

It All Started with the Finnish

By Allison Deere

Finns in America have long advocated the health benefits of a good sweat. In fact, the Finnish sauna is touted as a tool to obtain goals ranging from stress reduction to beautiful skin.

Finnish saunas developed as a combination of the Roman bath, which uses, hot dry air, and the Russian *banya*, which uses steam. The traditional wooden room offers benches at varying levels for sitting or lying down and is heated either by wood stoves or electric heaters. Finns use saunas as couples, as families, socially and at athletic clubs.

In the United States, the average person's first sauna bathing experience is at a health club or the home of a friend. According to sauna experts, Americans may not be getting the full benefits of a sauna bath because they don't know the proper way to use a sauna. Dealers who fail to communicate such vital information could, in turn, find themselves with consumers unfamiliar with the joys of a good sauna.

A "sauna" is essentially a bath from the inside out. The bather sits or lies on a towel on a wooden sauna bench. After a few moments, the bather begins to perspire profusely. This process removes oil, dirt, and dead skin cells from the body, along with the water.

The Finns promote saunas as a way to maintain clear, youthful-looking skin. Step one is flushing out these impurities with a good sweat. Step Two is returning moisture to the skin, they say, by pouring water on the stones that heat the sauna, creating steam.

Unfortunately, because many health clubs don't offer bathers the traditional bucket of water to ladle over the heated rocks, many people have never had a true sauna experience.

While it is difficult to document many of the health claims for saunas, at least two seem obvious. A sauna bath is relaxing and can be a valuable tool in stress reduction. One reason for this may be because of the cleansing of the pores. Another may be that the process of sauna bathing can give the cardiovascular

system a workout similar to exercising. The body's response to heat – the cooling process- is to speed up the circulation system to pump blood through blood vessels at the skin's surface to allow the body to perspire. This requires energy – and calories. Because of this weight loss, not all of which is water loss, many athletes will take a sauna as part of their weight control regimen.

Saunas also are said to help soothe disorders such as insomnia. Taking a sauna is said to increase blood circulation and accelerate metabolism to aid in recovery from fatigue. They also provide a morning warm-up and serve as a partial substitute for exercising among the handicapped and others unable to perform physical activities.

The by-product of the sauna "workout" will be the same as an exercise workout. The heart will beat faster, and the person will be flushed and relaxed. Saunas also have been attributed with the ability to soothe aching muscles after exercise.

As with spas, there are some caveats to sauna use. It is suggested that saunas not be taken alone, because the body's ability to deal with heat varies from person to person. Caution should be taken by pregnant women, small children and persons suffering from heart disease, low blood pressure or epilepsy. Saunas also should not be taken if one has a cold accompanied by a fever.

As with a spa, sauna use should be eased into. It is generally recommended that one begin with just a few minutes in the sauna and then build up bathing intervals.

After a while, the bather will adjust to the environment and will be able to tolerate greater heat for longer intervals. This is when, sauna aficionados say, bathers begin to reap the benefits of a good sweat. Healthy persons usually work up to 20- to 30-minute sessions.

Temperatures in saunas range from 180° to 200° degrees, which can be handled safely by most users but may pose a problem for others. The best advice is, to take it slow.