

2023 IS THE YEAR OF SAUNA IN ESTONIA¹ Islands, giants² and sauna³

Compiled by: Matti Raudjärvi, Chief Editor (MR)
[Frequent modern sauna user for 50 years (1973–2023)⁴]

There are many islands in Estonia, most of them are small islands and many are uninhabited. The statistics on Estonian islands are magnificent: we have 2,222 islands in the sea (318 of which are larger than 1 hectare), and 133 islands in inland waters. Such a large number of islands, including the Hiiumaa Island and its inhabitants, provide also a lot of varying experience, including experience related to sauna, which is not always proportional to the size of the island.

The unique and diverse wildlife of the islands of Western Estonia, which has preserved due to the ability of the local people to live in harmony with the delicate environment of the islands, is the reason why the islands of Western Estonia (Saaremaa, Hiiumaa, Muhu, Vormsi and Ruhnu) were selected as a reserve of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme. Here you meet real wildlife, enjoy the traditional food of the islands and experience peculiar creative works inspired by the sea, land and forests! The West Estonian Archipelago Biosphere Reserve has the UNESCO certificate since 1990.⁵

Also the lifestyle of Kihnu, the 7th largest island, has been included in UNESCO heritage. The 4th largest island Vormsi can boast the largest collection in the world of Celtic crosses with circles. The second largest island Hiiumaa is considered to have the oldest continuously operated lighthouse in the world. Not to mention the resort town Kuressaare with its long traditions and high-level spas on the largest Estonian island Saaremaa.

¹ The idea of the Year of Sauna came from the journalist Rein Sikk, its organizer is MTÜ Eesti Maaturism (the Estonian Rural Tourism Organization) and “pusher” the *Maaleht* newspaper. Among other things, the Estonian Rural Tourism Organization has developed the Estonian Sauna Map Network in the couple of recent years. During the sauna training at the Lammasmäe Holiday Centre in Kunda, Lääne-Virumaa on 4 May 2022, sauna activists who are members of the organization decided to declare 2023 the Year of Sauna.

On 31 January 2023 the author of this article called the author of the idea of the Year of Sauna, Rein Sikk, and informed him of the publishing of this article in our journal. He was glad to hear it. I also got the permission (copyright!) to use the logo of the Year of Sauna and other logos in this journal.

² Hiiumaa (literal translation: the Land of Giants) is the second largest island of Estonia, in the Western part of Estonia in the Baltic Sea, and Hiiumaa islanders are called hiidlased (giants).

³ Year of Sauna 2023. Hiiumaa. [<https://hiiumaa.ee/sauna-aasta/>] 08/02/2023

⁴ MR considers the earlier period of 20 years of using sauna in 1953–1973 a preliminary sauna use period compared to the quality and possibilities of modern saunas (see also the related links and the full paper in Estonian on CD and the summary in English in this publication).

⁵ Islands of Western Estonia are a model of sustainable nature use under UNESCO protection. [<https://hiiumaa.ee/laane-estii-saared-on-unesco-tiiva-all-kestliku-looduskasutuse-eeskujuks/>] 12.02.2023

Besides, the islands offer untouched nature and unique cultural history which you can discover when hiking. Spend a meditation holiday with the smell of the sea and sounds of birds, plan a bicycle tour with the family and friends or sail on a sailing ship between small ports, participate in intimate cultural events, taste fresh fish and other local delicacies – everything is possible.⁶

97% of the inhabitants of Estonian islands live on the three largest islands:⁷ Saaremaa (2,683.25 km² and 31,304 inhabitants), Hiiumaa (1,018.49 km² and 8995 inhabitants) and Muhumaa (204.86 km²). According to the census of 2011, 40,715 people, i.e. 3% of the permanent population of Estonia lived permanently on the islands. According to the census of 2000, even in total 47,404 people lived on the islands. Although the number of islanders continues to decrease, the number of permanently inhabited islands has increased to 19 by 2011 compared to 2000 when people lived on 14 islands and islets all the year round (Saaremaa, Hiiumaa, Muhu, Kihnu, Kassari, Vormsi, Prangli, Ruhnu, Piirissaar, Manija, Abruka, Kesselaid, Vilsandi and Naissaar) – the additional islands are now Väike-Pakri, Osmussaar, Kõinastu, Aegna and Mohni. Small islands are called islets, shoals, stones, dries, etc.⁸ Approximately a half of Estonian small islands have no official name.

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Sauna and using saunas have been held in esteem and have been topical in Estonia for centuries. However, we can state that using saunas gathered new momentum in Estonia during the second half of 1960s and the first half of 1970s. It became popular with building summer houses mainly for seasonal use where a sauna was an important part of the building. The saunas built and seen in Finland somewhat served as a model. Thus we also started to characterise this type of sauna with the term Finnish sauna.

