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**Steam
mentality**
Finland

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Preface
Sitting in a little wooden hut in temperatures of up to 100c might seem a slightly eccentric way to spend your free time but in Finland it is a way of life. And while the health benefits are debated, everyone agrees that the real point is that a naked, steamy get-together is good for the soul.

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The Finns begin their sauna career as babies (opinions differ on the safe age to start, but most agree it is somewhere between six and 12 months) and continue throughout their life with weekly sessions. There are over two million saunas in the country (Finland's population is just over five million) and many people own two: one in their apartment and another in the summerhouse, preferably by a clear blue lake and with a wood-burning oven (they're said to produce the best steam, or *löyly*).

Joonas Berghäll and Mika Hotakainen, directors of the documentary *Steam of Life*, believe that the quiet, shared nakedness fulfills a yearning for equality and tranquillity. "Finland was ruled by Sweden and Russia for hundreds of years. But in the sauna everyone is equal," says Berghäll.

The sauna plays a central role even in Finnish decision-making. Members of parliament meet in weekly sauna sessions and in the tradition of legendary president Urho Kekkonen, ministers still invite foreign leaders to sauna evenings to discuss politics.

The health effects of sauna bathing are under constant debate. According to The Finnish Sauna Society: taking a sauna makes your heart beat faster, your blood rush to your skin and your sore muscles relax. Jumping into a cold lake or rolling in the snow, as many Finns like to do, compensates for the heat and, it is said, makes your skin look radiant. But the psychological effects are arguably the greatest benefits. You never feel so relaxed as you do after a long sauna session, sitting on the wooden steps on a summer night, gazing over a lake that mirrors the surrounding forests. And you never sleep so well. — (M)

