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## TREND #1

# Sauna Reinvented

**From theatrical Sauna Aufguss events to jaw-dropping amphitheater saunas...sweating will get more spectacular and social in years ahead**

A hot topic at the Summit was not only how the world needs to learn from European bathing/sauna culture, but how the Europeans themselves are now busy reimagining the sauna experience. For instance, a Summit showcase, “Sauna Aufguss: Hot Doesn’t Get Any Cooler Than This” (led by Lasse Eriksen, Development Manager, Nordic Hotels & Resorts, Farris Bad, Norway), vividly illustrated how sauna in Europe is evolving into a true event, called Sauna Aufguss (which means “infusion”) led by sauna-meisters serving up some serious entertainment to sweaty, happy audiences. Or a panel led by Anna Bjurstam (VP, Spas & Wellness, Six Senses; Owner, Raison D’Etre) called the “Naked Truth about European Spa and Wellness Traditions”, with European spa experts discussing their unique spa/wellness experiences (whether Sauna Aufguss or little-known experiences like the Latvian “pirt” sauna or ancient “black smoke saunas.”) And how what’s been hot in Europe is poised for global discovery.

### THE TREND

Saunas, spaces built for intense dry or wet heat sessions, are standard fare at hotels, spas and gyms worldwide. But when it comes to how sauna “gets done” there has been a serious disconnect between Northern, Central and Eastern Europe, where sauna-going is a way of life...and the rest of the world. In countries like Finland (where saunas were born 2,000 years ago), Italy, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, etc., the rituals and facilities are often creative, deeply social and fabulous. But the sauna experience outside Europe can frankly be rather “meh”: an uninspired, lonely experience in a spa or condo basement “box.” And while non-Europeans often jump in and out, Europeans know how to push this sweat experience, and that contrast therapy (taking a cold/snow plunge after, and repeating and repeating) is key to the health benefits, and to getting those endorphins pumping.

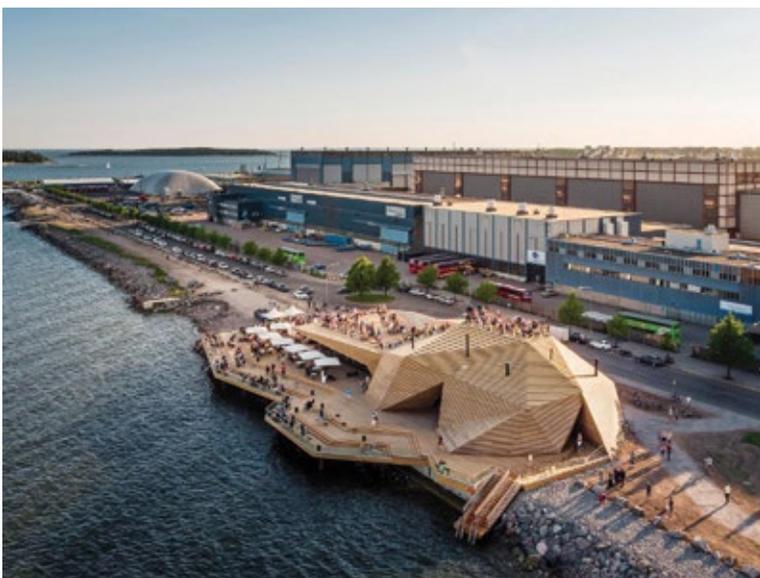


### The Past:

In Northern, Central and Eastern Europe, sauna has been a culture and an art for centuries, with often spectacular rituals and facilities. But the sauna experience elsewhere can frankly be rather “meh”: an uninspired, lonely experience in a hot “box.”

### The Future:

Europeans are now boldly reinventing the sauna experience, with everything from “Sauna Aufguss,” or sauna as a truly theatrical event, to more extraordinary and social sauna design. Sauna is getting reinvented, and the new directions look to spread globally.



