

# VARIETY



# Full steam ahead

Minnesota has become the  
epicenter of a sauna revival.



## WINKING AT WINTER

Top, Ana Macy and Sven Hoaglund left the sauna to take a dip in Lake Superior at Sisu and Löyly Sauna in Grand Marais. Above, Shaun Tudor ladled water onto the rocks to generate steam in the northern Minnesota sauna.

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GRAND MARAIS, MINN. - Waves crashed against Lake Superior's rocky, snow-covered shoreline. Just a few feet away, we sweated in a sauna, watching the frigid winter scene from a large picture window.

"It's magical," my mom said. "You basically are sitting right on the lake."

In swimsuits and sandals, we darted out of the 190-degree heat into the subfreezing temperatures as snow scrunched beneath our feet like sand at a beach. Seagulls flew over Adirondack chairs as a ship in the distance crawled across the icy waters of Lake Superior.

That picturesque northern Minnesota view is what sold Katie Usem on converting a century-old Norwegian fishing shack into a public year-round sauna along the world's largest freshwater lake. After she and her family moved from Chanhassen to Grand Marais during the COVID-19 pandemic, they opened Sisu and Löyly — tapping into a growing trend of saunas popping up across Minnesota.

"I wanted to find a way to bring a unique twist on this well established traditional practice," Usem

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# Full steam ahead

◀ **STEAM** from El said, “I’m biased but I think it’s potentially the best view for a sauna in North America.”

In the past few years, more than 20 sauna businesses have sprung up across the state, offering everything from mobile rentals delivered to your backyard to sauna sessions with lake vistas or skyline views. The growing movement is drawing people who are discovering—or rediscovering—the therapeutic heat of a sauna followed by a dip in a cold tub or lake.

“In Minnesota, in terms of the revival, this is the epicenter,” said Glenn Auerbach of Minneapolis, a “sauna evangelist” who’s written an e-book on building a sauna and founded the online Sauna Times. “This is the land of 10,000 lakes — and 10,000 cold plunges.”

Of course, many people and cultures, from Native Americans to Finns, have ancient sweat traditions. But like the exploding wellness industry, saunas are, well, gaining steam.

#### ‘Live more like the Finns’

In Minneapolis, the Great Northern festival this month is debuting its first-ever Sauna Village. In Duluth, Cedar & Stone Nordic Sauna hosts sessions near Canal Park.

And in Golden Valley, Craig Ringsven’s backyard sauna has become an unexpected booming business.

When the pandemic hit, the physical therapist added a barrel sauna, inspired by childhood memories of jumping in a lake after a sauna up north. He added a 300-gallon rock-lined pond for year-round cold plunges, a heated yurt, strings of lights and music.

For two years, he and his family enjoyed the private retreat before accepting public bookings at the end of 2021. They figured a few people might sign up. Instead, their Nordic Nook has drawn more than 1,000 people.

“It’s been pretty mind-blowing,” said Ringsven, who saunas at least four times a week. “It’s the way to embrace the winter.”

On the rooftop of the Hewing Hotel in Minneapolis’ North Loop, more than a dozen people sat in the sauna with their eyes closed on a recent “Thermaculture Thursday,” a weekly event put on by Stokeyard Outfitters, which also operates sauna sessions in south Minneapolis.

An instructor guided them through meditation as she dropped essential oils into water tossed on the stove’s rocks, emitting citrus-scented

steam. After a few minutes, they strolled into the frigid night, steam wafting off their bodies as they took turns submerging into cold-water tubs. One frequent visitor remarked how sauna has helped him reduce anxiety, sleep better and loosen muscles after workouts.

Regular sauna use has been linked to a variety of health benefits, including reducing blood pressure. After 30 years of sweating in a sauna three days a week, Auerbach is convinced it’s helped him stay physically and mentally healthy.

“If you want to live longer, you just live more like the Finns — and that’s less stress, more nature, more sauna,” Auerbach said. “The people who are leaning into this are doing it for passion over profits.”

He credits Minnesota’s varied climate, abundance of lakes, and Finnish and Scandinavian heritage for sparking the creation of more public saunas than any other state, he said. And it’s just the start.

“I don’t think we’re at the peak,” he said. “People used to make fun of me, and now they all want to join me on the bench.”

Auerbach helped turn an ice fishing house into 612 Sauna Society’s mobile sauna. The co-op, started in 2016, has more than 200 members and is an affordable “sauna of the people,” board member Kirk Jensen said. As cross-country skiers glide past at Theodore Wirth Regional Park in Minneapolis, friends and strangers often meet at the sauna, more akin to a book club or happy hour, Jensen said.

