

# Mikkel Aaland



*"It's All an Adventure"*

## When Sweating is a Good Thing

By Mikkel Aaland

***We've seen how the coronavirus hits those with underlying medical conditions hardest. Since a vaccine will only ever be a partial answer to ever-mutating viruses, a healthy lifestyle is in everyone's interest. That's why I believe we need to frame public bathing-be it in the form of a sauna, banya, temescal or hamam- as it has been framed throughout time, not as a luxury, but as essential.***

Like so many others quarantined at home, I have gained a new appreciation for my former routine. I no longer drink espressos at the Italian coffee shop on my corner, swim in the Bay, or sweat at one of the cities' public bathhouses or at the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club's private sauna. Sweating is particularly important to my mental and physical health. I discovered I was not alone researching my first book, [Sweat](#), an international survey of bathing customs. Cultures all over the world build sweat baths and use their heat and steam for relaxation, therapy and ritual. Now, in isolation with my beloved and chaotic family, I long for the calm community space to destress more than ever before.

Today most public bathhouse facilities around the world-from San Francisco to Istanbul, from Helsinki to Mexico City-have shut down due to the coronavirus. All of Germany's 12,000 public saunas are closed. I miss a good sweat, but closing bathhouses now is the right thing to do. The last thing we want during a pandemic is any intimate physical gathering.

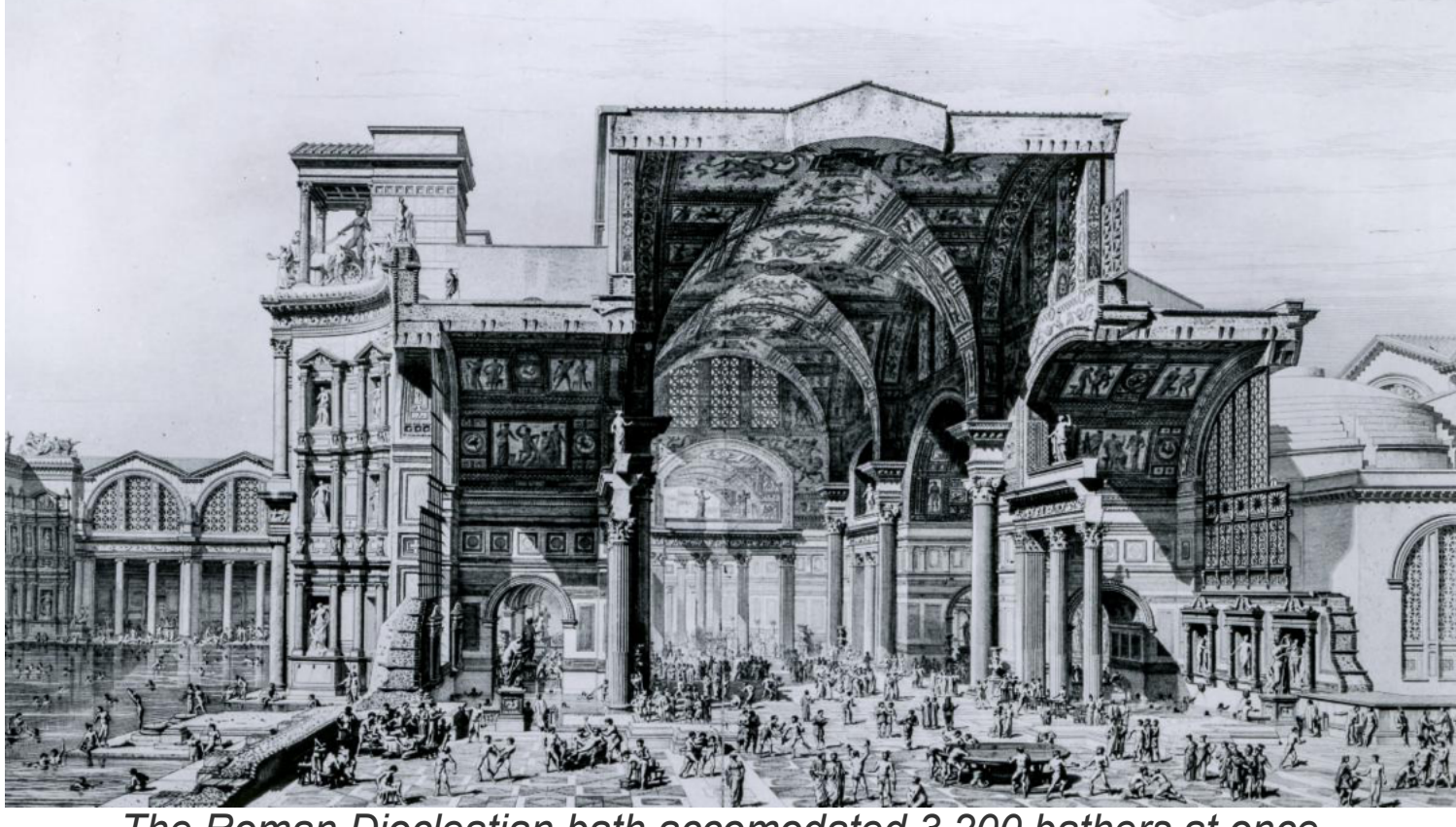
More commonly public bathhouses are considered places of healing, wellness and, of course, cleanliness. In Finland, there is a saying, "If a sick person is not cured by tar, spirits or sauna, then they will die." In Russia, "The spirit of the banya is holy." In Japan, a poem from the 19th century goes, "The power of the kama-buro equals hundreds of medicines." Just before I entered a Navajo sweat lodge, the medicine man told me, "Act as you would in your white man's church, with respect."



