



## GET OUTDOORS

## Saunas in the Snow

Looking for a hot new winter experience? Try a traditional Finnish treat in the Upper Peninsula

BY  
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When Finns first arrived in the mid-1860s to work in the Keweenaw Copper Country mines of the Upper Peninsula, they brought deeply rooted traditions with them. Foremost among these was the sauna (pronounced sow-nuh, the only Finnish word in the English dictionary, meaning “bathhouse”).

Considered a sacred space, early saunas welcomed the births of new generations and were utilized to bathe bodies before burial. Today, they remain communal places for

year-round rest, relaxation, and restoring balance — physical, mental, and emotional. The sauna is also the ideal setting for deep conversations, followed by coffee and nisu (a Finnish bread prepared with cardamom and wheat).

Jim Kurtti, retired director of the Finnish American Heritage Center in Hancock and honorary consul of Finland in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, is dedicated to preserving the customs of his Finnish ancestors, one sauna at a time.

A few years ago, he acquired an aging two-room sauna from his hometown of

Bruce Crossing in Ontonagon County and moved it to his property in neighboring Paynesville. The 1930s-era log structure features traditional Finnish double-dovetail corners, four windows, a custom Mason jar light fixture, and a one-of-a-kind door handle crafted from a garden pick believed to have been used by Kurtti's grandfather in the Calumet copper mines.

The steam room boasts the family's original Nippa wood-burning sauna stove made in Bruce Crossing nearly a century ago by Finnish immigrant Leo Nippa, who repurposed old smokestacks from the mines in his designs. Today, NIPPA® Sauna Stoves are made in Beulah, Mich. Kurtti also owns his grandfather's 1911 smoke sauna, which has yet to be reassembled and restored.

### U.P. Sauna Time

There's no set season for taking sauna, although winter provides more intense opportunities. The Keweenaw's third annual



Sauna Week runs Jan. 17-24 as part of the annual Heikinpäivä midwinter festival in downtown Hancock. Sauna-specific activities include in-person and online informational forums, self-guided tours of several Copper Country saunas, displays of students' projects on sauna culture, and a silent auction for a custom sauna built by students from the Copper Country Intermediate School District's Career and Technical Education program.

### How to Sauna

When reserving a public sauna, the steam room will be ready and waiting for you upon arrival. In the adjoining changing room, you can don the appropriate swim or athletic wear to accommodate the 170- to 200-degree temperatures. A beach towel, sandals, and even a hat or beanie (which helps regulate temperature) are also recommended.

Once inside a sauna, choose your seat along the wooden bench, keeping in mind that heat rises and that lower areas will be slightly cooler. To increase the sauna's humidity level, add water to the rocks to make löyly (steam), which also creates a unique ambience. (Not all saunas have steam, so it's important to check ahead of time.) After 15 minutes or so, take a break from the heat by dipping into the icy waters of a nearby lake, rolling around in the snow, or taking a cool shower. Then, return to the sauna and repeat the Nordic cycle for the duration of your allotted time.

Many Finns add vihta (or vasta) to their sauna experience. This involves gently brushing a bundle of fresh birch or cedar branches soaked in water across the skin to

stimulate circulation and release therapeutic aromatics. While in the sauna, it's important to keep hydrated with water or electrolyte beverages (but not alcohol), to replenish the sweat your body is releasing. Finally, remember that the sauna is a sanctified place that should be respected and revered.

### Where to Sauna

The Nordic Spa at Mount Bohemia in Lac La Belle, on the east side of the Keweenaw, offers several options for après-ski, including the traditional Finnish sauna with its ground-to-ceiling windows and panoramic views; a Himalayan salt-infused sauna; and a therapeutic herbal sauna. Afterward, stroll through the 45-degree Cool Mist Rain Cave or take a dip in the cool plunge pool and enjoy its refreshing 60-degree temperatures. Other offerings include the eucalyptus steam cabin, a Dead Sea mineral mud treatment, a crystal relaxation room, and an outdoor pool.

The resort, which offers two steam rooms, recently added a larger second hot tub called the Mineral Pool. All Nordic Spa services are available at no charge for lodging guests. The public can buy daily or seasonal passes.

Established in 2023 by Lynn and Jason Makela, Takka Saunas provides public and private wood-fired sauna sessions at two locations in the Keweenaw (takka means fireplace in Finnish). The original sanctuary in Eagle Harbor, Takka Superior, is nestled within the 27-acre Fresh Coast Cabins property and offers 75-minute private sauna experiences as well as 90-minute sunset saunas. Located steps from the rocky shoreline of Lake Superior, sauna-goers can take a natural cold plunge

between steam sittings if they choose.

The three- to five-person saunas found next to the Portage Lake Lift Bridge in Hancock, collectively known as Takka Portage, are well-suited for small-group socialization. Embracing the Finnish fondness for togetherness and connection, the "Social Sauna" provides the complete hot-and-cold cycle with people you may or may not know. These saunas also can be reserved for private groups.

### Why Sauna?

The heat from the sauna helps your body sweat out toxins, relaxes your muscles, clears airways, increases circulation, reduces stress, and burns calories. Mentally, the downtime clears the mind and helps worries slip away. Are you ready to give it a try? ≈

### PLAN IT!

Keweenaw Convention and Visitors Bureau  
[visitkeweenaw.com](http://visitkeweenaw.com)

## U.P. Finnish Facts

**NEARLY ONE IN THREE** of the Keweenaw Peninsula's population is of Finnish heritage. That's the highest concentration of Finns outside of Europe. Houghton, Keweenaw, Baraga, Ontonagon, and Gogebic counties are the only counties in the United States where residents claiming Finnish ancestry are the largest single ethnic group.

In 2025, Hancock was named the first U.S. Finno-Ugric "Capital of Culture," an international designation presented by the Estonia-based URALIC Centre representing the heritage, culture, and language of Finns, Estonians, Hungarians, and Sami, among various others.

**Both pages, clockwise from left:** Friends at the Nordic Spa at Mount Bohemia in Lac La Belle, on the east side of the Keweenaw, enjoy a hot dip on a chilly day. Cheers to fun at the Nordic Spa. Visitors stoke the steam at Takka Portage, located next to the Portage Lake Lift Bridge in Hancock.

