

Sauna: The Greatest Contribution to Civilization the Norse Ever Made

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Snow. Ice. Sleet. Cold. Wind. Winter.

You think **we** suffer from these things? Consider the poor residents of 10th century Scandinavia! If ever a people knew winter, it was the northerners in the "Dark Ages." But if they were plagued by winter's evils, they also reveled in one of its greatest escapes-the sauna.

Almost every homestead in what is now Russia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Greenland included a steambath house as one of its outbuildings. The bath house was built with a flagstone floor (with a drain in it) and either a stone oven or an open hearth piled with rocks, which could be heated with a peat fire. Once the oven (or the rocks) was hot, water would be thrown over them to fill the room with steam. Just as in modern saunas, seating in this room consisted of benches at two levels, one at regular chair height and a sort of a shelf higher up on the wall so that those wanting a hotter, more intense steam experience could climb the walls to get it. It was standard procedure to whip yourself with a bundle of twigs while bathing to increase the flow of circulation, and the steam bath traditionally ended with either a bucket of cold water being dumped over your head or a roll in the snow.

Residents of Iceland also enjoyed hot tubbing, bathing in the hot pools formed by volcanic springs.

No need for a 50 meter pool for a Viking swim meet! This culture valued stamina more than speed as a swimming skill. A favorite Norse swimming contest involved two participants, each trying to hold the other under water, until the loser collapsed. Presumably the winner would drag the loser to shore.