

Sauna Rituals

By Steve Leppälä



It's common for people who regularly use a sauna to develop rituals or to inherit them from family and friends. I've given a "Sauna Rituals" presentation a few times and I always try to make it a participatory presentation for audience members to share their sauna rituals as I introduce various topics of sauna use. I tell the audience that one person's ritual may be completely foreign to another person but that there is no wrong answer or ritual. I offer as an example by asking if anyone in the audience has ever used an infrared sauna. As soon as someone raises their hand I yell out, "That's wrong!"

One of my first memories is laying on my back over my mother's knees with my head over a sauna bucket as she sat on a short stool washing my hair in our family sauna. And that was just last week!

The first ritual I explore is the heating of the sauna. Sauna firewood heats a body several times as it is cut, split, stacked to dry and then carried to the sauna and stacked nearby, stored in the dressing room, or placed in wood box near the kiuas (sauna stove). Lighting the sauna often begins with tinder (something that is easily combustible such as birch bark or even crumpled up newspaper) which in turn lights the kindling whose main job is to burn/light the firewood. Kindling is dry, very thinly split, burns hot and hopefully burns for long enough to start to burn the firewood which is loosely placed in the firebox of the kiuas to allow air circulation to feed the fire.

The damper on the stovepipe is full open and any vent on the kiuas to feed air to the fire is opened too. After the firewood is burning well in the firebox additional firewood can be added more tightly and the stovepipe damper and kiuas vent are slightly closed so the wood will burn longer. My current sauna heating ritual in my home involves turning a timer dial to start heating the electric kiuas in my sauna.

In our sauna back home, we had to get water into the sauna for washing and for throwing water on the kiuas rocks to make löylyä (sauna steam). In the winter that meant carrying buckets of water from the house but in the summertime buckets were sometimes filled by dipping them into a well spring located across the road. We eventually used a garden hose to get water into the sauna during the summer which made that chore much easier. Some water went into a tank connected to the kiuas. That became our source of hot water for bathing.

Our first water tank for heating water was high and cylindrical, probably from an old water heater, and was connected lower down by two pipes that circulated water from the tank into the firebox of the kiuas and then back to the tank. When the water was heating it sounded like a jazz drummer. I loved that sound but rarely hear it anymore. The water tank on our next kiuas was welded right on its side. The water would boil in that tank and when the water level was high enough, right onto the sauna rocks. A loose cover over that water tank helped to prevent much of the water from evaporating in the air. Cold water was also put into a tank away from the kiuas.

“Making” sauna water for bathing involved using a large dipper for getting water from the hot water tank (without burning yourself) into an empty pail and then mixing in water from the cold-water tank to get the right water temperature for washing. The procedure was then often repeated but to produce a bit cooler water for rinsing. Used water was allowed to fall to the floor where it flowed toward the back wall into a gutter and then outside in a corner of the sauna. Currently my löyly water is retrieved into a short bucket from a faucet lower on the wall in my hot room and wash water is conveniently supplied in a shower stall in my dressing room.

So, what do YOU do in a sauna? There is a Finnish saying that “one must behave in the sauna as one would behave in church”. I pretty much stick to this and though I’m not proud to say that I do not always behave in church, I guess I have it covered. My dad passed away when I was a baby so during early years, sauna was every Saturday night was with my mom, a brother two years older than me and myself. We continued that grouping until we began to reach puberty and then it was just my brother and me.

The small community that I grew up in was made up of mostly people of Finnish heritage so almost everyone had their own sauna. It was not uncommon to visit someone's home and take sauna. If you planned or were invited to someone's home to take sauna, manners dictated that you brought your own towels and washcloths.

Sometimes a sauna newbie will get uncomfortable about being naked in a sauna with other naked people. Members of the opposite sex don't generally take sauna together unless they are members of the same family and even then, men and women often bathe separately. I have a sign on the wall outside of my sauna dressing room wall that says, "Saunominen uimapuku päällä on kuin jalkojen peseminen sukat päällä" which means, "Taking a sauna with a swimsuit on is like washing your feet with your socks on".

Most of the saunas that I take at my home currently are taken alone. I generally have no radio or music on during my "solo sauna" time. Rounds between the hot room and dressing room are reflective on new or old memories and are very relaxing. When I do have sauna guests, silence or conversation are both welcome. Even though nakedness is not a conscious thought while taking sauna with friends, the removal of that barrier tends to make people more open. I enjoy both a solo sauna and sauna with friends.

I heard that a friend in Michigan has a rule that you cannot throw löyly (water on the rocks) until you are sweating. I'm not certain of the purpose of the rule but that friend is serious about sauna so I have adopted it myself. I know of some people (not Finns) who never throw water onto their sauna stove. That is completely weird to me. In a burst, löyly raises the humidity in the hot room. As the humidity raises the room feels much hotter but löyly doesn't cause the temperature to raise. To borrow a phrase, "It's not the heat, it's the humidity." I try to linger past each cast of löyly before retreating to the dressing room to cool off.

Part of taking a sauna (more so in Finland than elsewhere) sometimes includes the use of a sauna whisk, a vihta (the word used mostly in western Finland) or vasta (what it's more often called in eastern Finland). It's a bundle of young branches (usually birch) soaked in a bucket of warm water and then slapped against a bather's bare skin to stimulate circulation and open pores. A vihta is taken from the warm bucket of water where it has been soaking and often first laid upon the hot rocks of the kiuas for several seconds before being switched across just about any bare skin that one can reach. (Typically the front and rear torso and legs.) It feels quite good no matter how it appears that the recipient is receiving a thrashing. An accessory benefit to using a birch vihta is the amazing aroma of birch leaves that is released into the air. When the wet vihta is briefly laid upon the hot rocks of the kiuas the resulting bit of löyly the

smooth scent of birch. Likewise, when the bucket of water where a birch vihta has been soaking is used for löyly water ensuing birch bouquet is even more powerful yet not overpowering.

Other broad leafed branches including oak will work for vihta construction though the aroma will be different. In North American some people may have heard of using a cedar bough as a vihta/vasta. I have a vague memory from my early childhood of a cedar bough vihta in our family sauna but that may have been a made-up memory.

The cooling off portion of a sauna round can be almost as important as time in the hot room. The time is used mostly for rest and recovery but a cold shock to your body can be both refreshing and healthy. The extreme version is going into water through a hole in the ice or less extreme during the summertime, a dip in a lake feels good. I've tried rolling in the snow several times and consider that the second-best cold shock. Just make sure to roll in nice fluffy snow. Crusty snow could cause injury to certain body parts. I have a cattle watering trough filled with cold water outside of the sauna in my basement but even a cold shower feels good. Drinking water during your cool off is a good idea for replacing fluids.

After taking only a shower during the day you get out and feel pretty clean. However, after a sauna when you're all washed and dried you feel REALLY clean! For me a morning sauna makes me feel refreshed and ready to face the world while an evening sauna will make me feel restful and ready for a good night's sleep.

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