

Etiquette 101

The Essential Guide to Baths, Saunas, and Spa Treatments

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OOPS A DAISY Avoid perfumed soap, shampoo, and conditioner before entering a Finnish sauna. Smelling like a flower or a fruit is almost as bad as not having showered at all.



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FINNISH CABINET MINISTERS DO IT, RUSSIAN HOCKEY

players do it, Koreans do it on a first date. Social bathing—known as “naked communion” in Japan—is an integral part of several cultures, strengthening bonds between family members, colleagues, and heads of state. In many countries it’s also considered the proper way to welcome a foreign guest. Whether sauna or *sentō*, *banya* or hammam, the shared bath is society’s great leveler, its group hug, its collective sigh. “Not sampling the local bathing culture would be like not trying the local cuisine,” says Melisse Gelula, co-founder of Well&Good NYC, an online wellness guide. And like any other institution integral to a society, this one has its rules, the first of which is to behave with churchlike decorum. In Finland, the sauna is the church, says Joonas Berghäll, co-director of the Finnish documentary *Steam of Life*. (Statistics bear him out: With just over five million inhabitants, Finland has roughly half that number of saunas—and a solid record as one of the least church-going countries in the world.) But what does *churchlike* mean? Bathhouses, like churches, have moods—some venerate, others jubilate. So visitors should always take the temperature, so to speak, to see what tone is appropriate.

The other cardinal rule: Soap and scrub everything before entering a communal pool or steam room. In Iceland, “everything” is defined by locker-room depictions of the human anatomy with highlighted areas: head, armpits, genitalia, feet. This may come as a shock, but we Americans are not known as the cleanest of the clean. Despite our fear of foreign germs, it turns out we don’t all know how to wash. “Locals can become very upset by the wrong etiquette,” says Susie Ellis of the Web site SpaFinder. “If you don’t soap and scrub before going into the water, they can be incensed.”

Encroaching modesty is another pet peeve. As spa owners around the world increasingly cater to the famously uptight American traveler (who among us isn’t at least a little shocked to see a casually topless German woman on the beach—or in the sauna?), you have to wonder about the cultural impact of our prudishness (not to mention the environmental footprint left by a growing number of towels, robes, and disposable undies). At least we’re learning. “Spa going is now considered a wellness activity and not just a pampering activity,” says Ellis. “As more people go to spas, they’re becoming more comfortable with nudity.”

Alexia Brue, Gelula’s business partner and the author of *Cathedrals of the Flesh: My Search for the Perfect Bath*, advises spa-bound travelers to quit worrying. “People stress out about the etiquette, but they don’t need to.” Even when there’s a language barrier, basic politeness goes a long way—especially, it seems, when you’re naked. “People want to help you,” says Brue. “They’re flattered by your interest, and they’re curious about you. Even the bossy Russian women—they worried that my head would be hot and that I’d get split ends, so they made me wear a cap. I never once felt unwelcome in any of the places I visited.” □

SAUNA DIPLOMACY

Finland

The sauna is associated with life’s most important events in Finland, and it inspires a mystical reverence. A generation ago, it was still the place where women gave birth. Over the years, guardians of sauna etiquette have warned against cursing, discussing religion and politics, whistling, singing, telling tales, bad-mouthing, and passing gas. In earlier



times, legend holds, transgressors were punished by the *sau-natonttu*, an elf

that inhabited the sauna and protected it from evil-doers.

In the frostiest days of the Cold War, it’s been said that Finnish president Urho Kekkonen kept a visiting Khrushchev in the steam until 5 A.M. Today, the country credits the many saunas built by Finnish peacekeeping troops with easing political tensions in such hot spots as Cyprus, Kosovo, and the Golan Heights. Sauna diplomacy was in danger of be-

coming obsolete in the 1990s, sidelined by the advancement of women in politics (the current Finnish president is a woman) and busy schedules. Since then, the power sauna has made something of a comeback.