The following text about the Year of Sauna focuses on the sauna traditions of Hiiumaa islanders for gratitude and respect for Hiiumaa islanders who have kindly welcomed me dozens of times on Hiiumaa and helped me to discover places on Hiiumaa. For the author of the article, saunas of Hiiumaa (particularly the smoke sauna, also the smoke sauna in my home garden at Pirita-Kose was built according to the sauna in the Hiiumaa Soera Farm Museum; besides, standing dried-up spruces and pines from the Kõpu Peninsular were used as the material of the walls of the sauna and the logs for the sauna were provided by the master boat builder from the Kukka Village; the sauna was assembled and finished also by Hiiumaa men) have become close to the heart. Smoke sauna was built for MR under direct and indirect guidance of a good friend, Hiiumaa islander Riho Tartu (9.09. 1950–29.05.2020) and therefore the following is a description of the sauna experience and

⁶ Islands. Estonian islands | Visit Estonia. [<https://www.visitestonia.com/en/where-to-go/islands>] 11/02/2023

⁷ Statistics of 2015: Estonian islands by size. Valem.ee [<https://www.valem.ee/et/eesti-saared>] 11.02.2023; according to the statistics of 2015, Kassari, Võilaid and Suur-Tulpe have merged with other islands as a result of rising of the land and are not included in the official list of sea islands.

⁸ Islands. The Association of Estonian Islands. [<https://saared.ee/liikmed/>] 11.02.2023

opinions of Hiiumaa islanders. By the way, in July-August 1974, at the military service camp at Tapa after graduation from the current Tallinn University of Technology, we slept with Riho in the same tent for 8 persons.

At the end of the article briefly (PS: Sauna experience on Saaremaa) also the saunas of Saaremaa and Muhumaa have been described with a few photos. Since this article is above all about using saunas on the three largest islands of Estonia, the author of the article considered it necessary to give a brief overview of our islands in general.

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On the occasion of the Year of Sauna, the web site Sauna2023 was launched with the map of all public and for rent saunas in Estonia – more than 150 saunas and more than 20 different types of saunas, including those heated with wood or with an electric heater, moss saunas, turf saunas, steam saunas, aroma saunas, infrared saunas, salt saunas and igloo saunas, barrel baths floating on a raft, etc. Also the sauna booking system will be ready soon.

The Estonian smoke sauna tradition has even been included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List of Humanity. Võro people led by Eda Veeroja at the Mooska Farm have done great work for the valuing of smoke sauna traditions. It was on their initiative that the smoke sauna traditions of Võrumaa were included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014.

In the smoke sauna in the North-Western corner of the home garden of MR at **Pirita-Kose** and on the swing in front of it and at the outdoor fireplace and smoke oven next to it many friends and colleagues both from Estonia and other countries have been spending time during summer, discussing problems related to the organization of conferences, publishing of the journal and other topical events, sometimes also at the table with smoked flounder, grilled sausages and meat, etc. (Manfred O. E. Hennies (10.09.1938 – 18.10.2019) /Applied University of Kiel, Germany/, Jaan Karu /Tallinn University of Technology/, Sulev Mäeltsemees /Tallinn University of Technology/, Janno Reiljan (8.10.1951 – 23.01.2018) /University of Tartu/, Igor Risin /Voronezh State University, Russia/, Jüri Sepp /University of Tartu/, Epp and Tiit Õim /friend from student years/ and several others). Also several other colleagues, many acquaintances, relatives and neighbours have often visited the smoke sauna. Manfred has been a particular fan of sauna as smoke sauna was really exotic for him.

Sauna is sacred for a Hiiumaa islander: 2023 has been declared as the Year of Sauna in Estonia. On Hiiumaa, all years are sauna years. Every home on Hiiumaa and most accommodation establishments on the island have a sauna. Or at least an agreement with a neighbour whose sauna can be used. Sauna is accompanied by good snacks, cosy storytelling and funny Hiiumaa jokes.

Sauna is better than football: Sauna is such an important and sacred thing for a Hiiumaa islander that even races of Ott Tänak or the World Championship football games should be on other days than on Saturday, the sauna day. To be able to talk without hurry, make steam and whisk oneself. During better times, Hiiumaa islanders had sauna days also on Wednesdays but modern comforts of homes have made the tradition of washing oneself in mid-week less frequent.

Whisking is a real science: People used to say on Hiiumaa that there are four things which make a person healthy: sauna, whisk, vodka and tar. The effect of whisking does not come from hard beating but from pulling off a leaf which has stuck to the body – the bigger the leaf, the better the effect.

