for I was dressed as scantily as those who had preceded me. I hastily pushed the door open, and was welcomed by the voices of all the company as I closed it behind me. The heat was so*

*intense that I could hardly breath, and I begged them not to raise any more steam for awhile; the sudden transition for 20 degrees below zero to such an atmosphere overpowered me. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the place, by the dim light which came through the cracks of the door I began to recognise the faces of my friends. There were more people than usual, for all the neighbours had come to have a bath with Paulus. At first I seated myself on one of the lower benches built around, after awhile getting on the other above. More water was poured on the hot stones, and such a volume of steam arose that I could not endure it, so I jumped down again, and reclined in a half-seated posture in order to breathe more freely. In a short time I was in a most profuse perspiration; again and again steam was raised by pouring water on the stones, till at last the hot air and steam became extremely oppressive. Now and then we poured water on each other, which caused a delightful sensation of relief; then with boughs, every one's back and loins were switched till they smarted severely. "Let me give you a switching, Paulus," a fair-haired damsel or a young fellow would say; "and after you get yours, I want you to give me one." This operation is beneficial, as it quickens the circulation of the blood in the skin. In about half an hour the people began to depart, first submitting to a final flagellation, after which cold water was poured upon the body; then all went home as naked as they came. As I emerged from the hut the sensation was delightful, the breathing of the cold air imparting fresh vigour and exhilarating my spirits; I rolled myself in the snow, as did some others, and afterwards ran as fast as I could to the farmhouse. In some places the men and women, as if by agreement, do not return together, and the old women wear something around their loins as they go to or come from the bath. I have gone out of the bath-house with the mercury at 32 degrees below zero. It is not dangerous to walk a short distance, as long as the perspiration is not suddenly and entirely checked. On returning one does not dress at once, for he must get cool gradually and check the dripping perspiration. I had hardly been fifteen minutes in my room, when suddenly the door opened and the wife, who had dressed herself, came in, and was not the least abashed at my appearance; she talked with me as if I were in my morning-gown. The door opened again, and a grown daughter entered, and then another. I began to fear that all the neighbours were coming, as if to a reception. Though they did not seem in the least troubled, I was; I seated myself on a chair, however, and for a short time we carried on a rambling conversation; they then left, and I dressed myself and went into the stuga, or family room. At first I could hardly keep my countenance, for the sight was extremely ludicrous. There was a crowd of visitors, neighbours of different ages, and among them three old fellows--a grandfather, father, and an uncle--who were sitting upon one of the benches with legs crossed, minus a particle of clothing, shaving themselves without a looking-glass. Nobody seemed to mind them, for the women were knitting, weaving, and chatting. This was certainly a scene primitive enough. When the men had finished shaving, clean shirts were brought, and they then dressed themselves while seated. The men usually shave once a week, oftener when courting, and always after the bath, for the beard then becomes soft. These people are the only peasantry in Europe who take a bath every week, and they are very healthy. I never failed to bathe every Saturday.*

## **FINNISH NATIONALISM**

Finnish customs and folklore became prominent in the paints, songs and novels of Finnish artists during the 1800s. After the defeat of Napoleon, the French conceded the territory of Finland to Czar Alexander I of Russia, who clamped strict censorship on all Finnish political discussion and publications. The independent Finns were not about to put up with heavy-handed tactics of the foreigners, so they glorified their cultural heritage that set them apart from the Russians. "Swedes we are not; Russians we can never be; therefore we must be Finns!" became the slogan of the intelligensia.

## **THE KALEVALA**

Their nationalism was stirred and marshalled. Folk tales, poetry and the sauna became symbols of their cause. A remarkable epic poem, the Kalevala (Land of the Heroes) writes of mythical heroes in search of an identity separate from Russia and the rest of Scandinavia. (This poem is said to have inspired

Longfellow's style in Hiawatha.) The poem makes many references to the heroes' enthusiasm for the sauna. In the following section, the poet instructs a future bride of Ilmarinen in the preparation and care of the sauna:

When the evening bath is wanted,  
Fetch the water and the bath-whisks,  
Have the bath-whisks warm and ready,  
Fill thou full with steam the bathroom,  
Do not take too long about it,  
Do not loiter in the bathroom,  
Lest my father-in-law imagine,  
You were lying on the bath-boards,  
On the bench your head reclining.  
When the room again you enter,  
Then announce the bath is ready;  
O my father-in-law beloved,  
Now the bath is fully ready,  
Water brought and likewise bath-whisks,  
All the boards are cleanly scoured,  
Go and bathe thee at thy pleasure,  
Wash thou there as it shall please thee,  
I myself will mind the steaming,  
Standing underneath the boarding."

## ARTISTS AND SAUNA

Before 1808, no Finn had attempted to paint the sauna on canvas. Artistically, examining a sauna would be like painting an oven or a toilet--it just wasn't done. But the forces of nationalism and realism changed this as C.P. Elfstrom's painting shows.

The sauna soon became the central subject for many a Finnish painter, depicting scenes of blood letting, old women bathing, and birch gatherers.

