

SAUNA EXPERIENCES IN ESTONIA, BALTIC STATES AND NORDIC COUNTRIES¹²

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Introduction

Sauna and the customs and use of sauna have been in esteem and 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.

Finnish sauna is characterised by a tradition of a thousand years and simplicity. The air in sauna is hot and dry, moisture is briefly added by throwing water on the stones of the heater. A sauna is heated until the temperature is 65–95 °C, and the platform has several steps which allow people to choose different temperatures. After each time spent on the sauna platform people can cool themselves with cool water (depending on what is available: shower, bath, pond, stream, river, lake, sea) or in a fresh snowdrift or in the fresh air. The Finnish sauna is intended for longer relaxation.

We can state that an integrated, serious and healthy attitude towards sauna and use of sauna is an issue of cultural policy and eventually economic policy.

The aim of this article is to present the idea of the Year of Sauna also here to our readers and authors (certainly based extensively on and referring to the web site of the Year of

¹ The full article is available on the CD enclosed with this publication.

² The idea of the Year of Sauna-came from the journalist Rein Sikk, the 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 on the phone, 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 logos of the Year of Sauna and other logos in this journal.

³ MR has been a modern sauna user for 50 years (1973–2023). MR considers his 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 summary in English of this article).

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Sauna) and show briefly (which is also our aim) that the people related to the publishing of our journal have been active sauna users for a long time already.

The research tasks for the achievement of this goal are as follows:

- to characterise briefly the activities in the Baltic and Nordic countries and by the International Sauna Association (ISA);
- to give an overview of the personal sauna experience of the author of this article in Estonia and at other places;
- to describe the basic knowledge of sauna and use of sauna;
- to encourage Estonians to preserve and promote the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage of humanity – the smoke sauna.

The author of this article (MR), while respecting the author of the idea of the Year of Sauna, founders of the Kadrina Sauna Club, the Estonian Rural Tourism Organization, the *Maaleht* newspaper and positive activities of other communities in Estonia, has been an active sauna user in our sauna scene together with his friends already since the beginning of 1970s.

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As a comment: The Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Urmas Reinsalu participated in the 59th Munich Security Conference in Germany (on 17–19 February 2023) where he met with the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoshimasa Hayashi and thanked Japan for taking initiative together with the U.S.A. and other G7 countries and countries with similar positions in helping Ukraine and coordinating the assistance. They also discussed increasing close cooperation, particularly in the field of digitalisation. Reinsalu also welcomed the **New Security Strategy of Japan which emphasized achievement of closer cooperation with the Nordic and Baltic countries.**⁵

A potential association of the Nordic and Baltic countries is talked about from time to time but often the conclusion is that these two groups of countries are still different, some countries have belonged to Western Europe and others to Eastern Europe. Yes, it used to be so but not because of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Such belonging to Eastern Europe and Soviet occupation have been caused by the very countries who are currently emphasizing this difference. Maybe this narrow-mindedness will be overcome in the course of time if things and the situation are considered more broadly and thoroughly.

* * *

*MR: If already a security strategy includes Nordic and Baltic countries together, we could treat these countries together also in other fields, such as economy, etc. We could surely talk here about joint activities of the Baltic-Nordic countries (or the Baltic states and the Nordic countries) in the field of **sauna and use of sauna** at least within ISA, if necessary.*

⁵ BLOG | Ursula von der Leyen: the allies will have to double the military support to Ukraine to achieve the full failure of Putin's imperialist plans. Ohtuleht.ee. 18.02.2023

1. Sauna has an important role in Estonia and other Baltic states, the Nordic countries but also in the broader meaning internationally

Estonians are a sauna nation – the first written records of sauna date here already from the beginning of the 13th century in North Estonia. While homes have mostly smaller Finnish saunas which are often heated with electricity, particularly in a city, the spas and tourism farms offer very different and interesting ways to use sauna.