A whisk can be made of any tree twigs but different tree species have a different effect. For instance, it is said that a juniper whisk gives energy. Birch whisk is certainly most common but whisks can be very different. A Hiiumaa islander can make a whisk from anything, not just tree twigs – even from an old fishing net or from nettles. More skilful of them use a birch twig to tie the whisk instead of rope. A whisk had to do several jobs in the old times before it was finished. For instance, before using an old whisk for kindling firewood, it was turned into a brush for the bread oven. It was said that women who cannot make a bread oven brush will not find a husband.

Sauna is an important ritual: It is said that in the old times the life of a Hiiumaa islander began and ended in a sauna. A Hiiumaa islander got help from sauna also when he was ill – it was a doctor for poor people. For the alleviation of back pain the affected area had to be whisked hard, for the treatment of sore throat, drops of turpentine were added to the steaming water.

During the poor times not every farm had sauna every week. Firewood was expensive and could be sold to the mainland instead, so they used a neighbour's sauna to save money. This is where the expression "village saunas are heated by turns" originated. Already heating a sauna was a special procedure. It took a whole day to prepare a sauna with an old-school heater. It was necessary to heat it for five hours, in addition, the cleaning and ventilation and other important activities. While the home was heated with branches, cones and other available materials, the firewood for sauna evenings consisted of birch and aspen logs. The heater had to be hot, a well-heated sauna was warm until morning and steaming was possible also in the next day. In the old times, a wooden bath was used for washing in sauna as the water was believed to be much better in it than in an ordinary bath.

There are enough saunas for own people and guests: There is a large choice of saunas on Hiiumaa and there are probably no types of saunas in the world you cannot find here. There are the igloo sauna, steam sauna, tent sauna, barrel sauna, Finnish sauna and all other versions. There are also two public steam saunas available which can be rented for a more private event. A sauna on wheels or a sauna barrel can be ordered to any place you wish: to the forest, by the sea or to a snowy field.

Sauna needs dedication: In addition to following the traditions also good mood is important. You have to go to a sauna in a kind mood, without evil plans. Besides

enjoying sauna also talking to other people is important. Hiiumaa islanders have their own news agency – KKNSR which means “a woman from Kärđla told me in sauna”. People said hello when entering a sauna, saying: “Hello, sauna!”. There were also different prohibitions, for instance, it was not allowed to whistle in a sauna. One had to be polite in a sauna.

A festival of sauna buses invites inventors: A festival of mobile saunas – Sauna Bus Party – has been organised on Hiiumaa for 17 years already. People whisk a lot there and elect the best mobile saunas of the year. Both sauna vehicles and sauna trailers gather in Hiiumaa for the long weekend and people exchange their experience in all subjects related to sauna from the whisking temperature up to the choice of tyres for a sauna bus. Sauna vehicles have been built at several places in Estonia but the tradition of sauna bus convention has developed and continues on Hiiumaa.

Equinox Night Fire Party: During Indian summer (called Old Wives’ Summer here), on 23 September, the first big Sauna Day will take place on Hiiumaa! Different kinds of sauna experience will be available all over the island. Several workshops will be opened and sauna dishes can be tasted. The Sauna Day will end with the Equinox Night Fire Party.

Hiiumaa sauna products are available also today. Hiiumaa has even its own sauna soaps and other sauna products. Instead of a washing sponge, fine mesh fishing nets are used on Hiiumaa and other nice local products are back scrubbing rope, steam water bag and mud from Käina Bay.

Sauna dishes in the old times were scone, pearl barley porridge, peas, dried apples – because who could eat candies then – and graham bread with bacon. When steaming on Hiiumaa you should first take a look at the shelves of local producers – Hiiumaa tastes are in good harmony with the Hiiumaa sauna.

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In the old times, sauna was the heart of a farm, where life both began and ended. Meat was smoked in sauna and herbs were dried there. It was the main washing place and in the coldest winter days people even lived in the sauna together with animals. The role of sauna has changed a lot by now but it has retained its popularity. It is not important which sauna to visit. They all give you energy, both to the body and mind.

Saunas and using saunas can be regarded as a national wealth and cultural value of Estonia. Similarly, it is surely a national wealth and cultural value of all other Baltic countries and Nordic nations, and also for all these people and nations in the world who hold sauna in esteem and value and preserve the related traditions. This is certainly supported by the Estonian Year of Sauna 2023 which is at the same time a part of our cultural policy.

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Letter from Estonian Rural Tourism, 24.08.2023. eesti@maaturism.ee :

Write history!

Sauna lovers are expected to hear stories from the Estonian Folklore Archive that reflect different experiences, talk about the custom of sauna, sauna as a healing ritual, stories that reflect sauna conversations and gatherings, different traditions and beliefs where the sauna has received the status of a sacred place. You can also write several stories. Until 31.12.2023