

# Hotrocks

**Si Hawkins** soaks up the wild, rural beauty of southern Finland – and tries to acclimatise to its sauna culture.  
Photography by **Tim White**



HOT SHOTS

- ▣ Villa Hepolahti and (below) its fishing boat
- ▣ Sweating away inside a traditional Finnish sauna
- ▣ Navigating the corn maze

**D**usk descends delightfully upon Lake Pinteale, a serene and almost ripple-free oasis framed by acres of Finnish forest, now glowing gloriously orange under the remnants of a late-evening sun.

Sadly it won't be serene and ripple-free for long, as also descending upon the lake at some speed are several noisy British men, hurtling along a wooden jetty as steam pours from their otherwise pallid bodies. These curious specimens all recently bolted from an uncomfortably hot sauna, and tottering along with them is yours truly, in a state of slight hysteria. My poor, confused body, having just emerged from by far the hottest place I have ever taken it, is about to be thrust into what looks likely to be the coldest – which could be interesting.

The Finns love saunas. In fact, their leisure time largely revolves around them, which can seem odd to those who prefer not to spend hours sitting in rooms with scantily clad strangers. However, throw yourself into the full Finnish sweatbox experience, then into a freezing lake – if one is available – and, through the steam, all becomes clear.

With a few fellow sauna virgins I've travelled to the rural village of Laitikkala in southern Finland, and specifically to Villa Hepolahti, which is just about the loveliest place you can experience sauna culture. This secluded lakeside retreat generally welcomes large vacationing families or brainstorming business people, and the steam is "an essential part of the arrangement", according to Heikki Rönni, who runs the place with wife Päivi. "Usually a working group has their meeting first and then refines

the day's ideas in the sauna," he explains.

Our group's more leisurely experience, on the other hand, will involve "sauna, dinner, drinks and karaoke", but first Rönni sends us off for a bracing afternoon in the Laitikkala countryside. His villa may seem remote, but within a short hike are several similarly blossoming rustic businesses.

The first stop is Suttinen Farm, which has a shop full of beguiling berry-related products, and also a "Maissilabyrintti", a corn maze. Getting lost along these great corridors of corn can be a little unnerving, particularly when a plane flies overhead and the whole experience suddenly seems eerily reminiscent of that scene from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, in which Cary Grant is strafed by a gun-laden crop-duster. It's spooky, but that's what's so fantastic about it.

Across the road, the Rönnvik vineyard

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is one of Finland's oldest, run by the same family for over 100 years. Things haven't always been easy, as Rönnvik's matriarch Eila Rönni explains, with Finland's strict alcohol laws causing ongoing consternation. But they've adapted and this is now also a popular destination for conference groups. Those meetings must get spicy after a few of Rönnvik's potent berry wines.

We don't down too many tipples, thankfully, as waiting to greet us by the lake after our look around the area is Heikki, and a small fishing boat. Part of the Villa Hepolahti experience is catching your own dinner, so

having been issued with an array of rods and nets we motor off for a trawl around the lake. It turns out to be more of a sightseeing tour, as the lake's piscine residents remain resolutely off-radar. But just as we've given up on catching anything my rod buckles dramatically, there's a gasp of excitement from the other novice anglers and after a titanic struggle up comes... foliage.

Our crayfish baskets yield better rewards, and after depositing them back at base, Heikki reveals some Hepolahti history. The villa was originally built as a retirement home for his grandfather, Toivo Koskelo,

a forest councillor. The current two Rönnis refurbished and reopened the building in 2005, 50 years after it was originally completed, using mainly local timber. There's also a separate log cabin sauna down by the lake. "It would not have been made from anything else," he says. "In Finnish tradition the saunas have always been wooden."

Strolling through the trees to that cabin is certainly more evocative than the usual hotel-spa experience, and this aspect of rural Finnish life is all-encompassing once inside: inner-city pressures seem slightly pointless when you're about to be gently cooked. There's a mighty gasp as Heikki pours a hefty ladle of water over the boiling stones on his iron stove and sends a wave of searing warmth around the cabin. Every previously clogged-up pore suddenly feels alive. ➤



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**NAKED AMBITION**

- The lakeside sauna
- Our writer enjoys a post-sauna beer
- Finns go crazy for sweating and swimming



**Fast facts**

**GETTING THERE**  
Ryanair's low-cost flights touch down at Tampere airport, 18km and a 25-minute bus ride from the city. Our writer visited the beautiful village of Laitikkala, which lies about 47km from the centre of Tampere. There are daily bus services from Tampere to Laitikkala, but the best way to get there is by car - it's a 45-minute drive, taking in beautiful Finnish scenery as you go. Hertz (www.hertz.com) is Ryanair's exclusive car hire partner and offers discounts to Ryanair passengers.

In truth, for Heikki and his compatriots this is much more than a leisure activity. There are almost as many saunas as there are cars in Finland - about 2 million saunas for 5 million people. They were genuinely essential in pre-war households, a relatively hygienic location for childbirth and minor surgery. The Finnish army is famed for building saunas as soon as they make camp, and there's one in the nation's parliament building. One Finnish tour guide I meet during this trip tells me she gave up living in Paris because she just couldn't handle being away from Finland's sauna culture.

Be careful not to overdo it though. Just as the heat begins to get heavy, a misguided member of our party causes uproar by throwing a whole bucket of water on the stove. The temperature rises rapidly. It's too much. There's a minor stampede to the door,

**Even the pastier individuals who were initially wary of stripping, steaming and swimming, embrace it enthusiastically**

up the jetty and towards the lake. And as we leap in I'm half convinced that we'll all shatter like glass bottles.

Actually it's just an extraordinary rush, and as the body cools and the surroundings again become apparent you realise what a rare privilege this is, to be basking in such splendid isolation.

Even the pastier individuals who were initially wary of stripping, steaming and

swimming, embrace it enthusiastically, and repeat the routine for several hours. So glorious is the setting that I stay in the lake until it's chilly, almost dark, and a small boat looms intriguingly on the horizon. In it are two Lithuanians, who have managed to achieve what we couldn't earlier, and caught a fair few fish. And very good they are too, washed down with some potent Finnish schnapps.

Deeply besotted by the rural sauna experience, I try to repeat that rich sensory rush a few days later, unsuccessfully. I'm in a contemporary, well-regarded city-centre spa, which houses a perfectly good steam room and a sizeable swimming pool. But compared with where I've just been, in this indoor, urban location something is distinctly lacking.

The heat is on, but it just doesn't work as well without the wood. ♡