

Popularizing the Finnish sauna: The case of the American hospitality industry



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Abstract

The popularization of the Finnish Sauna in the American hospitality industry began in the 1960s. Brought to this continent by the Finnish immigrants, the use of the sauna was never – and to this day is not – fully understood. With the coming of the 1960 Winter Olympics and a high-profile visit of the President of Finland to the United States in 1961 provided impetus for a growing industry. This article briefly examines this history of the sauna in America, and concentrates on the popularity this amenity has shown in the hotels and motels of the country. By analyzing hotel and motel directories with the use of the location quotient, a distinct regional concentration of the amenity is found across the country. Various reasons for their concentration are proposed, including ethnic settlement patterns, climate and winter recreational activities.

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Introduction

Popular culture studies are an up-and-coming subfield in cultural geography. Courses dealing with this subject have expanded from the original courses offered in Bowling Green State University in the 1960s, to courses offered in many disciplines, including geography. Some of the leaders in this field include George Carney (1998,1995,1994), John Jakle (1996,1994), John E.Harmon (1998), Barbara and John Shortridge (1998), and Wilbur Zelinsky (1992,1980). Areas of interest have included aspects of music, fashion, sports, foods, and almost anything that is part of the society we live in. As such, popular culture studies provide a new venue of interest to a growing field of study that has boundless opportunities for study of our everyday culture.

It is in this area that I have begun to examine amenities available in the hospitality industry. Some of the amenities available in such context include the swimming pools, hot-tubs, weight rooms, the most recent trend-setting amenity of waterslides, as well as the sauna.

While the sauna is the mainstay and icon of Finnish culture in Finland, where some two million saunas exist for a population of about five million people, the traditional use of the sauna is not well understood abroad.¹ Without getting into the traditional practices involved in sauna bathing, it is of interest to examine the growing popularity of this phenomena here in the United States.² The history of the sauna in America dates to the coming of Finnish immigrants to the country as early as the New Sweden Colony of 1638. These Delaware Finns quickly assimilated to the early American society, but left the imprint of their presence in the log-cabin construction that diffused across the continent from this culture hearth area (Jordan & Kaups, 1989). These early Finns also brought their sauna, but it was not until the late 1800s, that a growing influx of Finns began to find their homesteads and settlements in areas such as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, the Copper Country and Mesabi Range of Minnesota, as well as Wisconsin. Accordingly, the Finns built saunas in their homesteads, which often were ridiculed and misunder-

stood by their neighbors. Public saunas became available for many others, and over the years, Americans were introduced to the sauna tradition (Kaups,1976). It has been alleged that the impetus for the sauna in the American hotel and motel industry began in the early 1960s as a result of two factors. Firstly, the Finnish athletes of the 1960 Squaw Valley Winter Olympics were provided a sauna facility, which caught on amongst other athletes and the media. A second factor for the growth of interest in the sauna was the result of the state visit by President Kekkonen of Finland with President Kennedy in October, 1961. During this visit, President Kennedy was asked to locate a sauna for use by the Finnish President. An internal memo from the Kennedy Library in Boston shows that a mobile sauna was sought by the White House, which was obtained from a Connecticut sauna manufacturer named Cecil Ellis. A saunamobile was driven to the Finnish Consulate General in Pelham, NY, where the Finnish President was able to use the facility. While no media coverage of this sauna event is to be found in Finnish-American newspapers nor in the large American dailies such as the New York Times, the impact of this state visit was still seen a few years later. Prior to the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, it was alleged in Life Magazine that the President was hoping to build a sauna into the White House. From these two events, a growing interest in the "fashion" of sauna was evident, and it is well-known that today, many hotels, motels and health facilities offer a sauna for their guests.³



