



# Warming to the Appeals of the Sauna

Once the haunt of middle-aged and older men, saunas in Japan have surged in popularity in recent years, with the younger generation and women driving the boom.

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**UMEZAWA AKIRA**

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**I**N Japan as elsewhere in the world, many people enjoy using the sauna, or Finnish-style steam bath. According to the Japan Sauna Spa Association, Japan is home to more than 10 million sauna enthusiasts.

Japan's first sauna was created in 1957 in a public bathing facility in Ginza, Tokyo, but the sauna did not take off in Japan until the Tokyo Olympics in 1964.

As Wakabayashi Mikio, General Manager of the Secretariat of the Japan Sauna Spa Association explains, "Reports that the Finnish athletes had created a prefabricated sauna in the athletes village boosted public awareness of saunas. After that, sauna facilities grew more widespread, especially in urban areas of Japan."

Initially, sauna users were mostly businessmen, who dropped off on their way home from work to unwind. Some businessmen who were so busy in the economic boom they had no time to go home would visit all-night public bathing facilities for a sauna and a nap in the rest area before returning to the company the next day.

By the mid-1980s, large-scale bathing facilities known as Health Spas, inns and hotels, ski resorts, golf courses and other leisure facilities were jumping on the sauna bandwagon and saunas became readily available to all. However, they did not lose their "hot and stuffy" image and were still used mainly by middle-aged and older men.

In the early 2010s, this situation began to change, driven by the rise of social media, as sauna enthusiasts known as "saunners" began to share their love of saunas and ratings of facilities and services online. Awareness also grew that so-called contrast bathing, which involves having a cold-water bath or shower after sweating in a sauna, is very relaxing, leading more and more young people including women to start visiting the sauna. Another factor behind the growing popularity of saunas was the introduction of


services such as löyly, which utilizes the steam that rises when water is thrown on the hot stones to raise the humidity in the sauna room, and Aufguss, a sauna ritual where a sauna master fans the steam with a towel sending waves of heat in the direction of users.

According to Wakabayashi, "Aufguss is very relaxing because it uses water mixed with essential oils such as lavender and chamomile. The waving of the towels by the Aufguss master is also a theatrical experience."

From around the mid-2010s, interest in saunas grew still further, driven by the popularity of the manga series "Sado" ("The way of the sauna") by Tanaka Katsuki, a Japan Sauna Ambassador, along with a wave of features about saunas in the media.

In 2015, a sauna event called Sauna Fes Japan was held for the first time, at Finland Village, a resort on the lake in Koumi Town, Nagano Prefecture. Festival-goers could enjoy a wide range of saunas such as Finnish tent saunas pitched outside and mobile trailer saunas. The festival also provided the rare opportunity to cool off in the lake after a sauna, which helped make it hugely popular among saunners. The three-day festival in September 2019 was heavily oversubscribed, with 3,600 people applying for the 200 tickets available on each day.

Many saunners like to visit popular saunas around Japan. One highly-rated sauna is Hakuginsou in Kamifurano Town, Hokkaido. Located halfway up Mount Tokachi, Hakuginsou is a hot-spring hotel for climbers surrounded by nature. In winter, guests can look out on beautiful snow landscapes from its open-air baths and sauna rooms. Cooling off in the crisp cold air and snow is the main attraction for saunners.

Wakabayashi continues, "In an age when we are connected to everyone all the time through our smartphones, I think the sauna is a place where people can switch off and reflect on themselves. The sauna is also attracting attention as a place where position is irrelevant and people can be completely honest with each other. Some companies apparently hold meetings in the sauna. Our association intends to continue spreading the word about the many different benefits of saunas." 

1 Hakuginsou is a popular destination for "saunners"

2 A variety of saunas at Sauna Fes Japan

3 A typical Finnish-style steam bath

Photos: Courtesy of Hakuginsou (1); Courtesy of Sauna Fes Japan (2);  
Courtesy of Japan Sauna Spa Association (3)