In Washington, D.C., one of the best places to pick up a choice bit of political gossip is the Diplomatic Finnish Sauna



Society, a private club that serves as a meeting place for policy wonks, Capitol Hill staffers, and journalists. “It’s a good way to network on Friday evenings,” says Kari Mokko, the embassy’s press secretary and saunameister. Should you score an invitation—or find yourself in any other Finnish sauna—a few guidelines to consider: **SWIMSUITS ARE TABOO.** They’re denounced by purists as uncomfortable and unclean. Men and women sauna in the nude and separately, unless they are family members or close friends.

PUBLIC SAUNAS ARE EQUIPPED WITH SHOWERS. Wash everything, including your hair. Avoid perfumed soap, sham-

Tools of the Trade

A look at a few of the more exotic items you’re likely to encounter at spas overseas—and how not to use them.



KAUHA

Found in every Finnish sauna, the *kauha* is used to ladle water onto hot rocks in the sauna. Ask first to avoid shocking fellow bathers with an unexpected burst of steam.



VENIK (ALSO VASTA)

A bundle of birch or oak leaves soaked in water, it’s slapped lightly against the skin. This is not supposed to hurt—one connoisseur likens it to “being licked by a big mother cat.”



SHAPKA

The purpose of the Russian *banya* hat, made of wool, is not to warm your head but to cool it. A towel worn turban-style is an inferior substitute. Do not wear the *shapka* in the street.

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poo, and conditioner.

KNOCK BEFORE ENTERING. If you arrive late for a sauna gathering, don't open the door to say hi. Disrobe, shower, then ask (door closed) if anybody needs anything—a towel, a drink.

SHUT THE DOOR. Letting cold air in and hot air out of the sauna is a big faux pas. Try not to forget your towel or your drink.

PROTECT YOUR SWEATY BOTTOM FROM THE HOT BENCH AND VICE VERSA. If you've wrapped a towel around your head to protect your hair, then you'll need another one to go underneath you.

MIND THE SAUNA GRANNY. If the sauna door bursts open and a woman wielding a bundle of leaves (a *vasta*) rushes in and orders you to remove your underwear, do as you're told. She is the *kylvettäjä*—the bath attendant—and her job is to massage and/or scrub you and to make sure you follow the rules.

YOU DO NOT NEED TO BE A LICENSUED PRACTITIONER TO USE

SWEAT THE BIG STUFF Finns take their saunas seriously, as should you. At last year's International Sauna Congress in Tokyo, Finland's secretary of state had some advice for world leaders. "In a situation where the parties are far apart, the most important thing is to just meet and talk, meet and talk," he said. "The sauna provides an excellent environment for this."

A VASTA. Anybody can do it—even you. The massage may be self-administered, or you and a friend can take turns.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION LIGHT. Avoid topics that might cause stress, especially work. Mostly, people talk about the heat. If you're at a loss for words, inquire about sauna customs, a subject the Finns never tire of discussing. And by the way, the word is pronounced *SOW-na*, not *SAW-na*. That's how the Finns say it, and they should know.

ACCEPT A LITTLE TEASING. Neophytes tend not to last more than a couple of minutes in the sauna. There are worse gaffes than being the first to leave.



One is to end up on the sauna floor. Drink water, stay low and away from the corners (where heat gathers), and remember that this is not a competition.

IT'S OKAY TO DECLINE A SAUNA

INVITATION. Unless, that is, the stove has been fired up just for you. If you're really not up for it, offer a medical excuse.

◆ **WHEN TO TIP:** "Finns do not usually tip," says the Finnish embassy's Mokko.

ARCHITECTURAL BONANZA

Hungary

Budapest's public baths are architectural wonders built around hot springs that have washed the Celts, the Romans, and the Ottoman Turks. Do's and don'ts are often posted only in Hungarian and vary from one bath to another. Poles and businessmen meet in the quiet ambience of the thermal baths at Rudas. Families with kids queue up at the Széchenyi coed complex. The luxury Corinthia Hotel's Royal Spa has a couples' treatment room, a Vichy shower, algae wraps, and limited children's hours in the pool. For those who prefer a more traditional Hungarian bath, Brian Callnan, a Vermont-er who makes regular trips to Budapest, recommends winter



mornings in the outdoor pools at Széchenyi, with the steam rising off the water and the snow coming down. "But bring your own food," Callnan suggests. "The snack bar sells fried pork sandwiches spread with lard—not really spa food."