*This public sweat bath in Kagawa, Japan has been in continuous operation for 1300 years.*

These baths are mostly communal, accommodating anywhere from a few to dozens of bathers. Some are co-ed, but many are not. Many operate privately, but historically they have often been subsidized or community-owned. They come in many shapes and forms, and even though they have unique histories, rituals, and customs, they all share a common purpose: to rejuvenate and heal while connecting bathers with something larger than themselves.

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*The Roman Diocletian bath accomodated 3,200 bathers at once.*

If history is a judge, when the worst of this pandemic is over and physical distancing rules are relaxed, bathhouses will reopen. Outbreaks of cholera periodically closed the giant Roman thermaes from 100 BC to 500 AD. The baths, which accommodated thousands of bathers at once, were publicly subsidized and considered critical in preventing disease in the first place. During the Middle Ages, the black death swept through Europe and bathhouses (smaller than the giant thermae but still popular) were once again closed. Some of the bathhouses turned their heating ovens temporarily into bakeries, prompting cries of unfairness from the bakery's unions. Church pressure kept bathhouses closed longer than they might have been, not so much because of the plague, but because in the eyes of the Church, they represented pleasures of the flesh and, therefore, sin. "In Russia," according to Ethan Pollock in his newly published book, "Without the Banya We Would Perish," banyas remained open and legal. Indeed, they seemed to have thrived in this [plague] period."



*"Whoever cleans himself in this bath Unites with God And cleanses in one bath His body and soul, as he should." Text and wood cut from Thomas Murner's Badenfahrt, 1514.*

I am not saying the sweat bath is a panacea. Like fire, it can harm or comfort, depending on how it is used. But there is plenty of reliable medical research backing up many of the positive health claims. Heat, besides being a disinfectant, has been found to stimulate circulatory, cardiovascular, and immune functions. Immersion in cold water after a sweat bath is common and is linked to a reduction in inflammation and improved immune responses. Sweat, the product of the body's largest organ, skin, also rids the body of unwanted waste, which can even include heavy metals such as copper, zinc, mercury, and lead. It also reduces lactic acid build-up, which contributes to muscle aches and pains.

More studies would eventually fill in the blanks of our understanding of what happens when the body is super-heated and cooled. Hopefully, the medical community would use such studies to reframe bathing as an essential tool in the public health toolbox.