## INDUSTRIALIZATION

While nationalism was glorifying the sauna, industrialization diminished it. In the late 18th century Finns began to exploit their vast timber lands and dam rivers for hydro-electric power. Some became wealthy. A middle class emerged with money to spend on modern conveniences of the industrial West. For Finnish "fine folk" it became fashionable to bathe in showers or tubs and to travel to bathing resorts. Although still a national symbol, the sauna was limited to special occasions--holidays and hunting trips. Rural people still depended upon the sauna, but as the villages swelled with newcomers in search of work in lumbermills and corporate farms, the intimate lifestyle of the sauna was altered, its sanctity diminished. Silence was no longer the absolute rule; bridal bathing ceased along with the magic and witchcraft used in curing diseases and seeking luck.

As new medical facilities reached the provinces, the need for the sauna during childbirth disappeared. In the late 1800s, Finns opened the sauna's door to functions once foreign to it, like slaughtering animals and laundering. The simple function of cleansing and refreshing the body remained. Even the age-old custom of heterosexual bathing changed. Where once men strolled or ran naked from bath house to home, now they tied a shirt around their waist or held a birch twig in front of them. Women began to don light robes or dresses and took to dressing in the living room behind the bed curtain. Even the mother breastfeeding her infant turned to the wall when men were present.

Aside from growing modesty, practical reasons for segregated bathing arose. Dramatic increase of population on the farms made it impossible for everyone to bathe at the same time. They bathed in shifts, based on social standing--the landlord entered first, then the men closest to him, the other men and finally the women and children.

During this difficult transition time, urbanization shoved peasant ways into the background, and the savusauna went with them. If the sauna was to remain a Finnish custom, a new style had to be conceived--a more modern one without log construction and without the chimneyless heating system. Close living increased fire danger and insurance companies put a high premium on saunas built without fireproof cover for the fire and rocks. New heating units were designed, not all of them very good. Stones were encased in sheet metal boxes. Some were so small they could barely heat the sauna. Others were located close to the ceiling where they were least needed, "in the loft where the crows sit."

As concrete replaced wood, more heat was required to heat a sauna. As a result, many public saunas built at the turn of the 20th century were more like steam baths than saunas. By the 1930s, poor construction and resulting disinterest brought the sauna's popularity to an historic low.

## **SAUNA REVIVAL**

Ironically, the explosion of World War II halted this declining trend. Food became scarce, theaters and other forms of entertainment closed and life became bleak. Sauna was one of the few pastimes people could enjoy. The military found the sauna essential. They used tents with special sauna heating units as means of delousing the soldiers and boosting morale. Often a sauna left by an evacuated villager was repaired and heated by the freezing troops.

During the war a group of sauna devotees composed of Finnish journalists, doctors and architects convened to consider ways of furthering the sauna's cause. Known as Friends of the Finnish Sauna (Suomalaisen Saunan Ystävät), and later as the Sauna Society of Finland (Sauna Seura r.y.), their task was to research the climatic conditions inside the sauna, to determine the best ways of construction, and to perform tests to the sauna's physiological effects.

Business people were not included in the society for fear their commercial interests might prejudice the research. In 1940, the group's leader, H.J. Viherjuuri, published the first comprehensive work on saunas entitled Saunakirja (Sauna Book). It contained a brief history of bathing customs around the world, origins of the Finnish sauna as well as diagrams for construction. Modern Finns turned to it and learned how to build the heat-storage sauna stove--one of the few post-savusauna stoves that worked well. The book was later abridged and translated into Swedish, German and English, becoming the first sauna book available to enthusiasts everywhere. In 1966, a short American appendix was added to the English edition and published in America.

In 1946, Viherjuuri and his friends acquired a small sauna which they opened to the Society's growing membership. In 1952, they built a larger sauna complex near Helsinki on the island of Vaskiniemi which included two savusaunas, two vented saunas, and an experimental sauna where medical research could be conducted. (NASA used their facilities in 1959 to study the effects of re-entry heat on the human body.) Today, more than 2000 members of the Sauna Society use the saunas regularly. They also have an architectural library and physiological reports compiled over the years. The Society publishes a monthly magazine, Sauna, and sponsors the International Sauna Congress every four years.

The disappearance of the savusauna encouraged the growth of Finland's sauna industry. Obviously, the savusauna, with its hundreds of kilos of rocks and logs, was not a marketable item. But the new, metal-cased stoves were. As one sauna manufacturer said, "The savusauna is like a two thousand year old bottle of wine. Who can find it? Who can buy it?"

The vented, continuous woodburning stove was manufactured for countryside saunas and, immediately after World War II, electric and gas-heated stoves began heating city saunas. In the beginning, the home market in Finland was lucrative enough to satisfy the growing industry. Even today over half of the world's sauna sales are in Finland. But when the world market began demanding saunas, the Finnish industry was ill-prepared. During their history of isolation and non-aggression, they sat back and watched Sweden emulate Finnish inventions and market them internationally. Furthermore, the Finns were a bit reluctant to market a way of life, sell a ritual.

Meanwhile, the Germans designed and marketed their own sauna at home, while the Swedes were selling sauna stoves around the world. Eventually, a contingent of young, worldly Finns jumped into the international sauna business. Over 300 companies manufacture sauna stoves today, although only a handful produce 10,000 or more stoves yearly.

Another important component of the sauna industry are the hundreds of companies which build pre-fab sauna rooms, distributed through the larger stove companies. Much credit for the success of the Finnish sauna industry can be attributed to the Finnish Sauna Society whose engineers and draftsmen have imposed stern standards on the sauna companies. Their stamp of approval is found only on baths that comply with their careful specifications. Today, there are few places in the world where Finnish companies are not selling saunas, including their neighbor, Russia.

