



DESTINATION

# Steam spirit

*A sauna safari in Helsinki would have even the most hot-headed visitor chilling out.*

BY JOHAN AUGUSTIN

Reached aboard a small ferry that departs during the summer months from Helsinki's downtown Market Square, Lonna is a former military island that was, until a few years ago, off limits to the public. Now, though, the 150-metre-long island's half-dozen buildings, in red brick and traditional red and yellow wood, have been renovated. One is a restaurant and another, facing the Baltic Sea, has been transformed into a public sauna.

The sauna is an important part of Finnish culture; most Finns take at least one a week, and there are said to be about one million public and private hot rooms in the country – one for every five people. Even in winter, the practice continues; ice swimming is popular and a roll in the snow or a dip in an ice-hole only serves to heighten the experience of a sauna. And on Helsinki Sauna Day, an annual event that this year took place on March 9, the stereotypically modest, taciturn Finn is encouraged to invite the uninitiated into his or her private sauna.

A visit to the capital at other times will have you stumbling upon saunas in hotels,

fitness centres and at public swimming pools. Some are shared, others – like the one in Lonna – are divided between the sexes. (Tuesdays at the Lonna sauna are mixed, though; “Bring your swimsuit if you want,” advises the website.)

I strip and enter the heat, carrying the seat cover I was given on arrival. Inside the 20 square metre room, there is silence – well, almost. Traditionally, the sauna is a place of quiet contemplation, and even though some of the 10 people sitting here on wooden benches are chatting, they do so in hushed tones. The overall effect is calming and I feel myself unwind.

Wood-stove saunas are the most common type in Finland, and spruce and birch have been heating the stones at the top of Lonna's stove since early this morning, raising the temperature to about 80 degrees Celsius. Finnish saunas are typically kept at between 60 and 100 degrees Celsius, which is above the dew point and thus ensures there is little steam, unlike in a Turkish hammam.

“Löyly,” says a man, entering with a bucket of water. It's the Finnish word for steam, which is created when he ladles



cold water on the stones. “More?” he asks, nodding enthusiastically.

A wave of heat elicits moans of appreciation. I feel dizzy as the *löyly* penetrates every pore. When I walk outside to take a dip in the sea, my skin and mind feel refreshed.

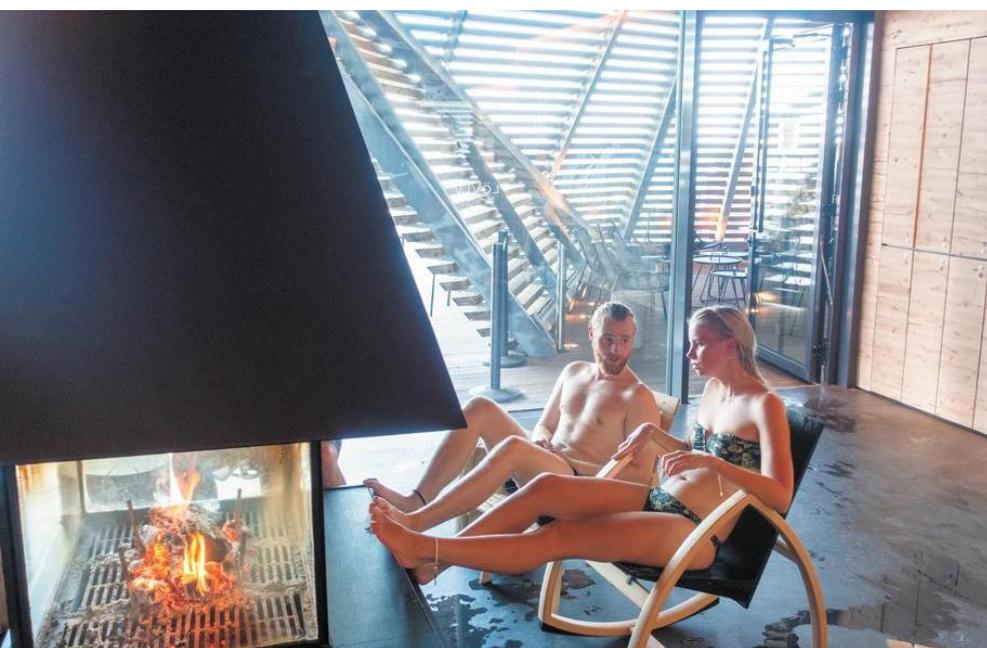
“This sauna is my favourite,” says local Mika Kamppi, who is sitting on the wooden

patio, next to the water's edge, holding a book. “It has the small island atmosphere.” His friend, Erik Wieman, originally from France, has lived in Helsinki for a few years and has embraced the culture: “Finns can be a bit shy, but in the sauna they want to talk to everyone, which is a good thing.”