AVOID DISTURBING YOUR FELLOW BATHERS. Generally speaking, there's more soaking than swimming.

BEWARE THE EVER-CHANGING DRESS CODE. Most baths have separate men's and women's hours, and nudity is generally acceptable in women's hammams. Bathing suits are required in coed pools. The standard-issue cover-up is an apron called a *kötény* (the women's version is bibbed). Some people wear it; others parade around in shower caps and sandals. Speedos are com-

mon in coed pools; surf shorts will mark you as a tourist.

PACK A FULL BATHING KIT. You're likely to need a bathing suit, rubber sandals, toiletries (soap, shampoo, conditioner, razor), and above all a towel (otherwise, you may end up with a rented object that resembles either a bedsheet or a baggy loin-cloth). Sandals are usually required in the steam room. Some pools require caps, some don't. ◆ **WHEN TO TIP:** "I normally give 100 to 200 huf—between 50 cents and a dollar—to the guy who opens and closes the locker or the changing cabin," says Budapest's Mihály Zsilinszky. "For massages, tip an additional 200 to 400 huf if you're happy with the service."

FOR THE SQUEAKY CLEAN ONLY

Japan

Bathing means soaking in Japan (the word for bath is *furo*), preferably in one of the country's numerous hot springs, or *onsen*. The golden rule is to immerse yourself only after you're squeaky clean. Eighteen years ago, JAPANESE ONLY signs began appearing on bathhouse doors in the port of Otaru. The signs, which were posted in English and Russian, followed several incidents involving drunken Russian sailors. Last year, in an effort to appear more visitor-friendly, bath house officials published a for-dummies guide in four languages. It is posted online (ota1010.com) and all over Tokyo's Ota Ward, which boasts more than 50 public bathhouses, many of them spring-fed.

BLUE IS FOR BOYS. Japanese bathers take it all off, but rarely in mixed company. A blue curtain at the entrance means all-clear for men, red for women.

LOOK FOR THE SHOE LOCKER JUST INSIDE THE ENTRANCE. The floor of the changing room should remain pristine.

SCRUB BEFORE YOU BATHE.

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You'll find low wooden stools and wooden or plastic buckets



in the wash-room. Sit on the stool, fill the bucket with water, and douse yourself, being careful not to slosh your neighbor.

RINSE WELL BUT AVOID WASTING WATER. If there's a shower, open the tap, get wet, and turn off the water while you scrub.

RINSE THE STOOL. After doing so, set the overturned bucket on top to indicate that you've cleaned your station.

SHAVING AND BRUSHING TEETH ARE ALLOWED. Just wash the evidence down the drain.

NEVER DUNK YOUR TOWEL IN THE POOL. You will be given a bit of fabric that looks like a small towel or a large washcloth; it is used both for scrubbing and drying. While you bathe, leave it on a rock or place it, neatly folded, on top of your head. Use it to dab perspiration from your brow.

DO NOT LET YOUR HAIR TRAIL IN THE FURO. Unless it's very short, cover your hair with a shower cap or twist it into a topknot.

BE PREPARED TO COVER TATTOOS. Certain designs are associated with the *yakuza* (the Japanese mafia), and some establishments ban them. Which tattoos and which *furos* is anybody's guess. Even if you're a foreigner, your body art might be an issue.

◆ **WHEN TO TIP:** Never.

BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

Russia

The *banya* "tends to be slightly more of a male thing than a female thing," says Greg Tepper of Exeter International, which specializes in travel to Eastern Europe. It's a popular meeting place for friends and colleagues, and are often likened to an American golf course.

The main difference between the Finnish sauna and the Russian *banya* is steam—lots of it. The best advice is to lie flat; otherwise, your head will be

The Ins and Outs of a Russian Banya



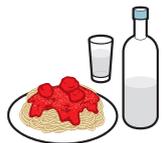
1 After showering, enter the *parilka*, or hot room, just to warm up. Once 100 beads of sweat have dripped from your nose, move into the cooler main room.



2 Wait a few minutes, then return to the *parilka* with a *venik*. Wave the *venik* over your body (not touching the skin), and then tap it lightly on your back and legs, slowly increasing the intensity. When you've had enough, head back to the main room. Repeat three times.



