NEWS LESSON

The Irish Saunas Bringing Strangers Together



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Would you try a sauna by the sea on a cold day?
2. What makes a place feel like somewhere people belong?
3. Would you rather relax in silence or with a friendly conversation?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**gossip**	☐	A	relating to the home
2	**plunge**	☐	B	casual talk about other people's private lives
3	**ritual**	☐	C	a set of actions done regularly in the same way
4	**sociability**	☐	D	a meeting, often a short and unplanned one
5	**barriers**	☐	E	things that stop people from meeting or understanding each other
6	**encounter**	☐	F	not arranged in advance
7	**domestic**	☐	G	the quality of enjoying being with other people
8	**unplanned**	☐	H	a sudden jump or dive into water

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Strangers share a timber cabin on a cold coast, talking about gossip and work. A booked hour offers company without a drink, though it is not the same as the pub's unplanned dropping in.

1 Picture a winter morning on Ireland's Atlantic coast. Rain moves across the horizon, the water is bitterly cold and, inside a timber cabin, half a dozen strangers are discussing everything from local gossip to their working lives. For some visitors, the attraction is company as well as heat. A shared cabin offers a place to talk without a drink in anyone's hand.

2 Sauna operators have found enthusiastic customers in coastal communities and urban areas alike. Sessions typically combine intense heat with time outdoors, sometimes including a brief plunge into the sea. The contrast between the two appears to be central to the attraction. While the ritual draws on northern European tradition, its appeal in Ireland seems to rest as much on sociability as on physical relaxation. What brings some people back may be the company as much as the temperature.

3 The pub remains a culturally significant institution, but it does not meet everybody's needs. Those abstaining from alcohol, or simply seeking a quieter atmosphere, may find that opportunities for informal face-to-face contact are surprisingly limited. The sauna offers an alternative setting in which conversation is neither the stated purpose nor an awkward interruption, and in which nobody is obliged to explain why they are not drinking. That absence of obligation is easily underestimated: in a pub, turning down a round invites comment, whereas in a sauna there is nothing to turn down.

4 Urban sociologists have long emphasised the importance of "third places": accessible environments beyond domestic and professional life where relationships develop without elaborate planning. A sauna is by no means accessible in the economic sense, since every visit has to be paid for, yet the shared physical experience does strip away some familiar social barriers. Titles and occupations count for little when everyone is sitting in a towel, waiting for the next wave of heat, and the usual markers of status give way to something more level. Conversation that would feel intrusive across an office desk becomes unremarkable.

5 There are limits to the comparison. Commercial wellness businesses cannot simply take over from enduring community institutions, and confident claims about health benefits should not disguise the fact that intense heat and cold-water immersion carry real risks for some individuals. Nor can an hour booked in advance quite replicate the unplanned dropping-in that made the pub a social institution in the first place. A pleasant encounter on a Saturday morning does not guarantee a deeper sense of belonging either. Warmth and sociability, agreeable though they are, are not the same thing as community.

6 Nevertheless, the trend raises a more substantial question than whether saunas are fashionable. If people increasingly seek out spaces free from screens, alcohol and organised entertainment, what does that reveal about the opportunities for connection in ordinary public life? The answer is unlikely to be especially flattering to the places most people pass through every day. Ireland's new social ritual may be telling us as much about what has quietly disappeared elsewhere as about the pleasures of getting warm.

Sources: RTÉ Lifestyle. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer implies that the lack of drinking is part of the sauna's appeal for some visitors. T F NG
2. The text shows that saunas are cheaper to visit than pubs. T F NG
3. The writer believes one pleasant Saturday session shows that a person has found a community. T F NG
4. According to the text, what people wear and where they sit helps to reduce differences in status. T F NG
5. The writer concludes that the trend shows Irish public life is thriving. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

abstaining	disguise	immersion	institution	intrusive	reluctant	replicate	tentative

1. Guests who are _____ from alcohol often welcome a setting where nobody comments on their choice.
2. A glossy advertising campaign can _____ the fact that the experience is unsuitable for some people.
3. No video call, however polished, can fully _____ the warmth of a shared room.
4. A guest who keeps probing into someone's private life can seem _____ .
5. Sudden _____ in icy water can shock the body.
6. The village hall is an _____ that generations of locals have relied on.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. That absence of obligation is easily _____ . (ESTIMATE)
2. Questions that would sound nosy in a meeting become _____ in a sauna. (REMARK)
3. Urban _____ have long studied how informal spaces build community. (SOCIOLOGY)
4. The sauna is not _____ to people on very low incomes. (ACCESS)
5. The report offers no _____ evidence that saunas improve wellbeing. (SUBSTANCE)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Watch the structure. Some linkers need a clause, some start a sentence, and some force the subject and verb to swap places.

albeit **lest** **nevertheless** **nor** **since** **though** **whereas**

1. Saunas charge for every session. _____ , they attract people who feel excluded by pub culture.
2. In a pub, refusing a drink often prompts comment, _____ nobody in a sauna has anything to refuse.
3. A sauna does not guarantee lasting friendships, _____ does it solve loneliness.
4. The cabins are rarely empty at weekends, _____ a booked slot is hard to find at short notice.
5. Pleasant _____ a single chat may be, it does not amount to belonging.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What could make a new social space welcoming to people who arrive alone?
2. Would a regular shared ritual make it easier to form friendships?
3. Could a place stay special once it became a popular tourist stop?

9 Role-play: sauna or pub?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the sauna fan

You want to meet your friend at a sauna by the sea on Saturday morning. Explain why you like it. Try to answer your friend's worries about the cost and the cold.

Student B · the pub fan

You usually meet friends at the pub on Saturday night. You are not sure about a sauna. Ask about the price, the heat and whether you can talk. Decide if you will go.

Useful phrases

I was hoping we could try something new.

I'm not sure it's really my thing.

It's quiet, so we can actually talk.

That's fair, but it's not cheap.

Why don't we do both?

I'll give it a go, if you buy the first coffee.

Afterwards, tell the class: where did you decide to meet, and who gave way?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 B · 2 H · 3 C · 4 G · 5 E · 6 D · 7 A · 8 F

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 NG · 3 F · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 abstaining · 2 disguise · 3 replicate · 4 intrusive · 5 immersion · 6 institution

6 Word forms

1 underestimated · 2 unremarkable · 3 sociologists · 4 accessible · 5 substantial

7 Language focus

1 Nevertheless · 2 whereas · 3 nor · 4 since · 5 though

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