

WHY I LOVE SPENDING MY CHRISTMASSES SWEATING IT OUT IN THE SAUNA

Written by Katreen Hardt

It was 2012 when I decided for the first time to spend Christmas alone. My father had recently passed away and my mum had plans to spend the holiday with my sister's family in the US. Sure, I could have flown there to celebrate with them, but being newly single that year, I wanted to be on my own – and somewhere special.

On a whim, I flew to a spa on Fuerteventura, one of the Canary Islands, where I found myself sweating it out in an 85°C (185°F) Finnish sauna every night after having spent my days learning how to kitesurf. The heat not only soothed my aching muscles, but as I lay on the wooden bench, beads of perspiration evaporating from my skin, I felt a deep sense of relaxation. Stress levels were reduced, circulation was improved, and endorphins were released. Thus, I returned home fresh-faced and happy.





The following Christmas, I travelled to a luxury resort on the island of Koh Samui where my schedule was jam-packed with pampering spa treatments like massages, facials, and infrared sauna baths. As there was no alcohol allowed on the premises, I'd sip coconut water from the shell while watching the golden orb of the sun set over the Gulf of Thailand.

Then in 2014, I jetted down to Agadir, Morocco, where I enjoyed the holiday in my birthday suit in a hammam getting steamed, rinsed, and scrubbed. Both trips left me feeling decades younger.

Over the next five years, I went to a German spa situated along the Baltic coast. On December 24, I'd pop open a bottle of Champagne before heading to the wellness area because, let's face it, it doesn't get much better than lying in a sizzling 110°C (230°F) earth sauna slightly buzzed.

In Germany, a country obsessed with nudity, it's completely normal for strangers – both men and women – to sit side by side sweating buckets in a small,

confined space with nothing but a towel. However, come dinner time, a meal I tend to skip on Christmas Eve so as to avoid having to dine all by my lonesome dressed to the nines in a crowded restaurant, I'm usually the only one in the sauna.

Then in 2016, I was just getting myself comfortable in the 90°C (194°F) Kelo sauna – my all-time favorite because it's not too dry, not too humid, and the fresh pine scent is wonderfully calming – when I sauntered a handsome man. Now, I tried very hard not to look, let alone stare, at this gentleman. But we eventually exchanged smiles, got talking, and, well, it turned into an annual meet-up come Christmas.

That was before the pandemic. But in 2020, I still managed to spend Christmas in the buff by renting a flat that included its own private sauna where, if just for three nights, I was able to seek solace away from a world at war with a deadly virus.

And while each year my girlfriends stress over food, gifts, and in-laws, I relish the peace and quiet that goes hand in hand with a lavish spa visit. My only

concern is which white fluffy bathrobe hanging outside the sauna is mine. I can't emphasize how liberating it is for me to mark the holiday in such a fashion.

This year,* I have plans to join my mum and my sister's family in the US for Christmas. But I've heard there's a swanky hotel in the vicinity that offers day spas – and you can bet your bare bottom dollar that I'll be making a reservation.

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Photo credit: Wiebke Ahlswede

Katreen Hardt began her career as a freelance journalist after writing about her experience as Gwyneth Paltrow's body double on the set of *Great Expectations*. Since then, she has become a regular contributor to a variety of diverse publications. She specializes in real-life features focusing on women's issues, from sex in midlife to harrowing journeys of triumph over tragedy, many of which are showcased in the Stories section of her website, katreenhardt.com.