

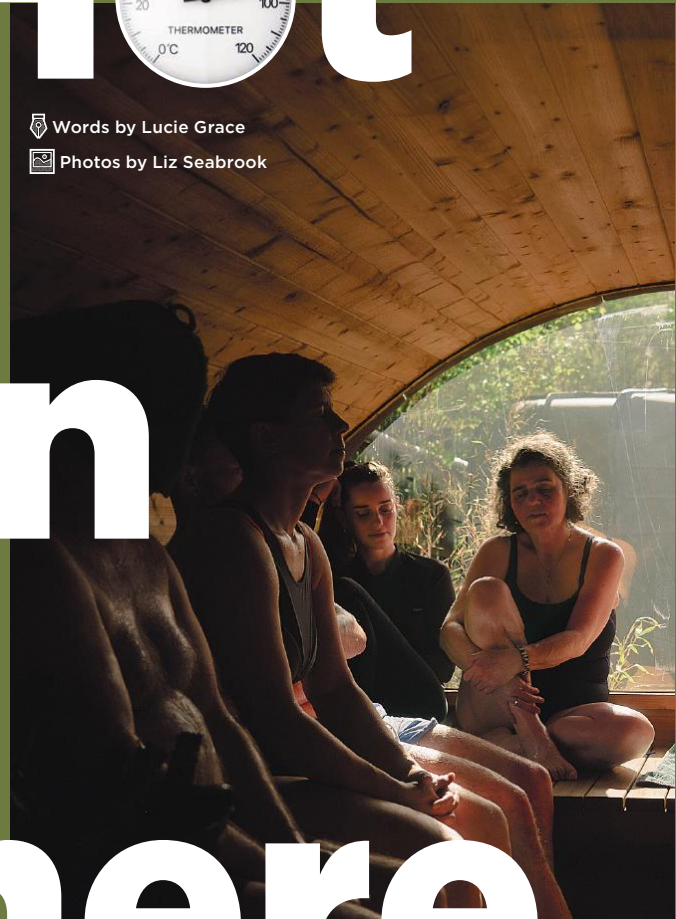


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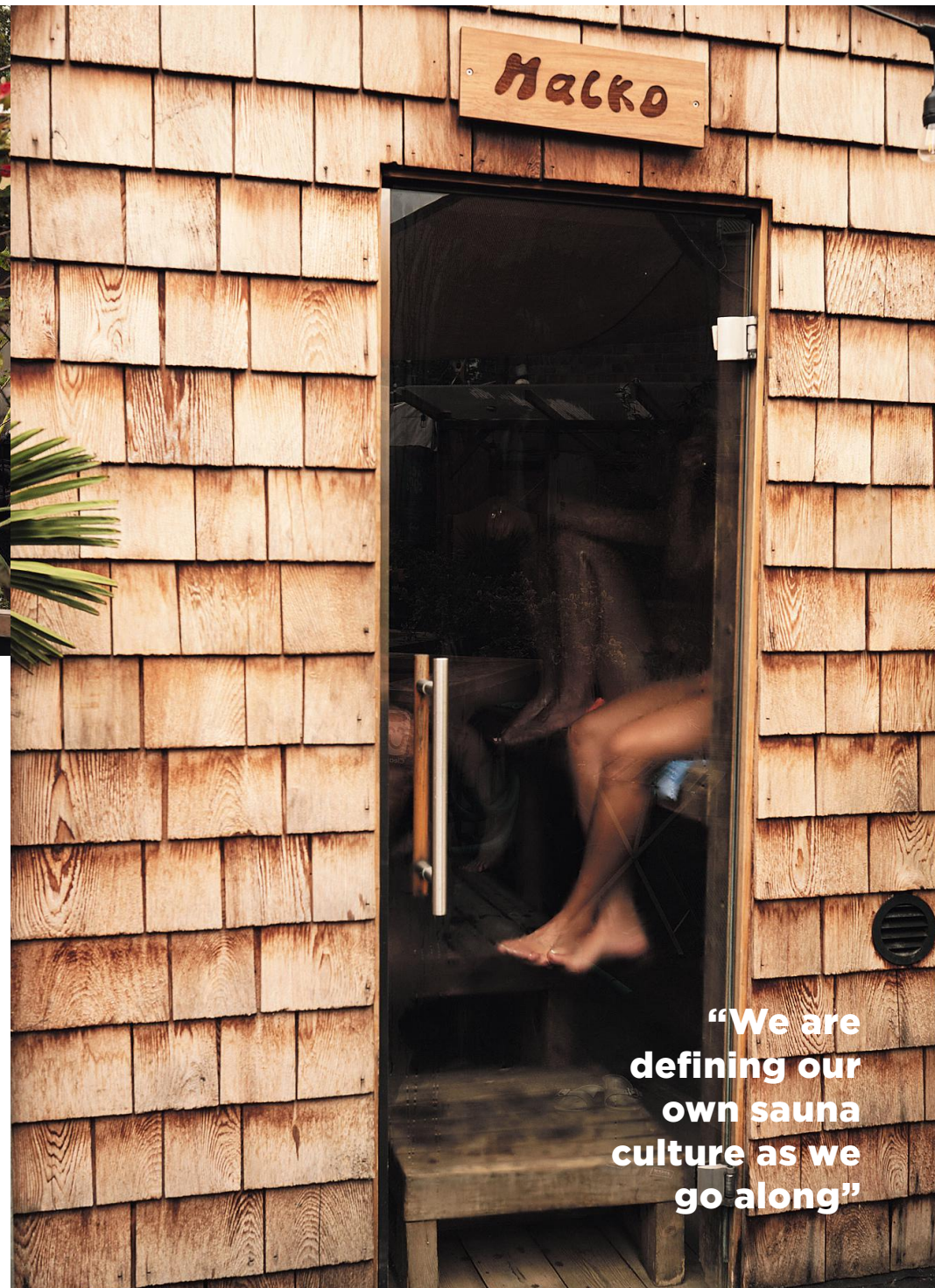