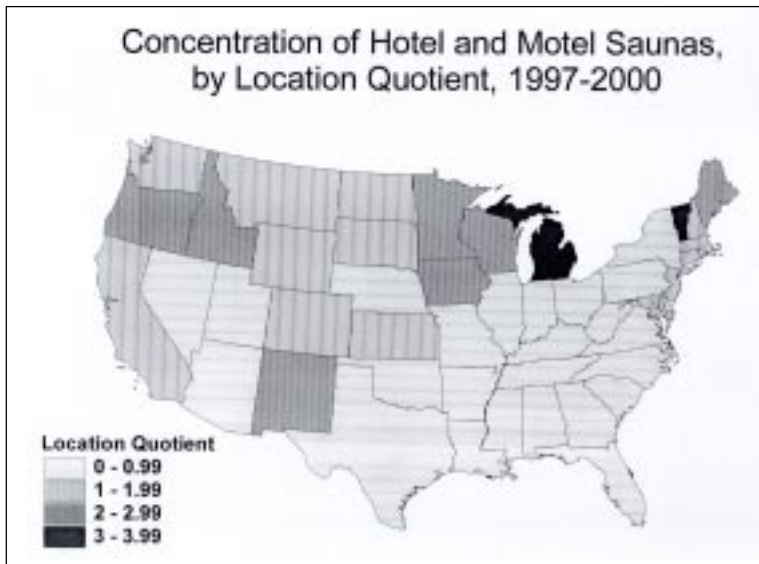
Harriet Ericksson, Miss Finland and Miss Scandinavia 1970 gives Johnny Carson some tips on how to take a sauna during a "Tonight Show" broadcast in 1970. Photo: Courtesy of Finnish Sauna Society, Helsinki, Finland.

A research proposal was developed as a result of staying in hotels and motels across the country and experiencing the sauna in various facilities. What is the geographic impact and distribution of saunas as part of the hospitality industry? By drawing information from a total of six different hotel/motel chain directories dating from 1997 to 2000, hours of examination by the author and student assistants provided data on the occurrence of the sauna across the country. The six hotel/motel chains chosen included Holiday Inn (1999–1,030 US properties), Ramada Inn (1999–961 US properties), Howard Johnson's (1999–462 US properties), Best Western Motels (2000–2,154 US properties), Super 8 Motels (1999–1,837 US properties), and Days Inn

(1997–1,698 US properties). A total of 2,453 hotel locations and 5,689 motel locations totaling 8,142 properties in the United States were analyzed

Methods used

Detailed analysis of the directories provided data on the occurrence of saunas. A direct mention of the sauna in the write-up or the presence of a specific symbol used to indicate the sauna on premises were used in tabulating the totals. The data may be slightly biased due to this classification scheme, but terms such as "holidomes", "health facilities", "fitness centers", were too vague and were not included – especially since each hotel has a different definition for each of these terms. Hundreds of



phone calls would be prohibitive as well. Thus, the data is based on obvious occurrences only. Finally, the published dates for each annual directory (1997–2000) allows for a fairly accurate tabulation of the locational tendencies of sauna locations across the United States. While the results provide a general picture of the sauna within the hospitality industry, additional work is possible with more hotel/motel chains in the future.

To analyze the collection of data, the use of the Location Quotient was utilized. This statistical measure simply measures the general trend of phenomena which occurs in a given location (state). The LQ compares some quality of an area with a specified norm. In this study, the quality involves the presence of a sauna within the hotels/motels in area i (S_i), and the norm the percentage of the country's total saunas within the hotel/motel chains (T_i). The location quotient for area i (LQ_i) is obtained as: $LQ_i = S_i / T_i$

If LQ is greater than 1.0, saunas are concentrated in area i relative to the percentage of all the saunas within the country. If the LQ is below 1.0, the presence of saunas is relatively under-represented within the state in question.

Results

The collected data indicates a number of interesting facts. In terms of hotel/motel chains, it became apparent that the hotels had the highest occurrence of the sauna within their facilities. Leading the way was Holiday Inn (16.9%), Howard Johnson's (16.3%), and Ramada Inn (13.4%). It appears that hotels will tend to build saunas in over 10% of their locations. Motels, on the other hand, rank lower in this concentration. The largest single motel chain Best Western leads the motels with 8.7%, followed by Super 8 (4.8%) and Days Inn (3.7%). As motels are less expensive for the traveler/tourist, their amenities do not