3 During the third visit, a *banya* attendant will put ice on your back (screaming is allowed).



4 Follow with a long massage, a big dinner, and plenty of vodka. —IGOR LIPOVETSKY, EXETER INTERNATIONAL GENERAL MANAGER, ST. PETERSBURG

hotter than your feet. The standard procedure is three or four sessions in the *parilka* (or hot room), cooling down in the main room in between.

At a high-end establishment like Moscow's Sandunovsky Baths, a professional is in charge of the vapors, pouring water infused with eucalyptus, mint, and sage and fanning the air with a towel. He also employs the *venik* (see "Tools of the Trade," page 46). In a neighborhood *banya*, it's



more of a free-for-all. "Often the staff don't speak English, so they'll lead you by the hand and just push you in the right direction. It can be daunting and very funny," says Tepper, who often arranges for guides to take travelers to private clubs.

KEEP YOUR FLIP-FLOPS ON. The *parilka* is more slippery than the typical sauna.

DON'T BRING BANNED OBJECTS INTO THE PARILKA. The steam room is not a place for masks, nail polish, scented beauty products, or nail clippers. Nor is it a place to read the newspaper, and the *Moscow Times* is not an appropriate sit-upon-cooked newsprint stinks.

STAY HYDRATED. "Some people drink vodka in the *banya*," says Tepper, "but you have to be careful." Extreme heat and alcohol are a dangerous combo. Traditionalists recommend tea, kvass, or fruit juice.

CHILL OUT. The sexes may or may not be segregated at lakeshore *banyas*, where there's sometimes skinny-dipping or a nude roll in the snow.

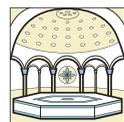
◆ **WHEN TO TIP:** Give ten percent for professional services such as a *venik* or standard massage.

SANDPAPERY SOOTHING

Turkey

The hammam (literally translated, the word means "spreader of warmth") is an

Islamic adaptation of the great Roman baths. The classic design is a series of progressively warmer chambers bathed in soft light and gentle steam, its centerpiece a domed cupola above an octagonal *göbek taşı* (belly stone)—a marble slab upon which you recline while soaking up the heat.



(Among the most magnificent examples is Çağaloğlu, in Istanbul; see "Say Ahhh!" page 100.) It may sound luxurious, but the Turkish bath is more about cleansing than pampering. Its secret weapon is a vigorous head-to-toe scrubbing, sometimes with a scratchy mitt. Well&Good's Gelula describes the experience as being peeled like a banana and hosed down like a circus elephant. "The more authentic you go, the less upright you can be," she adds. "These are bathing rituals that made sense long before there was a spa industry."

BE MINDFUL OF THE DRESS CODE.

The modern hammam is secular, but certain traditions remain. Islamic etiquette requires that men cover their loins, and the dress code is still relatively modest. Men wear a *pestemal*, a Turkish bath towel. On the women's side, bikini bottoms or house-provided disposable undies are common. In mixed company, it's swimsuits.

DON'T BE BASHFUL. The *tellak*, or hammam massage therapist, is typically a big, strong, scantily clad man or woman who scrubs every inch of your body, ignoring only the private parts. (Breasts and buttocks are not always considered private.) "It's like being bathed like a baby, only rougher," says Gelula.

WHAT TO SAY. To wish somebody a pleasant bath, say *Sihhatler olsun*, which means "May health be with you."

◆ **WHEN TO TIP:** At the end of services, attendants line up expecting a tip. Fifteen percent is usual. □

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THE NAKED TRUTH

Not everyone is at ease in the altogether. A few guidelines on when and where to lose the robe

Throughout the spa world, Americans are famous for overdressing. We are the ones who show up for the Swedish massage fully clothed, complain that the showers lack curtains, and cower at the sauna door. Rule number one: It is impossible to hide behind a bathing suit when everybody else is naked.

Emily Prucha, an American journalist living in Prague, tried: She was seven months pregnant at the time and bent on wearing a voluminous tankini at an Austrian resort where the teensiest thong was considered an extravagance (her Czech girlfriends talked her out of it).

