NEWS LESSON

Could the Sauna Be a New Place to Meet?



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	**associated**	☐	A	spending time with other people for fun
2	**regulars**	☐	B	connected in people's minds with something
3	**socialising**	☐	C	small in number or amount
4	**loneliness**	☐	D	the sad feeling of having nobody to talk to
5	**wellbeing**	☐	E	people who go to a place often
6	**gather**	☐	F	being healthy and happy
7	**uncomfortable**	☐	G	come together in one place
8	**limited**	☐	H	not feeling at ease

3 Read

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

Small cabins along the coast offer heat, a cold dip and conversation without alcohol. Regulars drop in at the same time each week, so familiar faces soon appear.

1 It is a curious picture of modern Ireland: strangers sitting shoulder to shoulder in a wooden sauna while Atlantic waves crash a few metres away. Some have come for the heat, some for a cold-water dip, and others simply for a conversation. What they all share is a desire to wind down somewhere that is neither home nor work.

2 Saunas have been springing up along the Irish coast and in towns, often as compact cabins that can be booked for a short session. The tradition is strongly associated with Finland. In Ireland, its popularity has a distinctly local character: dramatic weather, sea swimming and the chance to exchange a few words with people you would otherwise never meet. Because a session is short, it is easy to fit around work or family, and nobody is signing up for a whole evening. Regulars tend to drop in at the same time each week, so familiar faces soon appear.

3 The trend has encouraged comparisons with the Irish pub. For generations, pubs have offered much more than alcohol. They have been places to celebrate, exchange news and keep friendships alive. Yet anyone who is avoiding alcohol, watching their spending or tired of noisy evenings may struggle to find a similarly welcoming alternative, particularly in a small town where the options are limited.

4 A shared sauna changes the usual rules of socialising. Phones are put away, people are dressed simply and nobody needs to organise a formal activity. Conversation can develop naturally, and it is unusually easy to strike up a conversation with a stranger when everyone is sitting still, waiting for the heat to build.

5 Social researchers sometimes call such informal gathering places "third places", meaning spaces outside the home and workplace that help communities stay connected. The argument behind the term is straightforward: without somewhere easy to drop into, people rely entirely on arranged meetings, and those tend to fall away as life gets busier.

6 That does not mean saunas are an answer to Ireland's loneliness problem. A paid session is not necessarily affordable, especially for anyone who would like to go every week, and the experience may be uncomfortable or medically unsuitable for some people. A fifteen-minute chat with a stranger is also very different from building a dependable social network, the kind that people fall back on when something goes wrong.

7 The interesting question is not whether saunas will replace pubs. It is why so many people welcome another way to gather. Perhaps the popularity of these cabins reflects a wider shift towards alcohol-free socialising, wellbeing and activities that feel a little less organised than everyday life. Perhaps it simply reflects how pleasant it is to be warm while the weather does its worst outside.

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. Finland is closely linked with the sauna tradition. T F NG
2. Researchers use the term third places for informal spaces that are neither home nor work. T F NG
3. The writer says saunas solve Ireland's loneliness problem. T F NG
4. Sauna bookings in Ireland doubled during 2026. T F NG
5. To join a sauna session, you have to give up a whole evening. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

alternative	comparisons	dependable	dramatic	elaborate	gradual	informal	shift

1. The weather on the west coast can be _____, with storms arriving within minutes.
2. A _____ friend is someone you can always rely on.
3. Many people prefer _____ meetings with friends to formal events with a fixed programme.
4. Cafes are a popular _____ to the pub for people who do not drink.
5. There has been a _____ towards alcohol-free socialising in recent years.
6. People often make _____ between the sauna and the pub, since both are places to talk.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. Over the last few years, many new saunas _____ along the coast. (OPEN)
2. By the time we arrived, the earlier group _____. (LEAVE)
3. Most sessions _____ online in advance. (BOOK)
4. If more people lived near the sea, they _____ saunas more often. (VISIT)
5. For generations, the pub _____ the heart of village life. (BE)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Decide what the link does: give a reason, show a contrast, or warn about a result. Check the punctuation too.

because	however	instead	otherwise	so	unless	whereas

1. _____ a session is short, it is easy to fit around work or family.
2. Pubs offer food and music, _____ a sauna offers heat and quiet.
3. Pubs have been popular for generations. _____ , not everyone enjoys them.
4. The session is short and cheap, _____ some people go every week.
5. Visitors should book ahead; _____ , there may be no free place.

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

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 T · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 dramatic · 2 dependable · 3 informal · 4 alternative · 5 shift · 6 comparisons

6 Verb forms

1 have opened · 2 had left · 3 are booked · 4 would visit · 5 has been

7 Language focus

1 Because · 2 whereas · 3 However · 4 so · 5 otherwise

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