**GAY SAUNA NEWBIES**

***NOTE: If you are reading this having already entered the sauna, please read it before you get changed. If, after reading this, you change your mind about your visit, as long as you have not gotten changed, we will happily give you a full refund.***

“First time at the rodeo Hun? Well buckle up because it’s going to be a bumpy ride!”

Saunas have been a vital , vibrant part of gay male culture for at least a hundred years. A thousand if you count the Romans!

For the sexually confident and adventurous they offer a safe space in which gay men can express themselves, explore their desires, make new friends, relax, play, flirt and ‘hang out with the boys’ all without the judgement, social expectations and conditioning of the heteronormative world outside.

At their best they are big, bold and busy boisterous fun!

So far, so good right?

But what if you’re:

* An eighteen year old, fresh to the scene with limited sexual experience?
* A trans guy early on in the stages of his gender journey?
* A 45 year old man, just out of a 20 year monogamous relationship

A first time trip to a gay sauna might well be very enticing to all of the above. A long held sexual fantasy for some. But what should they expect? What should YOU expect?

For any newbie, a busy gay sauna on a busy night can be a bewildering and intimidating place, full of intuitive rules and codes that everyone except you seems to know; a meat-rack of men that seem to be confident and assured, some of whom are likely to cross your personal boundaries if you don’t have the kills or the confidence to tell them what those boundaries are.

And then there’s the rejection. Rejection is inevitable. It’s built into the culture and with skill it can be softened to the point that you hardly feel it (a hand casually brushing a thigh which is gently brushed away). But to the newbie, the inevitable multiple rejections can be crushing. How dare they reject me! They must all be racist! And transphobic! No, Hun, you’re white and you’re cis. They just weren’t into you.

Gay saunas thrive on a largely intuitive non-verbal form of communication, known by some as The Code of Silence. Most people get it straight away. But some have to learn the hard way. See that guy staring at you with an x-ray vision that could melt a Cream Egg at 200 metres? I think he wants to be your friend. Feel that foot accidentally rubbing against your shin in the jacuzzi? Chances are that was no accident.

Whilst saunas follow the same rules on consent as anywhere else, these mostly applies to actual sexual activity. Activities that cross one person’s boundaries (but not necessarily anothers), are harder to impose rules upon – especially within such a sexualised environment. Depending on where you go and what you do within the sauna, you may well experience an unsolicited nipple tweak, bottom smack or a groping of your bits. But one person’s ‘violation’ is another’s ‘sexual heaven’.

Of course you can (and should) talk to the staff if you are uncomfortable with the tweaker/smacker/groper. And certainly the staff should seek a solution. But this can only happen AFTER you’ve already been tweaked, smacked or groped (if you’ve experienced all three at once, chances are you’ve discovered the dark room). What a sauna can’t do is fully protect you from this behaviour. Should customers do it? No. Can a sauna ascertain every customer’s propensity for unsolicited tweaking, smacking and groping as a condition of entry? Also no. News Flash: People lie.

To make it yet more complicated (some of us prefer the word ‘nuanced’), whilst consent is every bit as essential for sexual activity at a sauna as it is anywhere else, it is negotiated differently – mostly using the aforementioned Code of Silence.

Put it this way……sooner or later when you walk through the cabins of a sauna you will find a cabin door open with a naked man inside bent over, arse in the air ‘winking’ at you. He is hoping that one or more strangers are going to come along and insert a tongue, finger or penis into his anus.

Not a word has been said, yet consent has been given.

This is obviously an extreme example (and a cautionary tale: if you lose a contact lens in a cabin, keep your towel on when you bend over to look for it!). But it does demonstrate that non-verbal consent is a little more complicated than ‘do you mind if I shag you?’. More importantly, a lack of a clear ‘no’ can be misunderstood to be yes.

Most guys find the Code of Silence very easy to pick up and are able to use it to deftly negotiate their wants and not wants in no time. But, even better, the Code of Silence has a built in safety mechanism: if you break the code and speak, it can be deafeningly powerful. So if you ever find yourself in a situation that you don’t want to be in and he or they are just not reading your non-verbal signals, JUST SAY NO. Loud and proud: NO!

Even better, say “I DO NOT CONSENT”. Any sexual activity that he or they seek to impose upon you after that is a clear act of rape or sexual assault. And both are extremely rare at gay saunas – not least because there are always others around to help once you ask for it.

So what’s the take-away here?

Well, I’d hope by now, dear newbie, that you’d see that getting the most out of a gay sauna requires a level of sexual confidence and full sexual agency:

* The confidence to pick yourself back up and plough on when Hot Guy #3 has turned you down
* And the agency to negotiate consent and to say no to anything you don’t want.

If you don’t feel you have this confidence (and only you can know this, this has to be your decision), then you have to consider if saunas are really for you. Not everyone’s fantasy should become a reality.

However, if you feel that you don’t yet have the confidence but want to develop it, we’d recommend you start by going to a sauna when it’s quiet. You can’t do baby steps when all around you is a sexy stampede!

Two final tips:

1. Confidence cannot be induced through drugs or alcohol. That only induces various levels of stupid, some of which can be very dangerous.
2. Before you begin to use the sauna, be sure to read their rules of consent. Ours are here.

Whatever you choose, we hope you enjoy. Safely.

Big Love

Sweatbox