

Turning Up the Heat

Sauna culture is undergoing a revitalization in the Nordic countries—and adding dimension to their waterfronts.

By Emma O'Kelly



Oslo's SALT includes the communal saunas Skroget (pictured) and Årdna, as well as barrel saunas and plunge pools.

PHOTO: ENDRE LOHNE

ONE EARLY MORNING THIS past June on the Helsinki waterfront, a woman wearing large black shades paddled gently up and down a shimmering pool, as steaming bathers emerged from a nearby floating sauna to join her. As the ferry to Katajanokka chugged by, commuters looked on enviously. Wouldn't they love to start their working week like this, with a dip in the Allas Sea Pool?

Allas founder and CEO Raoul Grünstein certainly thinks so. "There has been a mental shift towards wellbeing since Covid," says Grünstein, "and increasingly, people are looking for experiences." This has been part of his motivation to build a network of "waterside wellness" complexes in many cities, beginning with the 9,000-square-meter location in Helsinki. Having opened the location in 2016, he pitched up at just the right time. By then, industries were moving away from the city center, leaving empty lots on the waterfront; Grünstein "pierced the industrial layer," as he puts it, and opened the first Allas complex on an old parking lot in September of that year. It now has more than 2,000 members and boasts around 800,000 visitors a year; it will soon be joined by a four-pool Allas complex in the Finnish city of Oulu, and a Turku version is later planned to open with six saunas. Both have conference rooms, yoga studios, restaurants and terraces. From there, it's on to Stockholm in 2024.

Grünstein was far from alone in his thinking, or in his timing. As construction began on the first Allas Sea Pool, city councils from Copenhagen to Oslo were working to clean up their harbors in a bid to combat pollution and attract tourists year-round, while locals clamored to reclaim their waterfront. In the same year, a derelict, drug-dealing black spot on Oslo's fjord underwent the same transformation. The sauna complex SALT, which began its life as a nomadic triangle-shaped art project offering a program of DJs, performances and readings in a gentle 50-degree-celsius environment, pitched up in the capital city permanently following its tours through northern Norway. The goal, founder Erlend Mogård-Larsen explains, was to inject new life into a now-accessible location. "When I moved to Oslo at the end of the 1980s as a 19-year-old punk, it was impossible to reach the fjord from the city. You had to take the bus (to the forested peninsula of Bygdøy)," Mogård-Larsen says. Since establishing its permanent grounds, SALT has now morphed into a sauna complex with food and drink outlets, barrel saunas and plunge pools, and rituals such as whisking and aufguss. This amalgam of traditions from many sweat-bathing cultures represents a new sauna movement which attracts young, diverse audiences, tourists and locals alike. "Now there are 20-30 saunas in the fjord," says Mogård-Larsen. "I love it."

The Allas complex in Katajanokka, Helsinki, includes warm-water and sea-water pools, a restaurant and a sky bar, and offers a range of yoga classes as well as live music performances in its courtyard.



PHOTOS BY NORDIC URBAN



PHOTOS: ENDRE LOHNE

An all-in-one venue, cultural programming at SALT includes live performances by musicians such as Swedish singer Melissa Horn (left), installations by artists such as Kaarina Kaikkonen (top), as well as comedy and theater, and DJ sessions in its largest sauna (bottom).

“People are rethinking sauna as a whole experience.”

HERNESAARI, A FORMERLY industrial district of Helsinki, has undergone a similar transformation along the arrival of the spa complex Löyly. Designed by Finnish architects Avanto, co-founder Ville Hara explains, “Back in 2016, Hernesaari was quite shady. Tourists never docked here, so the city came up with a plan to get people out of the cruise ships spending money.” With two wood-fired saunas, a smoke sauna, a buzzy cocktail bar and restaurant, well-heeled office workers are able to sip cocktails on its outdoor terraces next to tourists from the U.S. and Japan, while sweaty bathers jump into the fresh Baltic Sea. Today Löyly attracts more than 200,000 visitors a year and is the youngest building in the country to be listed as of special or historical interest. And because all of Finland’s coastline is public, anyone can access its terraces.