Back in the city proper, in the Hernesaari quarter, I visit another



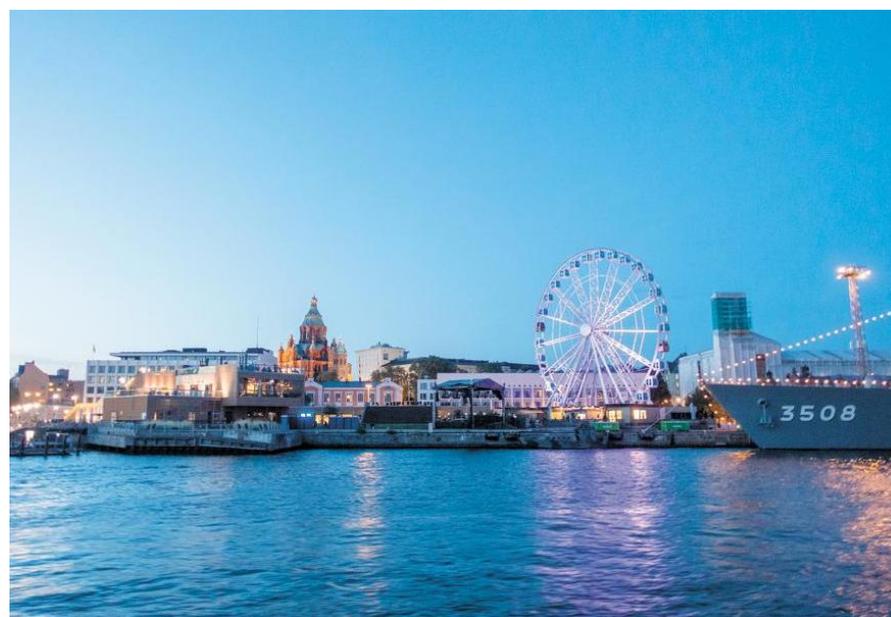
**Clockwise from far left:** Lonna island, off Helsinki (picture: Alamy); a sea pool in central Helsinki; a typical sauna, in the Helsinki suburbs; a sunset view from Lonna; a couple relax in Löyly sauna; Lonna sauna; the heating at Löyly; Erik Wieman (left) and Mika Kamppi at the Lonna sauna. Pictures: Johan Augustin



newcomer to the capital's sauna scene. Löyly – yes, the name is simply “Steam” – has three saunas and a restaurant right on the Helsinki waterfront. The building is an architectural masterpiece, a modern take on a pyramid built solely with sustainable wood. Off the outdoor terrace, past the many sunbathers lazing on loungers, hangs a ladder that descends into the chilly Baltic.

Löyly's saunas are mixed, so visitors keep their swimwear on at all times. The wooden bench in the one I enter is hot, and so I sit on a seat cover. Two Japanese girls, dressed in bikinis, chat next to me, and giggle when I try to prise my trunks away from my sweaty skin.

Outside the sauna, in a spacious, bright chill-out area with wooden floorboards and



planks covering the walls, a couple loll against each other on armchairs in front of burning logs in a fireplace. Next to the door to the terrace is a rope attached to a bucket full of icy water, a taster of the sea waiting outside. When the water hits my skull, the chakras open wide.

The following day, I catch the tram to Meilahti, a residential district in west Helsinki, and to a 19th century red wooden cottage surrounded by greenery. Inside, wooden skis and a kick-sledge hang from robust ceiling beams. The smell coming from one of the rooms resembles that of burned croissants, but this is no bakery.

I take off my clothes and slip into the heat of a men-only session at the Kaurilan sauna. A handful of others can be discerned in the dim light, sitting on wooden benches, sipping from cans of beer and chatting.

“Welcome! Feel at home,” one of them says to me.

Kaurilan regular Antti Keski-Kuha has visited hundreds of saunas in southern Finland, he says, and considers this one to be the best. “The atmosphere is clearly unbeatable.”

Perhaps it's the flame from the wood stove, the candles or the intimacy of the space that breaks down barriers in the 80-degree heat. Many a personal story is shared during the two hours I spend with my latest sauna buddies.

Afterwards, as I dress, I realise that in some ways, Helsinki resembles a city-sized spa resort. But that thought is soon replaced by another; although my head is full of sauna culture, my stomach is telling me it wants to put the place's reputation as a foodie city to the test. But that's a whole other story ... ■