



Smoke saunas and sauna customs in historical Võrumaa

Sauna and the customs surrounding it have been an integral part of the Estonian culture for centuries. The smoke sauna – the oldest type of sauna – is often found in the south-eastern part of Estonia, in the historical Võrumaa (Vana-Võromaa), and its use continues to this day.

For the Võro people, a smoke sauna is a place for cleansing the body and soul. In this region, a rich and unique set of customs is associated with sauna-going. These customs comprise the actual bathing traditions as well as sauna heating, whisk making, sauna construction, sauna healing, and meat smoking.

The smoke sauna tradition in Vana-Võromaa is so unique that it has been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

However, the only way to understand the difference between a smoke sauna and a traditional sauna is to visit a smoke sauna for yourself.

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VANA-VÕROMAA



SAVVUSANN

Vana-Võromaa is the home of the indigenous Võro people who belong to the Baltic-Finnic ethnic group. They have their own language and unique customs. The size of the Võro community is approximately 70,000 people, of whom about 50,000 live in their historic settlements in the eight parishes of Vana-Võromaa.

The Võro people distinguish from their neighbours by their language and customs. The native community upholds the traditional rural ways of life, which includes the smoke sauna tradition.





A smoke sauna is usually a simple log house with one or two rooms. The key element of it is the wood-burning stove without a chimney. The large stones of the stove are heated for about 6–8 hours. During the heating process, the smoke is ventilated out through an open door, window, or a ventilation hole (röpna). Before going to the sauna, the fire is allowed to die and the smoke is ventilated out. The hot stones keep the temperature in the smoke sauna between +65 °C and +90 °C. The humidity in it is between 30% and 70%. Sauna-going lasts at least an hour, often 2–4 hours, during which the air temperature drops and the humidity increases.

Sauna-going cleanses and heals the body through intensive sweating. During a sauna session, clothes are not worn; bathers will sit or lie on a high bench (lava – a wooden bench higher than the stove) and sweat for about 10–15 minutes (as long as it is comfortable), throwing water on the hot stones (leil). After each session, bathers rinse their body with lukewarm or cool water. Smoke saunas are often located near water and sauna-goers bathe after each session. In winter, a hole is cut into the ice for dipping in the water. Between sessions, bathers rest and drink herbal tea or water.

An important part of sauna-going is vihtlemine, a type of self-massage by gently beating oneself with a fresh or dried whisk made of bundled branches and leaves of trees and/or plants.

Sauna-going and the involved sweating activates blood formation, balances blood pressure and blood sugar, improves blood and lymph circulation, and exercises the heart. Sauna-going also strengthens the immune system, increases metabolism, and cleanses the body from metabolic waste. In addition, it improves sleep quality and positively impacts the nervous system. After going to the sauna, the mind will be calm and the body will feel light and relaxed. The SMOKE SAUNA is the ending of the old and the beginning of something new!