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Words by Lucie Grace
Photos by Liz Seabrook



The UK is experiencing a post-pandemic sauna boom. In London, community spaces – and a dedicated festival this spring – are making sauna culture accessible to all



Pink-faced, blissful and coated in sweat, I'm desperate to dunk myself in bracing cold water. I've just been on a journey of heat, steam and incredible scent. Known as *pirts*, the Latvian sauna ritual saw me tapped, smacked and brushed with venik bundles of oak, linden and birch leaves. Baltic sauna tradition is a spiritual thing, rooted in a belief of gods of fire, water and earth coming together. I understand why as I emerge from the cold plunge, reborn. Sauna master Mon Klavins wraps me in blankets and I rest, reflecting on how beautiful life can be. But I'm not in Riga. This is Hackney Wick, in the east end of London.

The UK isn't the first place in Europe you think of when it comes to sauna culture, but the country is experiencing a colossal boom, with some 45 open to the public in early 2023 increasing to over 200 saunas by 2025 – particularly in its capital city, London.

The site of my ritual, Hackney Community Sauna Baths, was one of the pioneers, serendipitously built in the yard of an Art Deco, former public baths building. The stoves here were first fired in 2021, stoking London's bathing renaissance years ahead of the curve. The garden is like a playground, with toy dinosaurs perched between the ferns that line six cold plunges, surrounded by seven saunas.

The largest of the wood stove-heated saunas is three-tiered Saunaverse. The name hints at its backstory: the sauna was built for The Saunaverse Festival, which launched in 2023 at Hackney Community Sauna Baths (or CSB for short) and is now a permanent fixture here.

The fifth edition of this joyful sweat fest is back on 18-19 April at Hackney CSB, and promises to be bigger, swetier and jollier than ever. Two 12-hour days of unlimited sauna, cold plunges, hot tub soaks, music, dance,

“We are defining our own sauna culture as we go along”

Clockwise from above
Hackney Community Sauna Baths offers everything from whisky barrel plunge pools to seven sauna huts where you can work up a sweat

“We’re giving an insight into sauna cultures from across the world”



This page The Community Sauna Baths in Hackney Wick and Stratford, and the Saunaverse Festival (right)



workshops, sauna rituals and revelry will be held over the weekend.

“In the UK, we are defining our own sauna culture as we go along,” says Saunaverse founder Tom de Wilton. An engineer by training and sauna builder by trade, Tom is brimming with excitement for the next instalment of his gathering that sees 350 attendees per day float around the yard in colourful dry robes and sauna hats, rotating between having a sweat and vibing to the tunes.