“What’s interesting is that this waterside boom is being led by saunas rather than accommodation,” notes Heikki Riitahuhta, founder of Finnish architecture firm Studio Puisto. “People are rethinking sauna as a whole experience.” In 2020, Studio Puisto completed Kiulu, a sauna and restaurant complex on the waterfront in the Finnish city of Ähtäri. With its elegant terrace and lakeside dock, a mummolantasauna or ‘grandma’s sauna’ on the lake treatment rooms, and a five-star restaurant, it’s a fine example of the

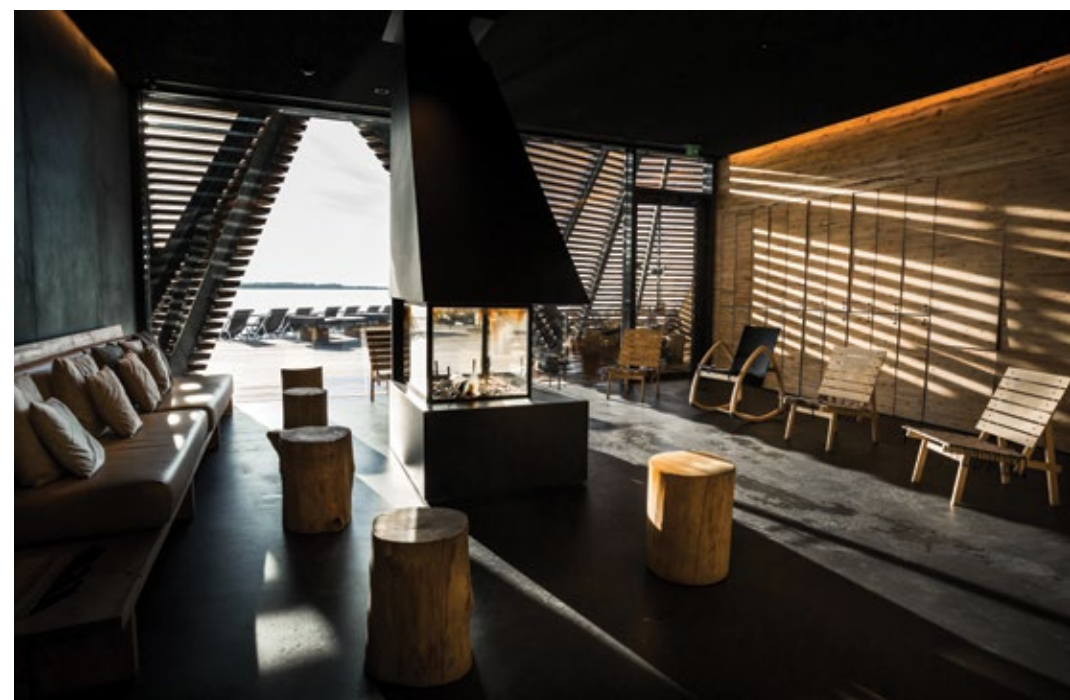


Developed as a free-form project with triangular faces, Löyly is located on the southern tip of Helsinki in Hernesaari, just over a mile from city center.

PHOTO COURTESY NOHO MEDIA



PHOTOS COURTESY NOHO MEDIA



Whether seated indoors or on the terrace in summer months, visitors to Löyly's restaurant are treated to seaside views and Scandinavian classics such as salmon soup and elk meatballs.

Spa-goers at Löyly are able to cool down from experiences in either the wood-fired or smoke saunas by jumping directly into the Baltic Sea, any time of year.

For many decades, a sauna in the basement was a luxury add-on.

new generation of wellness complexes that are reconnecting city dwellers to nature. This past summer two Space of Mind cabins opened on the rocks next to the main building; at just under 10 square meters, each cabin comes with its own custom furniture and is prefabricated from ecologically sourced Finnish wood. Offering comfort and a holistic experience, it's become an ideal option for anyone wanting to get closer to nature.

FINLAND NOW CITES sauna tourism as its number one attraction; but then life without sauna in Finland would be like the UK without tea. Ferries, trains, building sites and military bases have their own saunas; even Helsinki's famous SkyWheel ferris wheel has sauna cabins. In countries like Norway, Sweden and Denmark, sauna culture has fallen in and out of fashion over the eras. In 1800s Norway and Sweden, government officials would tour rural regions promoting the health benefits of good hygiene; the sauna was a communal washroom and people were taught good bathing practices. In the 1920s and 1930s, industrialisation and 'bathroom-ization' led to the invention of electric stoves, which were quickly adopted by apartment blocks and private homes as a practical alternative to traditional wood-fired versions. For many decades, a sauna in the basement was a luxury add-on.