Personally, as someone prone to depression, I find the health benefits associated with communal bathing, especially encouraging. Sitting and sweating together naked or nearly naked breaks down barriers between people, inspires meaningful dialogue and contributes to positive mental health. A wealth of evidence shows that positive emotions enhance the immune system, while negative emotions suppress it.

Living in Finland in the 1970s while working on Sweat, I interviewed Professor Harald Teir, MD, president of the Finnish Sauna Society. He told me something that has stayed with and inspired me: "The idea is not to have the best sauna on the block, but to get the entire block in the sauna."



*Professor Teir and a research sauna in Helsinki, Finland 1975.*

After my book was published, I became a lifelong advocate for public bathing. I envisioned public baths employing hot air or steam populating city blocks here in America, distributed much like Starbucks. It's been an uphill battle; U.S. bathing culture has never come close to that of Europe, Japan, Russia, Korea, and a large swath of the world. The exception to this comes from isolated pockets of immigrants from places like Finland and Russia and Korea, who stubbornly maintain their traditional bathing customs.

Putting Professor Teir's words into action, a few years ago a renovation of our local city pool presented a timely opportunity to push for a public sauna. We shelved our plans to build a private sauna in our backyard, and poured our energy into helping make a public sauna adjacent to the pool a reality. It became the first publicly funded sauna in the state, and quickly one of the most popular hangouts in our diverse neighborhood. Our small success will never, however, compare with Germany, which requires public swimming facilities to offer public saunas.

Most recently, I traveled around the world hosting [Perfect Sweat](#), a documentary series based on my book, currently in post-production. I witnessed an explosion of interest in ancient bathing customs and rituals. In San Francisco, for example, I found the newly opened Archimedes banya crowded with tech professionals from noon to midnight. The long-lived Albany Sauna and Japantown's Kabuki Hot Springs are busier than ever. In Minnesota, the 612 Sauna Society boasts over 200 members and conducts weekly sauna sessions in a mobile sauna unit that moves from location to location.

Oslo, Norway, is nearly overflowing with newly built public saunas (badstue in the native language). Istanbul hamams have become the hip place to hold bachelor and bachelorette parties. Japanese youth hold tent sauna parties on lakesides and even under train tracks in downtown Tokyo. At last summer's Burning Man festival, there were over 15 saunas, banyas, and DIY steam baths from four different countries distributed around the playa. Last Christmas, I visited Tepoztlán, just outside of Mexico City, and found public temescals, the ancient Aztec sweat bath, on just about every corner catering to tourists and locals alike. (All of the above, of course, before pandemic closures.)



*Bathers in Copenhagen, Denmark enjoying the popular mobile sauna truck, Butcher's Heat.*

Young people consistently told me a communal bath is a place that meets their physical, social and even spiritual needs all under one roof. In a stressful world, increasingly out of balance and out of tune, they found harmony. The Japanese even have coined a word for the feeling they get when they exit the bath: *to-to-no-ta*, which means "in tune." It rolls off the tongue so nicely.

In recent days I've talked with several bathhouse owners in the US and abroad who tell me they are hurting. Even when restrictions are relaxed, many of them are worried. Strict rules on physical distancing will cut into their already slim profits. Large luxury spa complexes that include saunas, hamams or banyas offer more services and accommodate more customers. It will be difficult for them too, but they are better positioned than the smaller, private bathhouses for a post-pandemic era.

"Last year we added a sauna that accommodates 100 people," says Lasse Eriksen, develop manager of Farris Bad, a large-scale luxury spa in Norway. "It will take organizing, but we can adapt to physical distancing," he says.

Eventually, we will return to physical closeness. "Bathhouses will survive," says Mikhail Brodsky, founder of Archimedes banya, "People need them. But will our business survive?"

I am counting on it, for my health and everyone else around me.

***Here is a link to most of the material from my book, Sweat. An ebook with the complete material is available from Amazon. Original hard copies of the book are rare. Perfect Sweat is produced by Bray's Run Productions, a Seattle-based independent film production company.***