reach the levels of their hotelier cousins. In terms of the presence of saunas across the United States, the absolutely highest occurrence of saunas is found in the 71 hotels or motels in California (Table 1). However, when the percentage of saunas occurring in 50 states are considered, it is noted that the most concentrated occurrences are in the states of Vermont and Michigan, with some 33% and 26% of all hotels/motels respectively offering a sauna. By using the statistical measure of Location Quotient, it is noted that a number of states in the northern part of the US have a higher occurrence of saunas relative to other states (Figure 1). The states of Vermont ($LQ=3.99$) and Michigan ($LQ=3.42$) lead the country, followed by Wisconsin ($LQ=2.84$), Maine ($LQ=2.73$) and Minnesota ($LQ=2.59$). The concentration of saunas within hotels/motels in the Midwest may not be surprising, but the strong occurrence of saunas in New England states was initially unexpected. A number of possibilities exist for the findings. The settlement of Finns in the United States is strongest in the Midwest. The states of Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin have always maintained a strong Finnish presence. The importance of the sauna has been seen and documented in the Midwest by numerous authors (Viherjuuri,1965; Kaups,1976; Aaland,1978; Edelsward,1993; Rajala,2000). Scandinavians and especially Swedes are also found in Iowa as well as other Midwestern states. Whether these ethnic concentrations have had any impact on the occurrence of saunas within the regions' hotels/

Table 1. Saunas in US hotels and motels by state

State	# of motels and hotels	Saunas	LQ	State	# of motels and hotels	Saunas	LQ
Alabama	152	2	0.16	Illinois	290	22	0.91
Montana	84	14	1.99	Rhode Island	12	1	1.00
Alaska	26	1	0.46	Indiana	176	13	0.88
Nebraska	90	6	0.80	South Carolina	166	6	0.43
Arizona	177	9	0.61	Iowa	170	29	2.04
Nevada	70	0	0.00	South Dakota	91	13	1.71
Arkansas	139	6	0.52	Kansas	117	15	1.53
New Hampshire	24	2	1.00	Tennessee	258	9	0.42
California	693	71	1.23	Kentucky	159	3	0.23
New Jersey	119	15	1.51	Texas	614	25	0.49
Colorado	185	25	1.62	Louisiana	127	5	0.47
New Mexico	97	18	2.22	Utah	94	6	0.76
Connecticut	53	6	1.35	Maine	35	8	2.73
New York	234	18	0.92	Vermont	21	7	3.99
D.C.	72	4	0.66	Maryland	70	7	1.20
North Carolina	261	12	0.55	Virginia	242	6	0.30
Delaware	13	0	0.00	Massachusetts	108	12	1.33
North Dakota	41	6	1.73	Washington	115	14	1.46
Florida	541	11	0.24	Michigan	210	60	3.42
Ohio	257	20	0.93	West Virginia	60	2	0.40
Georgia	349	4	0.14	Minnesota	185	40	2.59
Oklahoma	134	10	0.89	Wisconsin	177	42	2.84
Hawaii	10	0	0.00	Mississippi	125	5	0.48
Oregon	104	19	2.19	Wyoming	68	9	1.56
Idaho	54	11	2.44	Missouri	231	18	0.93
Pennsylvania	242	14	0.69	<i>Totals</i>	<i>8142</i>	<i>681</i>	<i>1.00</i>

motels may be assumed, but further investigation is needed to verify this correlation. The concentration of New England states is somewhat less known. Finns and Swedes settled in many of the New England states in the early 1900s, but the presence of Vermont and Maine as leading the region may be better explained by the winter sports that attract many to the region. The well known alpine ski hills and other destinations are most noted for Vermont (Sugar Bush Ski Area, Stow Ski

Area, Killington Mountain) and Maine (Sugar Loaf and Sunday River Ski Areas). Other states that place within the top ten in the country include Idaho ($LQ = 2.44$), New Mexico ($LQ = 2.22$), Oregon ($LQ=2.19$), Iowa ($LQ = 2.04$), and Montana ($LQ=1.99$). New Mexico may be influenced by the many seasonal migrants – “Snowbirds” – who travel to the region during the cold winters of the north, who in term may find the sauna an attraction which the northerners are already used to.

The mountains of Nevada, Idaho, Montana and Oregon also pose a colder climate which have many alpine ski areas which may have led to a growing number of sauna facilities as well. The general lack of saunas is noted in the southern states, and it is not surprising that states such as Hawaii and Nevada have no saunas at all. Smaller states such as Delaware also share in the lack of sauna facilities. Further analysis of directories may also provide a distinct regional occurrences of sauna/hotel com-

binations within states. By analyzing the distribution of hotel/motel facilities and sauna by counties, correlations with ethnic groups and alpine ski areas may be better able to answer the suggestions noted above.