“It just makes the community fun, especially in the winter when we’re kind of starved for socialization and interaction,” said Jensen, who also fields questions from passing skeptics. “There is no middle ground for sauna — it’s either hell yes or hard pass.”

#### Room to grow

Useem, of Grand Marais’ Sisu and Löyly, wasn’t a fan of saunas until visiting scenic ones in Iceland and British Columbia, which were

unlike the windowless, stuffy saunas she had experienced in the past.

“I think there are a lot of people like me who have tried it but haven’t seen the magic,” she said. “That’s the great thing about there being a lot more options in Minnesota than even two, three years ago.”

When school and work went virtual during the pandemic, Useem, her husband and two kids left the Twin Cities — like many other urbanites — for northern Minnesota. They bought a house near their family cabin that was built by a Norwegian fishing family in 1922 and spent seven months renovating the 216-square-foot fish house.

They painted the building bright red and added two saunas with electric stoves surrounded by stones. Windows frame the changing views of the bay.

“Lake Superior has lots of moods,” Useem said. “It just adds another dimension being so close to the lake.”

Sisu (pronounced SEE-soo) is the Finnish concept for grit or tenacity while löyly (pronounced LOW-loo) is the Finnish word for steam that rises when water is poured on the stove’s stones. Each sauna (pronounced SOW-nah) has a bucket of water and ladle to do just that.

An adjacent mechanic’s garage is now a lounge with restrooms and showers. About 70% of the guests are tourists while the rest are locals. Grand Marais draws most tourists in summer and fall, but Sisu and Löyly is busiest in fall to winter. Last fall, it booked up seven days a week. Useem added cold tubs for summer visitors who want a cold plunge without walking to the lake and she hopes to add a mobile sauna and possibly a floating sauna on an inland lake, mimicking floating saunas on Norwegian fjords.

After all, saunas are no passing fad.

“It seems to be having a new life in people interested in it,” said Useem, who saunas at least once a week. “It never gets old — the view, the nice heat.”

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#### SO HOT, SO COLD

Top, Shaun Tudor had steam coming off his body as he walked to Lake Superior for a dip. Center, from left, Ana Macy, Tabitha Blanchard, Sven Hoaglund and Tudor enjoyed their session at Sisu and Löyly Sauna. Above, Blanchard and Macy ran out of the water after their Lake Superior plunge.

Photos by RENÉE JONES SCHNEIDER • Star Tribune

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Glenn Auerbach, sauna evangelist

## A SAMPLING OF SAUNAS IN MINNESOTA

**612 Sauna Society:** This co-op moves to Cedar Lake in Minneapolis and Silverwood Park in St. Anthony in the fall, and Theodore Wirth Regional Park in Minneapolis in the winter. Cost is \$35 for a 90-minute community session. The sauna also hosts events like aufguss, a German ritual that combines high heat, lots of steam and aromatherapy. 612saunasociety.com

**Camp du Nord:** Outside of its popular summer camps, anyone can book a cabin at this Ely YMCA camp to enjoy three saunas on Burntside Lake. A 1933 sauna in a log building built by Finnish carpenters is lighted by kerosene lamps with a traditional wood-fired sauna and a hole carved in the frozen lake for avantouinti, the Finnish word for ice-hole swimming. Nightly cabin rates in the fall, winter and spring range from about \$115 to \$660. ymcamn.org/camps/camp\_du\_nord

**Cedar and Stone Nordic Sauna:** This mobile sauna near Lake Superior in Duluth offers private and community sessions for 75 minutes ranging from \$49 to \$79. cedarandstonesauna.com

**Ely Steam Sauna:** For more than 100 years, this public sauna has attracted locals and tourists. Cost is \$11-\$16. elysteamsauna.net

**Nordic Nook:** A Golden Valley family opened up their backyard barrel sauna to visitors, who can also take a plunge in a rock-lined pool. Cost is \$135 for an hour for one or two people, or \$150 for three or four people for an hour. nordicnookoasis.com

**Sisu and Löyly:** The Grand Marais sauna opened in 2021 on Lake Superior. Cost is \$18 for a 60-minute community session or \$65 for a 90-minute private sauna. sisuandloyly.com

**Stokeyard Outfitters:** This Minneapolis company offers sauna reservations (cost starts at \$35 for a 90-minute sauna session) off Nicollet Avenue and also hosts events at the Hewing Hotel in the North Loop, including guided steam aromatherapy during two-hour “Thermaculture Thursdays” for \$65. stokeyard.com

**Watershed Spa and Baths:** The Minneapolis spa opened in 2022 featuring a sauna, steam room, soaking pool and cold-plunge pool. Cost is \$54 for a three-hour day pass.