PHOTOS: MARC GOODWIN/ARCHMOSPHERES



Visitors to Saunaravintola
Kiulu step into an airy, light-flooded entrance before visiting the darker and secluded saunas.



With its outer shell clad in black wooden boards, Saunaravintola Kiulu is nestled into its surrounding landscape, creating sheltered pockets for activity.



PHOTO COURTESY FARRIS BAD

Guests in Farris Bad's bathing hall enjoy a heated jacuzzi and pool with direct views of Larvik Fjord.

LASSE ERIKSEN, DEVELOPMENT MANAGER AT FARRIS BAD, a beachside wellness complex just outside Oslo, notes that the ebb and flow of bathing cultures is a common one globally. “From Ottoman hammam to Japanese mushi-buro to Russian banya, Mayan temazcal and Norwegian badstue, all cultures have a sweat bathing tradition which is thousands of years old,” Eriksen says. “In some countries this awakens and others it is already strong.” During the recent pandemic era, as feelings of isolation and loneliness became all too familiar, the social experience of saunas became more compelling. And by then the trend for winter swimming and urban waterside adventure had already begun making a comeback, bringing a new generation of cold-water swimmers to reclaim windswept jetties and carve new routes into the waterways of their cities.

As luxury buildings such as Oslo's Barcode Project and Helsinki's high-rise towers by Lahdelma & Mahlamäki have risen along urban waterfronts, the idea of access has grown into a political one, leading sauna projects to develop



PHOTO: BECKY ZELLER

Docked year-round in Oslo's harbor outside the Munch Museum, Oslo Badstuforening's “island sauna” includes the Bispen sauna and Munken paddle hut.

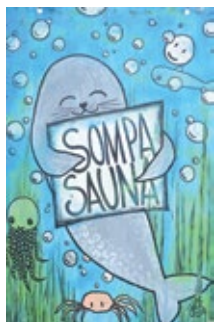
in new and organic ways. Hans Jørgen Hamre, a Norwegian politics teacher in one of Oslo's lower-income districts, recalls how while living on a boat in 2013, “on a whim, I decided to build a floating sauna out of driftwood found in Bjørkiva. But wherever we went in the city, we were never welcome.” Ice bathers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs swimming club helped Hamre secure a dock for his sauna in 2015. What came next was a surprise: “The bureaucrats and the anarchists became friends and the sauna became very popular,” explains ice bather Ragna Marie Fjeld. “We had to formalize it in some way so that more people could enjoy it.” Fjeld quit her job at the ministry and helped found Oslo Badstuforening, the nonprofit sauna association that has evolved from Hamre's project. Floating under the Munch Museum, Oslo Badstuforening has 17 employees, 13 saunas, 7,000 members and a waiting list. Fjeld explains: “Our mission is to bring sauna to the people. We hope and believe it is more than a trend, that it becomes something people do as often and naturally as skiing in the forests around Oslo.”



PHOTO: OLIMAR/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Improvised from the discovery of an abandoned wood stove in 2011, Sompasauna in Helsinki has since become a favorite of locals and tourists and is run entirely by volunteers.

SOMPASAUNA IN HELSINKI, A WOOD-BURNING SELF-SERVICE public sauna built and maintained by volunteers, likewise started as a rebel yell against the authorities in 2011 and has since been destroyed and resurrected no less than six times. It's free for everyone, open 24 hours daily (clothing is optional) and serviced by a help-yourself pile of firewood restocked by volunteers. "No money changes hands here," says volunteer Niklas Roiha. Income is generated through memberships starting at 20 euros a year (though more is welcome) and from deposits from recycled cans. In the next year or two, Sompasauna will have to move on again from its current location on the edge of the Smart Kalasatama city development, "fleeing like rats" from the march of the luxury towers, Roiha notes. But that it should cease to exist with its next move is inconceivable. It's too famous. "Many tourists come here without even



going into the center of Helsinki," explains Roiha. Visitors on any given day can expect to see bathers speaking French as they jump off the jetty to the sea, or Japanese tourists setting up picnics, alongside Helsinki natives enjoying saunas or playing the piano. With Sompasauna now part of the establishment, the original anarchist founders have moved on; but its mix of ancient sauna traditions, talkoo (community spirit) and citizen-driven activism have remained, driving UNESCO to add Finnish sauna to its List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019.

