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abc15. The Sauna

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Sensation of Sauna

Introduction

Learn about the fine art of sweating and the benefits of an at-home sauna. by Suzi Wong

At first glance, the method smacks of madness: to begin, sit buck-naked in a hot wooden room (180°-200° F or 82°-93°C) and sweat from every pore; next, plunge into a blue lake or roll in a snow bank; then, return to the hot box and do it all over again, smiling with bliss. Is this an audition for Survivor or WHAT?

Welcome to sauna! Whether you pronounce it the Finnish way ("sow"-na as in "cow") or the American ("saw"-na), you'll love how the dry heat of this rigorous sweat bath provides a healthy glow and exquisite relaxation. The people of Finland have practised it for centuries. When Finns immigrated to North America, they brought their Saturday night sauna, and the custom has spread across the continent. Today, saunas are found in health clubs, hotels, and homes around the globe.

Sensation of Sauna by Suzi Wong The Benefits of Sauna

Since ancient times, people have sought the physical and spiritual benefits of the sweat bath. Greeks, Romans, Turks, Irish, Germans, Russians, Japanese, Mayans, and various African tribes created elaborate rituals around bathing. Today, Aboriginal peoples/Native Americans continue using sweat lodges for medical, ceremonial, and recreational purposes.

Founded on concepts of purification, the Finnish sauna has been praised for healing everything from a runny nose to insomnia. There is little medical research on such claims, but it's common knowledge that the sauna's soothing heat is good medicine for many physical ailments, including:

- rheumatism and arthritis, stiff or sore muscles
- kidney malfunction (the sauna cannot replace a failing organ but the sweating it produces can effectively augment the kidney's work of extracting bodily poisons)
- colds, sinus congestion, and minor respiratory problems due to allergies
- poor circulation (the oft-heard complaint of cold hands and feet)

- acne and dermatitis (the heat softens oil plugs that block skin pores and also helps remove dead skin)

The sauna also promotes mental health. Saunas are said to calm nerves, reduce tension, and induce a euphoric, peaceful mood. At the same time, the invigorating cycles of heat and cold sharpen the senses and increase alertness and concentration, so that some people sauna in the morning. However, when you go to bed, the relaxation is deep and complete, "Everyone knows that a sauna makes you sleep like a baby." (Kalevi Kujansuu, Finnish immigrant)

Warning: Be sure your body can handle the physiological changes of sauna's rapid alternation of extreme heat and cold. If you are taking medication or have respiratory problems, high blood pressure, or are pregnant, check with a doctor before taking a sauna.

Sensation of Sauna by Suzi Wong Eight Easy Steps to Soothing Sauna

For a Finn (or sauna enthusiast), the sauna is a mystical, almost holy experience. But, you don't need initiation rites to enjoy a sauna. There are no hard and fast rules; people discover their preferences and improvise on these basic steps:

1. Take a quick, warm shower and dry off.
2. Enter the pre-heated sauna (at least 160°F or 83°C) and relax on the bench for 5-10 minutes or until you perspire freely. Note: length of time varies for each individual and excess can be harmful; leave immediately if you feel dizzy or uncomfortable.
3. Cool off with a swim or shower.
4. Rest for approximately 10 minutes.
5. Re-enter the sauna for another 5-10 minutes. Increase the humidity by splashing water over the hot rocks.
6. Take a final plunge or roll in the snow before a leisurely, scrub-down shower.
7. Rest at least 20 minutes to cool down completely. This is an opportunity to listen to music, view the scenery or meditate.
8. Dress and have a light snack with plenty of fluids to make up for the loss of salts and water.

Sensation of Sauna by Suzi Wong Enhancing the Experience

1. For the Finns, sauna is a communal experience. Sauna with friends and family to add to your pleasure.
2. Take your time - indulge in the luxury of sensation and relaxation. A sauna can last the better part of an afternoon or evening. Also, allow time between the sauna and meals; to sauna on a full stomach is unpleasant and dangerous.
3. Choose your time. Some people like to sauna after exercise - whether you've been cross-country skiing, weight training or simply working hard, your sore muscles will love the sauna. Many prefer to sauna at the end of the day to bring on sleep.
4. Remove all clothing to let your skin breathe deeply and sweat freely. Note: spectacles, contacts, or jewellery may conduct heat and become burning hot!
5. Vary the heat and length of stay. Novices need to build up endurance. Children often sit on the lower benches that are cooler, or stick their feet in a bucket of cool water to moderate the impact of the sauna.

Accessories

Over the years, sauna goers have developed ways to intensify the sauna experience. You may wish to consider adding these items to your shopping cart:

- A wooden bucket and ladle to help you throw cool water on the heated rocks, thus producing löyly (löü-lü), steam that curls around the sauna and boosts the humidity to give you a rush of heat and sweat. Note: be sure the ladle is at least 15" long and has a wooden handle; if you use a plastic bucket, keep it away from the heater.
- A thermometer designed to show high temperatures and that can be read without the aid of glasses or contacts.
- A vihta (veh-tä) or whisk made of birch or other branches (to increase circulation, companions at a sauna give each other friendly beatings with the whisk)
- A loofa or scrubbing sponge whose natural fibres help skin get squeaky-clean
- A variety of aromatherapy oils for added health benefits and to induce special moods, such as lavender for relaxation or citrus scents for vitality. Eucalyptus is a favourite, especially for clearing up congestion.