“We’re giving an insight into sauna cultures from across the world, in a little micropocket in London,” he continues, explaining how *aufguss* (the German-born practice of wafting hot air and aromatherapy oils around a music filled sauna), *whisking* (a Baltic and Eastern European ritual of tapping and cleansing guests with leaves and branches) and sound baths (Tibetan

bowls and other instruments played inside the sauna) are just a few of the rituals that bring attendees to the yard, with eager punters queuing up before the session is due to start.

What started out as a festival full of sauna industry professionals and Hackney locals is growing with the same momentum as Britain’s insatiable love for all things sauna. Global wellness is now worth an astonishing €5 trillion and is being driven by younger generations, who see mindful, therapeutic treatments as part of their daily routine rather than an occasional treat. The rapidly rising wellness market was boosted by the Covid pandemic - which underpinned a greater interest in mental and physical health - and Millennials and Gen Z are increasingly behind more fun ways of exploring the benefits of heat therapies.

“We’re hoping to convert a new wave of sauna goers,” says

PHOTOS: SHANGRI-LA, THE SHARD, LONDON, BRENNA DUNCAN



SOAK IT UP

London hotels aren’t generally well-equipped with sauna stoves, but these stays are on top of wellness in travel

The Shangri-La at The Shard

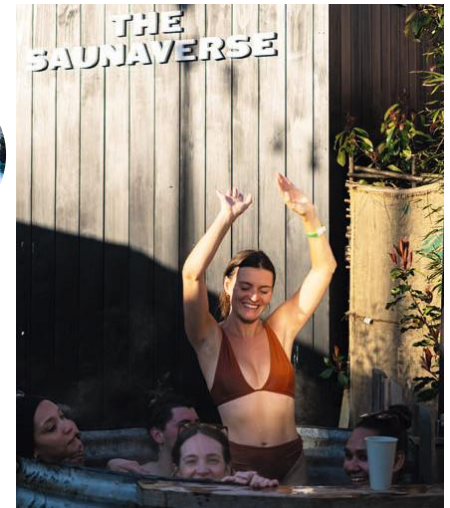
On the 52nd floor of London’s tallest building, the spa at this elevated stay has absolutely incredible views of the city below, from the aptly named Sky Sauna and Sky Pool. shangri-la.com

The Landmark

This vast heritage property in Marylebone has a suitably luxurious spa suite with a chlorine-free indoor swimming pool, Jacuzzi and sanarium steam room awaiting. landmarklondon.co.uk

The Rubens at the Palace

Heritage properties don’t come finer than this sumptuous hotel beside the Royal Mews, who’ve partnered with AIRE Ancient Baths, Charing Cross to give hotel guests VIP soak and steam perks. rubenshotel.com



LONDON



SWEAT BOX

The sauna boom spreads far and wide across the UK, with more than 200 to visit on Britain's coast, in its forests and on the shores of glassy lakes and lochs

Hot Tottie, Luss North of Glasgow,

This cosy barrel sauna stares out over majestic Ben Lomond and is perched on the shores of Loch Lomond, the serene lake which you can dunk in after.

hot-tottie.com

The Wild Sauna, Cherington

An award-winning, unfathomably pretty sauna and hot tub sanctuary shrouded by trees and wildflowers, on the banks of a babbling brook near The Cotswolds.

whichfordmill.co.uk

Beach Box, Brighton

Pioneers in the scene, this longstanding outfit sits on the pebbles of Brighton beach – a cluster of saunas, cold plunges and a fire pit, where regular events and rituals are held.

beachboxspa.co.uk



Here You can try a traditional *parenie* at Banya No.1 Hoxton
Below Tunes at the Saunaverse Festival

“We are hoping to convert a new wave of sauna goers”

Tom, who enjoys seeing people come for the DJs and stay for the heat. “The hope is they’re getting a great sauna experience, have a boogie and become sauna lovers.”

Music is a big part of the festival, with chilled acoustic sounds in the morning and progressively dance-y evenings. Beers are on sale and there’s one ‘clothing optional’ sauna tucked away for the traditionalists.