“Countries have customs that aren’t going to change,” says Susie Ellis, president of SpaFinder. “But they’re making more of an effort to explain the etiquette.” The following

guidelines, compiled with help from the experts at SpaFinder, are about blending in.

IN THE RELAXATION ROOM OR COOL-DOWN AREA Don the provided cover-up (a robe, a sheet, a towel); no sashaying over to the buffet in your birthday suit. In Japan, the standard robe is called a *yukata*, and if it’s too small, ask for a large (*dai*) or an extra-large (*tokudai*); insufficient coverage will become apparent the moment you try to sit cross-legged.

IN THE SAUNA, STEAM ROOM, OR JACUZZI Purists frown on swimsuits in these facilities, which



tend to be single-sex and nude, with separate times for men and women. In coed

facilities, swimsuits are common—but if you wear one in a German sauna, you might be asked to leave. Before placing your bare butt on a sauna bench, lay down a towel.

IN THE MASSAGE ROOM Having a Swedish massage—or most others, for that matter—without taking off your clothes is like

having a haircut without removing your hat. In the United States, massage therapists employ tortuous draping techniques to shield their customers from view—a practice considered quite bizarre in other parts of the world. One notable exception to the nudity norm is Thai massage, in which clients wear loose clothing for an elaborate series of assisted floor-based stretches. Many luxury resorts provide the garments. “Some guests don’t want to wear the pajamas,” says Vikki Aquino, spa director at Bangkok’s Shangri-La hotel. “But then they understand why once the treatment starts.”

BODY TREATMENTS SUCH AS SALT SCRUBS AND VICHY SHOWERS



Shed everything—except perhaps the wristband that holds your locker key. Some spas do offer disposable panties.

HYDROTHERAPY TREATMENTS Many spas suggest that you wear a swimsuit, although in some you can go nude. □

Where to Bare: A Global Guide

AUSTRALIA, THE CARIBBEAN, THE UNITED KINGDOM, AND THE UNITED STATES Modesty prevails. Wear swimsuits in saunas, steam rooms, and whirlpools.

JAPAN In bathing areas, nudity rules, but mixed nude bathing—officially outlawed in 1900—is rare. The so-called modesty towel is supposed to be strategically dangled in front of you, but it’s pretty ineffective and most bathers don’t bother.

INDIA Ayurvedic treatments are received in the nude from a therapist of the same sex.

MIDDLE EAST Modesty dictates segregation of the sexes and a *pešmal* or similar wrap for the men—flashing can get you expelled, though certain baths on certain days are known for cruising. In the women’s quarters, bikini tops and bottoms are a nuisance and tend to get yanked around in the vigorous scrub-down for which the hammam is famous. Chances are your inhibitions won’t survive and you’ll leave feeling as clean and innocent as the day you were born.

SWEDEN, FINLAND, AND RUSSIA In saunas, swimsuits are taboo; a *banya* hat and slippers are all the attire you’re likely to need. Men and women are segregated; nude coed bathing is rare except among family members and close friends. Even world leaders tend not to break these rules: The traditional no-neckties



NO PLACE FOR MODESTY

In Germany and Austria, nudity is the norm, even in coed saunas, steam rooms, and hot tubs.

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summit between Finland and Russia did not take place the year Vladimir Putin met with Finland's first female president, Tarja Halonen, elected in 2000.

GERMANY, AUSTRIA, AND GERMAN-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND Mixed-sex nudity is routine, although there's enough flexibility to create confusion. At the Friedrichsbad in Baden-Baden, a nineteenth-century bathhouse steeped in tradition, nudity is compulsory (see "Say Ahhh!" page 100). On some days, men and women bathe separately; on others, they use designated entrances and proceed through the facility in a segregated fashion—until they get to the pool area. "Suddenly you see all these uncircumcised penises everywhere," says Alexia Brue, of Well&Good NYC. "It can be quite a shock." At Caracalla Terme, Baden-Baden's family-friendly luxury day spa, swimsuits are mandatory in the bathing area.

The 99 Percent Solution

HERE IS THE BEST WAY TO PREPARE FOR NEARLY ALL SPA-NUDITY POSSIBILITIES

Undress completely in the locker room and put on a swimsuit, a spa robe, and spa slippers. Carry a large towel with you, and head to whatever part of the spa you're planning to use. Look around to see what everyone else is wearing, and consider following suit. Remember: It's easier to take something off than to find something to put on.