As noted earlier, hotel chains provide more amenities than do motel chains. By analyzing the three major hotel chains themselves, it is noted that the strongest representation of saunas are found in the states of Vermont ($LQ = 5.60$) and North Dakota ($LQ = 4.50$). These values, however, may be somewhat misleading, since seven of Vermont's nine hotel locations, and five of North Dakota's eight hotel locations had the amenity. A smaller representative sample obviously affects the results and introduces bias. The Location Quotient does not offer any statistical limits which would interpret significance of the findings, and this needs to be remembered in reading the findings presented here. Following the states mentioned above were Oregon ($LQ=3.36$), Maine ($LQ = 3.32$), South Dakota ($LQ=3.20$), Minnesota ($LQ = 2.79$), Michigan ($LQ = 2.61$), Wisconsin ($LQ = 2.53$), Idaho ($LQ = 2.40$), and Kansas ($LQ=2.16$). Overall, it is still noted that the mid-western states remain well represented with the sauna amenities. Of all the hotels examined, an average of 13.9% of hotels have a sauna facility. A total of 25 states show an under-representation of the saunas, while the other 50% of states has an over-

representation of saunas compared to the national average for hotel saunas.

In analyzing the three motel chains, an even more obvious concentration in the Midwest is seen. The top two states with saunas are in Michigan ($LQ = 5.97$) and Wisconsin ($LQ = 4.82$). Following in the top 10 are Idaho ($LQ = 4.36$), Minnesota ($LQ = 4.23$), New Mexico ($LQ = 4.10$), Montana ($LQ=3.46$), Iowa ($LQ=3.35$), Oregon ($LQ=3.14$), Colorado ($LQ = 2.66$), and South Dakota ($LQ = 2.55$). Of all the motels examined, only 5.9% of motels offer a sauna to their guests. Twenty-nine states in the union have an under-representation of saunas in their facilities, while twenty-one state have more than the national average.

Conclusions

Interesting spatial analyses are possible from tabulating hospitality industry data. The distribution of hotel saunas may be related, in part, to ethnic settlement patterns, recreational/ winter sports destinations as well as climate. Colder climates make the sauna a viable option and attraction for hotel/motel guests in the northern as well as mountainous western states. Conversely, the sauna does not have a large impact on hotels/motels in more southern and southeastern locations due to the already warm to hot climate. A second reason for this distribution can be made in regards to the dominant ethnic populations. Scandi-

navians and Finns in particular have tended to settle in the Midwest as well as New England, hence a possible correlation to the presence of saunas. Indeed, it would not be incorrect to assert the premise that many saunas were built by Finnish construction workers in some of the areas in Minnesota, Michigan and elsewhere. A number of shortcomings in this analysis are being addressed, and additional and more up-to-date data may provide somewhat different results. Notwithstanding this dilemma, it appears that the sauna is most likely to be found in the northern states, most specifically in the states in the Midwest and New England. The next step in an ongoing analysis of the sauna in America is to find the historical roots and diffusion of the sauna across the country. When did the first saunas of Holiday Inn appear in New York City or in Duluth, Minnesota? From where did the diffusion process begin? Some interesting results are bound to follow in the future. The latest findings indicate that while the Holiday Inn chain in America had no saunas in 1961 nor in 1964, Howard Johnson's had saunas available at two locations in 1964. These included Hyannis, Massachusetts and Cincinnati, Ohio. Further analysis into old hotel and motel directories will provide valuable information in the quest to find the diffusion patterns of this amenity within the hospitality industry.

Notes

- 1 The Finnish Sauna Society estimates that there are three million saunas worldwide, with two million in Finland alone!
- 2 Some of the traditional bathing methods in the sauna include alternating hot-steam and hot-dry air which is done by throwing water on the rocks. The Finns vehemently claim that there is no "dry sauna". Other practices, which in the past included childbirth and cupping, today still include the use of a birch whisk used to beat and cleanse the body, occasional plunge into a cold lake in summer and winter, or rolling in the snow. During the 1950s-60s, many public sauna facilities in the United States were closed due to increasing heterosexual and homosexual activity by non-Finns which is not a traditional practice in a real sauna.
- 3 The American media began writing about the sauna, which turned into a fad amongst the more affluent individuals. With television spots, such as the Tonight Show and Johnny Carson (see photo), this amenity was promoted and many bought or constructed a sauna. Yet, many did not adhere or fully understand the rules and use of the sauna. Thus, many were never used and the sauna was often made into a simple storage room.

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