PHOTO: HENRY SÖDERLUND



PHOTO: ANNE SOFIE EICH-ROMME

Founded to improve accessibility to the Copenhagen harbor, GoBoat's picnic boats are made from sustainable materials and use solar-powered electrical engines.

"In Copenhagen, demand for sauna is sky high," says Kasper Eich-Romme, co-founder of the eco-picnic boat rental company GoBoat. "There is a real desire to bring the Copenhagen harbor alive in the winter, and there's a waiting list of more than 10,000 people keen to join its bathing clubs." Around 15 years ago, the city invested more than one billion kroner to clear up the waterways, and since then nine bathing zones have been founded offering dipping holes, changing rooms and saunas. In Copenhagen, as in many Nordic cities, summer is one big fjord fiesta; paddleboarders ride the wake of huge cruise ships, kayakers power along next to electric-powered tourist ferries and swimming areas, and beaches are a free-for-all where anything goes.

THE BIGGER THE CITY, THE MORE COMPLEX THE regulations around its waterways. In Copenhagen, waterways are clearly demarcated and more controlled than in Oslo (you can be fined for swimming outside the zoned areas) and water quality can be dubious, especially after rains. In the swim zones it is tested frequently and a red light flashes when it's not clean enough for bathing. In Stockholm, an even bigger city, it's a similar story. "Getting permissions for Allas in Stockholm has been the most difficult of all cities so far," says Raoul Grünstein, adding that the location is to be located downtown between Munkholmen and Riddarholmen.

"Waterfront land is so expensive and permissions are difficult," says Heikki Riitahuhta. "Floating concepts are easier." It's not hard to see