Estonians like saunas so much that they have built them into buses and even into a tank of an old fire-fighting truck, also on rafts where people throw water on the heater, enjoy the company and jump into the river or lake water during rafting. Tourism farms in rural areas may have peculiar sauna customs: you can, for instance, try a sweating tent or a cave or forest sauna. Smoke sauna offers an excellent opportunity to experience ancient traditions, it is heated for approximately a half a day and then one usually spends hours in the sauna. It is not necessary to use soaps or gels as the body becomes clean anyway with repeated throwing of water on the stones, whisking and cooling off. People also praise sauna for making both body and mind clean and light.

Every Estonian spa has a proper sauna complex – in a salt sauna you can scrub your body, a steam sauna is good for your respiratory tract during cold winter, an infrared sauna has an impact on the inside of the body and an aromatherapy sauna is a place for enjoyable relaxation.

Besides Estonia, sauna and the use of sauna are popular and the subject is topical also in other Baltic states – Latvia and Lithuania, and also in the international sense. For instance, on the initiative of Lithuanians, the **XVI International Sauna Congress was organised in Trakai, Lithuania by the Lithuanian Sauna Academy from 30 May to 1 June 2014.**

Also the Nordic countries are sauna countries: Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway are members of ISA. Google searches showed that there are enough saunas in homes and summer houses and also in hotels and spas also in Iceland, Åland, the Faeroe Islands and Greenland. A Nordic sauna contains all primal elements of nature, e.g. fire, air, water and earth – hot steam, whisking, cooling off in water or snow and pampering of skin with herbal infusions and creams.

The Nordic countries (poetically also the Norse) is an area which includes Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark together with Åland (an autonomous county of Finland in the Baltic Sea with a Swedish-speaking population and Swedish as the only official language), the Faeroe Islands (an autonomous part of Denmark in the Northern part of the Atlantic Ocean) and Greenland (an autonomous part of the Kingdom of Denmark in the American continent).

ISA, the association of the sauna organisations and sauna enthusiasts of the world, held another Sauna Congress in cooperation with the Swedish Sauna Academy on the initiative of Swedes on the border between Sweden and Finland, in Haaparanta and Tornio: namely, **on 7–10 June 2018 the XVII International Sauna Congress on the subject “MIDNIGHT SUN and SAUNA” took place in Sweden.**

Last year, Germans were the organisers: **the XVIII International Sauna Congress took place in Stuttgart, Germany on 25–27 October 2022**. Approximately 200 people of 16 nationalities participated.

Thanks to the Estonian Rural Tourism Organization, Estonia finally became a member of the Sauna Association of the world before the Estonian Year of Sauna 2023. The decision so important for Estonians as sauna people was adopted in Copenhagen on 18 June 2022 by Board members of the Sauna Association ISA (International Sauna Association, founded in Germany in 1958 / the founder members were: Austria, Japan, Germany and Finland/; the current president is Risto Elomaa from Finland). Thus Estonia became the 21st member of the association of sauna nations and countries of the world. As at 16.01.2023, ISA had already 27 member organisations (four founder members, 14 national members, nine associate members and two honorary members (individual members).

All sauna enthusiasts have always been welcome at these magnificent sauna events – congresses. The programme has allowed participants to choose between subjects in the work of the Congress according to their interests: by choosing between lectures, workshops and seminars on the subjects of sauna and health; history and culture of sauna; technologies in sauna; or sauna architecture.

2. Personal sauna experience of the author of the article in Estonia and at other places

The author of the article owns the following personal saunas: three Finnish saunas heated with wood and one smoke sauna heated with wood. All saunas are heated from the steam room. All these possibilities for sauna use have also been shared with friends and both the construction and use periods of each sauna bring to mind nice memories.

