This week I’m writing about sauna (pronounced sow – nuh in Finland): an integral part of Finnish culture, with about 2 million saunas for a total population of 5 million. Here’s an introduction to sauna from the web site [http://cankar.org/sauna/](http://cankar.org/sauna/).

The sauna is a small room or hut heated to around 80 degrees Celsius. It is used for bathing as well as for mental and physical relaxation.

While a hot sauna may seem a cruel punishment to inexperienced bathers, it is actually a very pleasant experience. All you need is a towel and at least half an hour of time. Start with a shower, and then enter the sauna for a few minutes, listening to your senses. When you’ve had enough, take a refreshing shower, cool off for awhile and repeat once or twice. And no need to worry, it's entirely safe.

The operative phrase here is “when you’ve had enough”. I’ve been learning the hard way what enough is for me, with now two bouts of middle-of-the-night-extreme-wretchedness after particularly heavy sauna experiences. Yes, just as with coffee, black licorice and beer – a few of my other weaknesses – one can have too much sauna.

To get an idea of the ubiquity of saunas in Finland, even a small flat like ours has its own. Here I am sitting in it just this past Wednesday evening.

The ideal kiuas (kee – oo – ahs), or sauna stove, is an object of much debate here in Finland. Sauna snobs (much like the beer, coffee, bike, tool, snowmobile, gun, gear, etc. snobs that we all know and love) will say that the wood heated kiuas makes for a
much better sauna experience. I have to say that I can tell the difference, particularly in a small sauna, between the heat from an electric and a wood heated kiuas. Wood is better. However, the electric kiuas is the most common; that’s what ours is (below).

Sauna has a spiritual dimension in Finland. Its long history here is a part of that, but if the setting aside of a place and time for cleansing and quite isn’t a spiritual act, I don’t know what is.

Public saunas are also quite common here. For example, the swim center that we’ve been going to for the past several weeks has three saunas (mild, hot, and steam) in each of the men’s and women’s locker rooms, and there’s also a cold dip for the crazy (that’s me!). Interestingly, nudity is required in these public saunas, and just last week there was a female janitor cleaning nonchalantly while naked men milled around. Which brings me to another observation: I find the Finnish (and perhaps European) comfort with nudity refreshing and healthy. I think, for example, that it would help an adolescent boy to become more comfortable with his body earlier. I can’t speak for woman, but my guess is that the same holds. It’s just comforting to know that there really are all shapes and sizes … if you know what I mean.

With the holidays over, Jen and I are back to our weekly Wednesday morning date. Here’s a picture from this past week (clothes on this time). At this same church the week before we happened upon a recording session inside of the church by the Helsinki Radio City Orchestra. We stuck around for one song and it was a wonderful thing.