*Helsinki's hip, high-design new public sauna complex, Löyly, shows the new social directions. Image Source: Avanto Architects by kuvio.com*



*“Classic” Sauna Aufguss involves trained sauna-meisters using elaborate towel rituals to circulate an orchestra of infusions. Image Source: Lasse Eriksen, PowerPoint, Global Wellness Summit 2016*

And while the medical evidence for sauna isn't vast (“Big Sauna” doesn't have big bucks for clinical trials), it's positive for things like pain and cardiovascular impact. For instance, a large, 20-year-long University of Eastern Finland study (2015) revealed that frequent time spent in saunas was associated with a longer life and less cardiac-related deaths: people who visited a sauna 2-3 times a week had a 24% lower risk of death; those who sweated it out 4-7 times weekly were associated with a 40% mortality reduction.

And now Europeans themselves are dramatically reinventing the experience. For instance, for a few years in Northern/Central Europe sauna has evolved into a true event (called “Sauna Aufguss”), whose first chapter, “Classic Aufguss” involves “sauna-meisters” administering dozens of targeted aromatherapy infusions using complex towel rituals to circulate heat, humidity and infusions. All played to large, lively sauna “audiences” in spas across Austria, Germany, Italy, Finland and Norway.

But the newest chapter in Sauna Aufguss: how quickly it's becoming even more profoundly performative. The sauna-masters' towel rituals are evolving into full-blown dance routines; they wear costumes and lead singing or chanting; they act out scenes from plays or movies; there are even light, music, laser and smoke shows. A far cry from “meh,” the new sauna theater is packing in younger generations, is spreading further across Europe, and is poised to move out into the world.

And the sauna reinvention trend is taking many other forms: from huge, hip, new sauna amphitheaters where 50-300 people sweat communally – to architects reimagining saunas as cool community spaces (with music, food, bars, and talks on art and culture) – to more saunas deep in nature (floating on lakes, etc.) – to trendy “urban sweat lodges” using infrared saunas in places like LA and New York. The trend: far more creative, social, fun and glorious sauna design and experiences, which look to be exported beyond Europe. View Sauna Aufguss performances here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NseditMtDmQ>

## MORE ON SAUNA AUFGUSS THEATER

Sauna Aufguss, a star at so many spas across Northern/Central Europe, is very much a theater culture. Spas post “what’s playing” in each sauna daily (from specific infusions to performances). Special schools train Aufgussmasters on the techniques of infusing the sauna with the most impactful series of volatile essential oils (lemon, mint, cedar, juniper, sage, etc.), which are then complexly circulated with towels, flags or birch branches. Sauna-masters become spa-celebs known for their special performances...whether acting out scenes from Shakespeare or Top Gun. And it’s all now so competitive that there are annual Aufguss World Championships. (World Champion, Rob Keijzer, and professional, Lay Pang Ong, showed how it’s done at the Summit).

Lasse Eriksen (the leader of the Sauna Aufguss session) explained how American or Asian tourists are simply blown away when they experience their first “Show Aufguss” (they’re soon singing, clapping or drumming along). And he detailed the trend’s many positives: from bringing millennials into the healthy sauna scene to helping people extend this detoxing experience to its being a very affordable form of wellness, but one that

helps drive new revenues for spas (where the staff-to-guest ratio can be 1 to over 50).

Summit delegates experienced Sauna Aufguss events at **A-ROSA** and **Stanglwirt** in Kitzbühel, Austria (where the latter even uses singing bowls) and at Austria’s **Aquadome**, a watery kingdom of pools and saunas, including a three-tiered sauna stadium. This fast-moving trend is happening at too many European spas to list: from the first to launch in Italy, Tuscany’s **Asmana Wellness World** to Oslo’s chic **The Thief Spa’s** “Thief Guss”, a unique Aufguss spin revolving around Kneipp methods of cold-hot-cold-hot. And it’s even landed at North America’s largest spa, **Nordik Spa-Nature** (outside Ottawa, Canada), where team members traveled to Germany to get trained as authentic sauna-meisters.

## CREATIVE DIRECTIONS IN SAUNA DESIGN

A current London Design Festival exhibition (through late January), called Soak, Steam, Dream, reveals how a new generation of architects are rewriting sauna design. The powerful trend: sauna as the new social, community-creating “hangout” (and a healthy and hot alternative to

*Lasse Eriksen, Nordic Hotels & Resorts (Farris Bad, Norway), presents “Sauna Aufguss: Hot Doesn’t Get Any Cooler Than This.” Image Source: Global Wellness Summit by Michelle Hirnsberger*



bars and restaurants). You see it in **Gothenberg, Sweden's** new design-forward, port-side, public sauna, made of recycled, rusted steel, and built for “cultural debate, hedonism and business” or in Prague-based **H3T Architekti's** quirky, sauna-is-for-everyone, mobile/pop-up concepts: from floating saunas in lakes or saunas hanging from bridges to saunas on wheels.