Thus, the main sauna, “MR’s Finnish sauna at home” at Pirita-Kose is already **50 years old** by the summer of 2023 and we can celebrate the anniversary of half a century of the MR’s sauna. And what’s more:

- in 1993-1995 a smoke sauna was designed (following the model of the smoke sauna at the Soera Farm Museum on Hiiumaa) and built to the property in Tallinn in 1995; and in October 1995, after another fellowship period in Kiel, we used the smoke sauna and whisked there for the first time with my father. Thus, in autumn 2023, the **smoke sauna will already be 28 years old**, in 2025 it will be 30 years old;
- In the course of establishing a forest farm during the regaining of independence of the Republic of Estonia and restitution of lands, a Finnish sauna was built to the summer house – home office (in 2000), so **by now the sauna of the forest farm has been in use for 23 years already** and will be 25 years old in 2025;
- in 2016-2017 when MR ended his active activities on the basis of a contract of employment with the University of Tartu on 31.08.2017 (in the Pärnu College the authorisation agreement ended in 2019), a Finnish sauna was built in the Pärnu

apartment (home office) – the steam room is also used as a laundry drying room), by now **about six years old**, will be 10 years old in 2028.

The actual sauna geography of MR has never been very wide (let us regard it as medium or a little higher). **As not all saunas from the long period are not remembered, the number of different saunas visited may be actually more than 80. During the 50 years in Estonia, more than 80 different saunas have been used, in many of them repeatedly.**

The author of this article values Estonian saunas highly – the quality is not always the same but this is no problem. Sometimes the only differences are in the construction (e.g. optimal height of the steam room) but this is probably caused by certain lack of knowledge. There are 15 counties in Estonia, saunas of two counties, the Põlva and Rapla county, have not been visited yet.

Outside Estonia, the author of this article has visited **saunas in Latvia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Finland, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and Greece**. Although I have delivered lectures about five weeks every year for four years (2014–2017) at the universities of Tbilisi, Georgia (Georgian Technical University, Kutaisi State University) (some lectures also at the Telavi State University and Zugdidi State University) and supervised workshops and given consultations (Tbilisi State University) and have also participated and made presentations at the annual conference (Georgian Technical University, Kutaisi State University) and published papers in their scientific journals, I have unfortunately not visited saunas in Tbilisi. This is rather strange but my friends in Georgia are not very interested in saunas. As I have been elected/appointed as a visiting professor of two universities there, **I hope to correct this mistake during my next visit to Georgia and visit saunas in Tbilisi, Georgia.**

The Year of Sauna⁶ in Estonia has been dedicated to everybody who has sauna in the soul: we will remind you of (old) sauna customs, contemplate over sauna culture and highlight companies who provide public sauna services. The initiator of the Year of Sauna is the Estonian Rural Tourism Organization – many events will be organised.

3. What is the basic knowledge of sauna and use of sauna you should have? Estonian smoke sauna as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

According to the organisers, the aim of the Year of Sauna is to promote healthy and social sauna culture. It is good to remember that over the years, problems of body and soul have been treated in sauna – originally in a smoke sauna – people have communicated with souls of ancestors, met friends, delivered babies and washed the dead. The idea of a smoke sauna was also to let old things go.

One should know the following about sauna!

⁶ [<https://www.puhkaeestis.ee/et/puhka-eestis/2023-on-eestis-sauna-aasta-loe-mis-tulemas-on>] 26/12/2022

People have never gone to sauna without a whisk and this tradition has fortunately not disappeared even now – a whisk helps to excrete toxins, massages the body, stimulates circulation and accelerates metabolism. A whisk can be made from twigs of many trees and bushes and from plants: juniper, birch, oak, linden and also others, and when making a whisk also a secret wish can be said into it, e.g., an expectation to get rid of a disease. Before whisking, the whisk should be pulled slightly over the heater, then the leaves become soft, all essential oils are released, and the skin gets a good beating.

And certainly the contrasting activity is a part of the sauna, e.g. jumping into a snow drift or into water. It is a natural antidepressant, multivitamin and simply an excellent mood booster.

