

# The naked truth



**IMAGINE** the following scenario: You're in a business meeting, and just about to close a deal. Suddenly your counterpart suggests that you join him for a sauna, which means taking all your clothes off.

A Brit or an American might balk at the thought of being naked in the company of strangers. But for Finns, there's absolutely nothing suspicious about the sauna – it's just about as natural as it gets.

In Finland we simply love the sauna. There are an estimated two million saunas throughout the country. This basically means that just about every family has a sauna, some even have two.

**For us the sauna** is a sacred place, and not only because it's the only Finnish word in worldwide usage.

Throughout history the sauna has been a place of peace, calm, relaxation and contemplation. In the old days it was the only place for a good wash. Women even gave birth in saunas.

**There are many** different kinds of saunas. In the countryside, you may find saunas

heated with wood, or even a traditional smoke sauna.

In the city or in your hotel you will have to settle for an electric sauna. Nothing wrong with that. An electric sauna will give you a good *löyly* ("steam") as well.

I recently built a sauna in my home in Brussels. No, I did not go out into the forest with my ax and chainsaw. I ordered it made-to-measure from Finland. A friend of mine, Juha

(naturally a Finn), built it.

It took a while to convince my British wife that we really needed one. A Finn without a sauna is a bit like a Frenchman without a baguette, I argued.

I must admit that it was one of the best investments I've made. It's a family thing. The kids love it, too. There's nothing more relaxing than a hot sauna and a cold beer after a hard working week.

And you don't have to be a masochist to enjoy being beaten with a *vihta*, a traditional sauna whisk made of birch branches that improves circulation, aids relaxation and cleansing.

**The sauna** is also a great place to negotiate. Our late president Urho Kekkonen used to soften Soviet positions during the Cold War era in his famous Tamminiemi sauna.

At work I try to use the sauna strategy as well. I cordially invite my colleagues to have a sauna with me and then I don't let them out until they agree with my piece of legislation.

## Your trip to Finland is incomplete without experienc- ing a sauna.

Your visit to Finland is not complete without the sauna experience. Here are a few recommendations if you are staying in Helsinki: Kotiharjun sauna (Harjuntorinkatu 1) and Yrjönkadun Uimahalli (Yrjönkatu 21). If you're lucky and you know someone from the legendary Saunaseura (Vaskiniementie 10), you may be invited to the most prestigious sauna society of Finland.

If you don't feel like leaving your hotel, try the sauna there. Don't worry, getting naked is natural. At least in a Finnish sauna. ■■■

**Alexander Stubb is an MEP who tries to convince everyone about the virtues of a sauna.**