THE 19 GOLDEN RULES OF SPA TREATMENTS

With their temple-like atmosphere and curious offerings—seaweed wraps, cold-friction rubs—even hotel spas can make guests feel like strangers in a strange land. We've queried the experts for a few pointers on how to ensure a serene sojourn, from beginning to end

Before Your Visit

✓ DO

- **USE BREATH MINTS** before treatments, especially facials—otherwise, you're breathing lunch right into your aesthetician's face.
- **MEN SHOULD SHAVE** the night before a facial. "It makes skin less sensitive than shaving that morning," says Gillian Garcia, spa therapist at the Beverly Wilshire hotel, in Beverly Hills.

✗ DON'T

- **EAT A HEAVY MEAL** right before your appointment. "You are lying down and don't want the blood flow to concentrate in your stomach," says Garcia.



"Eat light. Drink water but not excessively—having to go to the bathroom every 30 minutes disrupts the treatment."

- **GET YOUR (ALCOHOLIC) DRINK ON** right before or after treatments—it's dehydrating.
- **OVERLY CLEANSE BEFORE A FACIAL.** "You want the therapist to see your true skin," says New York-based aesthetician Andrea DeSimone. "Even avoid washing your face so you aren't overly stimulated with products."



- **WEAR EXPENSIVE JEWELRY.** Most treatments require you to remove all jewel-

ry, and you may be too spacey afterward to remember to collect it.

In the Dressing Room and Relaxation Area

✓ DO

- **ARRIVE AT LEAST 30 MINUTES EARLY** to check in and begin decompressing, the International Spa Association (ISPA) recommends.

SHOWER BEFOREHAND. A masseur at a luxury hotel in Manhattan reveals that one of his biggest pet peeves is clients who are running late and skip the shower so they won't lose a moment of their massage. "It's hugely inconsiderate," he says. "Just walking around makes feet smell."

- **HIT THE STEAM OR SAUNA** before a massage or body treatments, advises ISPA—it aids in relaxation and circulation and eases exfoliation.

✗ DON'T

- **"STEAM AN HOUR BEFOREHAND** if you're getting waxed," says Garcia. "The incidence of damage is higher when your skin is softer."
- **USE CELL PHONES.** "I would keep the talking to a minimum as well," says Garcia.

In the Treatment Room

✓ DO

- **SPEAK UP** about the room temperature, music choice and volume, and massage pressure.

And do mention injuries or physical conditions. If the therapist doesn't speak English (inquire at check-in), be sure to communicate any concerns with the receptionist before the treatment begins.

- **PUT YOUR CHIN DOWN** and close your eyes. "When I'm giving a facial," says DeSimone, "I have products in my hands that could get in your eyes and irritate them." Even if you aren't getting a facial, staring at the ceiling locks muscles in back of the head.

TIP OFF YOUR AESTHETICIAN IF YOU'RE ATTENDING A BIG EVENT.

If you plan to wear a skimpy outfit, you won't want rough exfoliating or procedures such as "cupping," that Asian detox treatment which left unsightly welts on Gwyneth Paltrow right before a film premiere.

✗ DON'T

- **CHITCHAT.** You're not only missing an opportunity to truly relax, you're moving your jaw.
- **HOLD YOUR ARM, LEG, OR NECK** up to be massaged. It stiffens muscles.
- **EXTRACT BEFORE THE RED CARPET.** "When people have an event that day or the next, we avoid facial extractions or anything more clarifying since the possibility of the skin's purging is greater," says Garcia.

BE SHY ABOUT FOOT RITUALS.

"Lots of Southeast Asian rituals have a foot exfoliation at the beginning," notes Vikki Aquino, spa director at Bangkok's Shangri-La hotel. "Often Western clients say, 'Why are you kneeling in front of me?' If the guest shows a little bit of hesitation, the staff get nervous about it."

- **FALL FOR SALES PRESSURE.** "When people are lying down, they are very vulnerable. I would never go back if someone hard-sells me products while I'm on the massage table," says DeSimone. □