The Estonian smoke sauna tradition is even included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity List. Võro people led by Eda Veeroja at the Mooska Farm have done great work for the valuing of the 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.

Inclusion of smoke sauna in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity List was not achieved only by preservation, promotion and practising of the smoke sauna tradition but the initiator conducts activities actively even now at the Mooska Tourism Farm and welcomes all people interested in smoke sauna traditions to follow them there. There are certainly several types of smoke saunas in Estonia (with different positions of the platform and the heater, heating, etc).

As the name says, smoke has an important role in smoke sauna, so these buildings have no chimney – most smoke is let out through windows and doors before going to the platform. Hot stones keep the sauna warm for many hours⁷ and as always, hot water has to be thrown on them to make steam. The temperature of cold water is low, it does not generate good steam and breaks the stones of the heater.

Whisking has not been a practised during every use of sauna. Country people respect nature and there has to be a serious reason for cutting twigs in the forest for a whisk. Whisking has been a part of treatment or customs since the old times.

Whisking is started when the body is completely warm and the skin surface is clean, about after the third throwing of water on stones, after washing or scrubbing of body. Whisking is started from foot soles, moving gradually upwards. Men start whisking from the right foot and women from the left foot. All body parts are whisked at least three

⁷ In the smoke sauna of the author of this article (MR) it is possible to wash oneself properly in warm sauna and sometimes even throw water on stones on the next morning, after having heated the heater for about four hours on the previous day with billets of half a metre long and after having used the sauna for several hours in good company. The sauna heater has been built in such a way that after throwing hot water on hot stones, the steam circulates along the sauna walls through all corners of the steam room on the opposite side of the heater and only then falls on the people who are on the sauna platform.

times. Sauna words keep the whisking and breathing rhythm. After whisking the body (clean), whisk is placed on the ground and the person will step over the whisk to the clean area.

The most common whisks are made from silver birch. Whisking with a birch whisk rejuvenates skin, alleviates pain, cures wounds and strengthens the immune system. It restores the balance between body and soul, and the body will be light and joyous. Whisking with a birch whisk during new moon encourages people to start something. A birch whisk can be used repeatedly, for whisking different people. The best time for making birch whisks is between the new and old Midsummer Day, big days are particularly full of power. A birch whisk is made during waning moon.

Often plants and herbs with curative properties are added to whisks – e.g. mint, oregano, balm, rosemary, black currant, cherry, willow herb, tinfoil, hop, caraway, etc. (MR: also nettle is known as good whisk material).

Recommendations for whisking:

- drink herb tea or mineral water before sauna;
- before starting whisking it is recommended to dip the whisk into warm water to make the leaves nicely soft, or to braise the whisk near the heater;
- before making steam, rinse the body with warm water; do not wash with soap, scrubbing with salt is more preferable;
- lie on the platform and whisk all body parts. Start whisking from foot soles, moving gradually upwards;
- it is recommended to whisk 10–15 minutes and perform 2–3 whiskings during a visit to sauna;
- cool your head and pay attention to how you feel!

MR: so there are many alternatives and choices. Good luck trying, be persistent and have good steam!

Summary and conclusions

Considering the explanations and recommendations given in this article, the author of the article (MR) can state proceeding from his experience with modern high-quality saunas in 1973–2023⁸ that in case of normal use of sauna (not exaggerating with high

⁸ Thus, by the end of this year, MR has used sauna for 50 years. MR counts his sauna use experience from 1973 when the building of own home sauna was completed. Impressions from sauna use in earlier years both in Rakvere where I was born (from about 1953 to 1965; I cannot remember earlier times as I was born in 1949) and then in Tallinn (1965–1973), so about 20 years, is a short time compared to later years as the possibilities and the sauna culture are more or less different. The reason is that during the 20 years the main possibility to use sauna was either the municipal general sauna or sauna rented by the hour (which meant one hour of private sauna use for a family with a separate steam room, washing and dressing room). It was also possible to wash there and make good steam. But with the improvement of the quality of life, possibilities for sauna use at home appeared besides the municipal sauna (both in Rakvere and in Tallinn) (mainly only in one-family houses) and in the laundry room at home (or in a laundry room/sauna). But both the municipal saunas and home laundry rooms had lower quality and less privacy than the current saunas. This

temperature, duration of hot steam or food and drinks, also with the stamina competitions), a sauna is a very enjoyable place for relaxation, conversations and other related activities. The rest after sauna is also quite justified. Possibilities, principles and quality of building a sauna surely serve as a basis for normal sauna use.