PHOTO: LINA HINDRUM

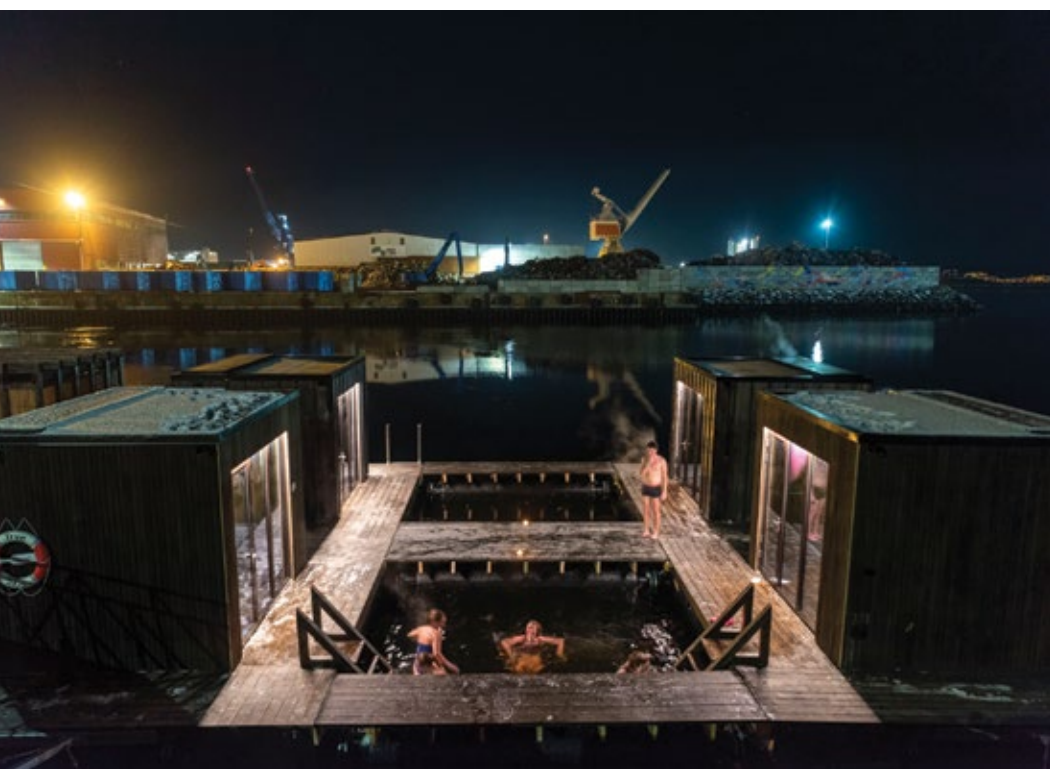


PHOTO: KYRRE M. KALSETH

KOK Oslo's floating saunas feature wood-fired stoves and large windows for sightseeing (top). **A floating village** for sauna lovers in Trondheim, ARK's design is inspired both by Nordic cultural heritage and Japanese and Turkish bathing activities (bottom).

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the appeal of mobile saunas that can anchor up in cleaner waters, escape the bustle and hazards of other boats and offer a closer-to-nature experience. Under the shadow of the new Munch Museum is Bispén, Oslo’s first ‘sleepover sauna,’ which features a simple floating platform with a sauna, toilet and double beds. Guests can row themselves over from the dock in a small wooden boat; sleeping bags, supplies and security are not provided, and the façade of the cabin is open to the elements. Designed by Norwegian architects Biotope in collaboration with The Norwegian Trekking Association, it costs about \$50 per night (500 NOK). And so far, even the VIPs are keen to attend; the Bishop of Oslo was the first guest.

FURTHER ALONG THE FJORD PAST THE OPERA HOUSE, KOK is a fleet of chic floating saunas powered by electric motors. Groups of up to 14 can hire a KOK cabin for a minimum of two hours and head out to the fjord, steaming in the sauna en route before jumping into the ‘brekwasser’ where sea and fresh water meet, as the singsong chirps of linnets, sandpipers and goldfinches drown out the hum of engines. KOK’s founder Kristin Lorange relishes these trips. “Out here, you can be in nature. It’s important for people to feel they belong to the fjord. If they have a sense of ownership, they will look after it.”

If cities around the world can all clean up their waterways, Lorange predicts a sauna revolution, where having hot-cold-hot-cold immersions become like “a gym membership for your wellbeing.” But why limit waterside wellness experiences solely to sauna—particularly in countries where sweat-bathing culture is new or being reinvented, and where audiences are keen to try new concepts? In late 2021, Erlend Mogård-Larsen’s floating bathing complex ARK opened in Trondheim; a 280-square-meter space built by Finnish architect Sami Rintala of Rintala Eggertsson Architects, the complex consists of four saunas, a Russian banya, Japanese onsen and a bar. Located in the HAVET Arena on the harbor, the floating sauna is accompanied by a new Bathing & Diving Fleet featuring a diving tower with two levels—which at 5.5 and 3 meters make it the tallest diving tower in Norway—as well as an area with pergola-covered seating and a table seating up to 20, demonstrating further how public space can extend into the water. Next up is a floating hammam. “There’s lots more to discover, more ideas and projects in mind,” says Erlend Mogård-Larsen. “SALT could visit London or even New York. We never know. We just follow the steam.”

Building on the waterfront is not without its complications. “It takes a lot of know-how,” says Raoul Grünstein, noting that it’s important to understand floating structures, water treatment processes and technology, as well as



PHOTO: KYRRE M. KALSETH

Since opening in July 2022, the new ARK Bathing & Diving Fleet has shown how public space in harbor cities can be extended through the use of floating structures.

the business model in order to make such a big investment. There's also an element of unpredictability—earlier this year, a Viking Line ferry crashed into Allas, which was certainly not part of the plan. And Ville Hara, who is now building a spa hotel in Töölö near Helsinki, adds that “our waterfront is pretty saturated. But there's always room for more saunas if the concept is different.”

What is universal is that the sauna is one of a few truly tech-free environments—it's no surprise that it appeals to a young digital generation who wants to disconnect. And as both Nordic and international audiences flock to these growing waterfront locations, new ideas are sure to follow.

So what's next? “A nightclub and a sauna,” says Heikki Riitahuhta. Is he joking? We'll have to wait and see.

Emma O'Kelly is a freelance journalist based in London. A contributing editor at *Wallpaper**, she has spent 25 years scoping out the best in Nordic design. Her book about Scandinavian sauna culture *Sauna—The Power of Deep Heat* will be published in September 2023 by Welbeck.



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