- Helsinki, Finland's stunning new public waterfront sauna complex, **Löyly**, a suave, eco-friendly pyramid composed of wooden slats, with the saunas (including an ancient, antioxidant Finnish smoke sauna), vast terraces, and restaurant all open to the sea. And where after a social steam you can jump in the harbor or through a hole in the ice in winter.
- **The Well** (near Oslo, Norway), the Nordic region's largest bathhouse. A new, sprawling, three-level fantasia of 15 saunas (from a jungle sauna to a cinema sauna to an Austrian loft sauna where Aufguss events are performed) – with 11 pools and 100 showers set to attract 100,000 daycationers a year.
- The Norwegian cultural project **SALT's** Arctic amphitheater sauna, the largest (and certainly one of the coolest) public saunas in the world, where 100 people gather for “group sweat-ins” on tiered benches facing the Norwegian Sea (looking out through a wall of glass) – all while experiencing theater, readings and art exhibits (or having a cocktail at the bar

while grooving to Norwegian electronica.) A portable project, the vast SALT sauna is set to move to northern cities in places like Iceland, Ireland, Scotland, Alaska and Russia after 2016.

- The brand-new **Hot Box Sauna**, the first set on a Scottish loch (Loch Tay), with panoramic lake views, and an evening DJ area and bar.
- You can see the importation of Finnish sauna culture at **Löyly locations in Portland, Oregon**, a hybrid between an American spa and a sauna hangout center. And global wellness retreats are putting their own indigenous spin on sauna, like Peru's **Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel**, with their “Andean Sauna” staged pond-side in a candlelit eucalyptus hut.
- Trendy urban “sweathouses” using infrared sauna technology (that get bodies sweating at lower temperatures, to extend and deepen the therapy), have gotten much ink, but only seem to be trending hotter. You can chill out in infrared sauna heat wraps (with the likes of Selena Gomez and the Kardashians) at Los Angeles' three **Shape House** locations (and they have ambitious expansion plans) or at NYC's **Higher Dose** infrared sauna spas (two locations now, three coming), where you sweat to house music while basking in chakra light therapy.



*SALT's Arctic amphitheater sauna, the largest public sauna in the world, where 100 people gather for “group sweat-ins” (and music, art and cocktails). Image Source: salted.no via traveller.com.au*



*The new Sauna Aufguss sees sauna-meisters staging true “events” - from singing to dance routines. Pictured above is recent World Champion Rob Keijzer. Image Source: AUGUSS-WM/Satama Sauna Park*

## THE FUTURE

Every culture has its ancient sweat tradition: the Arabic hamman, Japanese onsen, Russian banya, Native American sweat lodge, the Mesoamerican temezcal – and, of course, the most globally ubiquitous...the European sauna. All will continue to undergo a renaissance (and reinvention) as the world aches most for stress-reducing, detoxifying therapies. And if the sauna has seemed the most tepid experience outside of Europe, that’s set to change. Because the sauna reinventions now underway, from Sauna Aufguss events to eye-popping, high-design saunas aimed at becoming that communal “third place”, live right at the intersection of so many important, future trends in wellness and spa. The need for social and fun experiences in our Age of Loneliness - wellness experiences that are affordable for far

more than the “one-percent” - the interweaving of spa experiences with art, culture, music and performance – and ingenious new wellness architecture.

In the UN’s latest World Happiness Report seven of the ten happiest nations on Earth are in Northern Europe (Denmark, Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Netherlands and Sweden). Places where a “wellness culture” is natural and everyday (rather than a hysterical, consumerist stressor)...and where sauna is a way of life. In a world getting hotter and crazier, more people will travel to these countries for their cool, serene nature, and to try their hot sauna innovations at the source. And their breeds of more social, more entertaining, and high-design sauna concepts will continue to spread across the world.



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