Photo 1. Smoke sauna in the home garden of MR (Photo by MR)

In the smoke sauna in the North-Western corner of the home garden of MR at Pirita-Kose (Photo 1) 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 hosted 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 /08.10. 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 have participated). 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.

Almost always, the use of sauna has been accompanied by also serious discussions, even mini-workshops, so-to-say, on subjects of the speciality and the whole conduction of studies on economic policy and writing of papers / making presentations.

So – the editorial board of our journal and organising committee of the conference have carried out also other activities besides writing papers and compiling the journal and

reflects also the differences and bases of the two social orders. A bath and/or shower surely does not replace a modern sauna. The necessary heat, steam and a whisk are important. One should not go to the extremes and should maintain one's good health.

organising conferences, in this case activities related to sauna, and recommend it also to others. Sauna surely brings you good and constructive ideas and also conversations. During all our conferences (since 1984) also sauna has been in the programme one evening.

For instance, Archbishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church Urmas Viilma said in an interview on Estonian TV in December 2022 that he usually goes to sauna before an important sermon or speech to gather his thoughts.
Good steam and good sauna experience to everyone!

Sauna 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.

If we try to think about and explain the very essence of sauna and the use of sauna, we can say that it is an important part of our cultural policy within Estonian structural policy and in the economic policy of Estonians and also other countries and nations.

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NB! The full article in Estonian (on CD) has the following structure:

Introduction

1. Briefly about the history of use of sauna and on the development of own personal saunas

1.1. About the use of sauna in the Nordic and Baltic countries and about use of sauna internationally (incl. Photo 1)

1.2. Developments of the saunas and use of sauna by the undersigned

2. Main personal sauna experience of the author of the article

2.1. Sauna experience in Estonia (incl. Figure 1 and Table 1)

2.2. Sauna experience outside Estonia (incl. Table 2 and Photo 2)

2.3. Smoke sauna in own home garden (incl. Photo 3)

3. New celebration in Estonia – Year of Sauna – and its events

4. 2023 is a Year of Sauna in Estonia – with enthusiasm and pleasure! (incl. Photo 4)

5. Estonian Sauna Map Network

6. About whisking. Times for making whisks

7. Saunas in Estonia

8. More about whisking and sauna whisks

9. About old sauna customs and practices (reference to M. J. Eisen). Heater stones

Summary

Literature used

PS (Post Scriptum; added later): incl. Photos 5–6 and

A. Members of ISA (International Sauna Association)

B. A new type of sauna appeared in Estonia in the course of 8 years (2013–2021) – sumesauna (incl. Photos 7–12)

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ANNEXES (incl. Photos 13 – 28):

Annex 1: Year of Sauna 2023: By the end of the Year of Sauna there will hopefully be 12 sauna capitals in Estonia (12 months!) (incl. Photo 13)

Annex 2: Estonian historical sauna architecture up to today

2.1. Historical saunas (incl. Photos 14–17)

2.2. Modern and industrially produced saunas (incl. Photos 18–24)

Annex 3: Regular and frequent use of sauna maintains good health (brief abstract of studies), Sources

Annex 4: Modern saunas: sauna enjoyment in Finland on a big wheel, in Helsinki already since summer 2016, and sauna as a modern work of art in Sweden (incl. Photos 25–28)

Annex 5: Text of the Declaration of Sauna Peace