



This is what Spa business writes about the International Sauna Congress

International Sauna Congress

Heat experience enthusiasts from 24 countries took part in the 17th annual International Sauna Congress in June. Those attending share their insights

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A passionate congress: presentations, workshops and social gatherings celebrated sauna culture from around the world

Scientific presentations, workshops, sauna bathing, food, music, excursions and activities were all part of the four-day International Sauna Congress held in June.

Organised by the International Sauna Association (ISA), the congress is held every four years in different parts of the world with this event taking place on the border between Sweden and Finland.

More than 200 people with a passion for saunas attended the congress, including delegates from new sauna countries such as Pakistan and Kenya, as well as a group of 20 delegates from Japan.



A cultured experience

An opening barbeque celebrated the ISA's 60th anniversary and was followed by a chance to explore 18 alternative and intriguing saunas in a Midnight Sun Sauna experience. The range included those in metal spheres and wooden huts to some in tents and military trucks.

"An important part of the event is the practical side, meaning sauna visits in interesting historical places, whisking, making whisks according to old habits, etc," says Risto Elomaa, ISA president. "We hope that the visitors can bring some of that sauna culture and experiences with them when going back home."

Presentations and workshops celebrated saunas from around the world including shinrin yoku (forest bathing) and sauna, the vanishing practice of Estonian smoke saunas and modern Lithuanian baths.

"The discussions around different sweat cultures were a strong point for me this year," says sauna aufguss master Lasse Eriksen from Norway. He adds that many bridges were built by cultures sharing best practice examples and common issues such as the need for a generic sector name – the term 'thermic bathing' was popular. "Representatives from all sweat cultures – Japanese baths, Lithuanian and Latvian pirts, Russian banyas, Turkish hammams, Native American sweat lodges, Norwegian badstus and Finnish saunas – agreed to focus on this terminology, to become one family."

More research needed

Health science was another key topic of the congress. An overview of some of the latest studies revealed how saunas can aid cardiovascular health and even impact gene expression.

With the medical community now increasingly accepting the benefits of complementary therapies such as acupuncture and massage, it's hoped that thermal experiences may one day be prescribed too – but there's a need for funding and more clinical trials.

"Something magical happens – social and economic barriers melt and intimate conversation flows easily"



Risto Elomaa

Elomaa says: "We need studies with control groups, which have bigger samples (across multiple countries) and which look into the deeper reasons behind the benefits of sauna.

"Due to ageing populations, research focused on sauna and people with dementia would be a key area."

As well as the physical benefits of saunas, it was also noted that heat experiences bring people together in a relaxed setting to create a sense of community, help people connect and aid mental wellbeing. Sweat guru Mikkel Aaland, who gave two presentations at the event, says: "Very few human activities satisfy our social, physical and spiritual needs under one roof like the communal sauna/sweat bath..."



“Something magical happens – social and economic barriers melt and intimate conversation flows easily.”



Sauna of the future

Presentations and workshops delved into all aspects of sauna technology, design and architecture – from building a mobile smoke sauna to contemporary sauna architecture and style over substance.

Eriksen says: “While saunas of the past focused on function, those of the future are about connection with nature in forests, on cliff edges or even sitting on water. Many also make a visual statement.” Examples of standout design include Sweden’s Solar Egg – a sauna encased in a giant golden egg sculpture (see SB17/3 p22) and the Arctic Bath – a floating hotel and spa (with saunas) reminiscent of a bird’s nest.

There was much talk about attracting millennials to future-proof saunas. Many countries are struggling with their lack of interest in the traditional activity. But there are glimmers of hope. The SALT project in Norway is appealing to millennials by combining sauna with art, DJs/music and lectures in a social environment. Its public sauna, housing up to 100 people, has opened next to Oslo’s iconic Opera House.

Meanwhile, Aaland is making an eight-part documentary, Perfect Sweat, which has uncovered an “explosive rebirth” in sauna, particularly in Russia. “Young people are hungry for authentic, healthy experiences,” he says. “Millennials are infusing new life and excitement into sweat bathing rituals.”

Originally published in Spa Business 2018 issue 3

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