If that doesn’t sound very British to you, you’d be right. Tom is championing beers and clothing optional saunas, found in Finland and central Europe, to offer an authentic experience. And he’s

not the only one in London who’s this committed. While community saunas are all the rage, there’s a handful of sweaty spaces who’ve been flying the flag for decades, some surviving from the early 20th century’s bath house era – when Londoners didn’t have running water at home – while others brought global bathing culture to London. Banya No.1 in Hoxton is one of the latter and is authentically Slavic, with refreshments – whether that’s beer or *kvass* (fermented, probiotic like kombucha) – an essential part of the experience. Having plugged the hospitality element of heat therapy for 14 years, founder Andrei Fomin says that increasingly Gen Z groups are visiting his establishment, where the star treatment is a euphoric *parenie* (a Russian form of whisking, where you’re beaten with silver birch twigs by two sauna masters in 70°C heat).

All of a sudden, you’re spoilt for choice when it comes to getting a sweat on in London. Read on for our favourite new sauna spots in London.

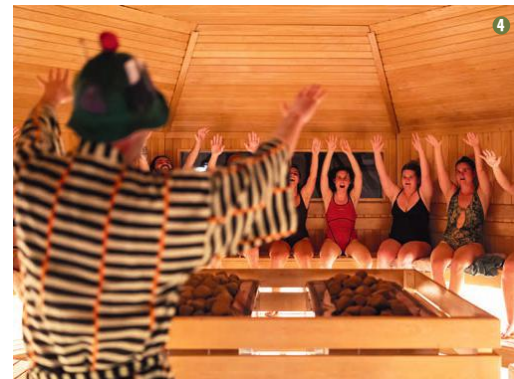
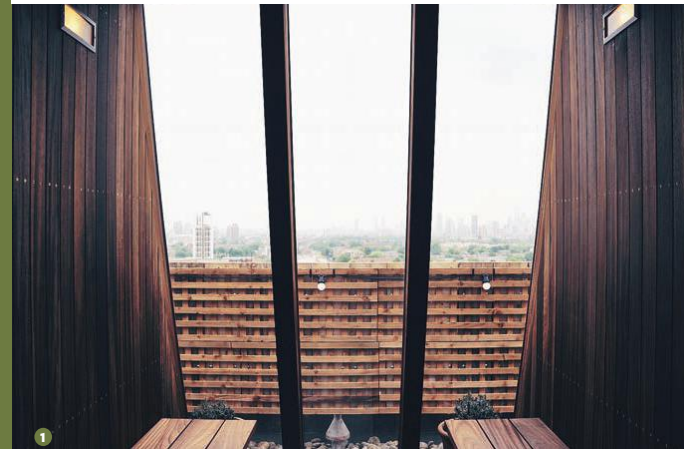
saunaverse.co.uk

✈ Wizz Air flies to London



PHOTOS: PANOS BARAS; ROOFTOP SAUNAS INSTAGRAM; @THELDNFTNESSCOLLECTIVE; LOREA TALE / SAUNA SOCIAL CLUB; BRENNIA DUNCAN

FEELING THE HEAT



1. ROOFTOP SAUNAS HACKNEY

Sweeping views of London’s cityscape are the USP at these cabin saunas, an oasis of calm up on the roof of Netil House in east London. But if the views alone aren’t enough to tempt you, then privacy might be – each little sauna is bookable for four friends (or solo).

Price: From £16.50pp

2. SAUNOS SAUNA, ISLINGTON

This luxurious Finnish style sauna and cold plunge pool is built into a big Dutch barge, floating in a canal near Angel. Gazing out of the windows at boats, joggers and maybe even a kayak passing by is all part of the charm.

Price: £20 for 45 minutes

3. SAUNA SOCIAL CLUB, PECKHAM

The carefully curated ambient music has put this friendly space on the map, along with its cosy living room vibes that you don’t initially expect, given its train arch exterior. It’s one for music lovers who want clubbing community vibes without the alcohol and late nights.

Price: Ambient Sauna = £24.99, Essential Sauna = £14.99

4. WALTHAMSTOW COMMUNITY SAUNA

The latest outpost from the CSB team is worth the pilgrimage on the Victoria Line simply to try out their large, octagonal sauna, designed with Aufguss in mind. There’s a meaty programme of sauna rituals on the calendar, but if that’s not your thing, their chilled out garden and sauna spaces are just the zen you need.

Price: From £9.50 for an hour

5. SKUNA SAUNA, CANARY WHARF

Stare out of the wide sauna window across the waters that flow into the quays from the River Thames, in this new floating sauna in the old docks of West India Quays. Or double up the experience and book the floating hot tub in a boat, so you can drive around the docks as you bathe.

Price: Sauna from £15pp for an hour