

# Mikkel Aaland



*"It's All an Adventure"*

## The magic of Aufguss, a modern sauna ritual

What is Aufguss?

In 2018 I traveled to Italy and Germany to film an episode of my travel documentary [Perfect Sweat](#). The subject of the episode was Aufguss, a unique sweat ritual.

The Aufguss ritual is performed in a sauna by one or more sauna masters. In the ritual, the sauna master (or masters) uses a towel to distribute scented steam generated by hot rocks throughout a sauna room. Depending on the type of Aufguss, the ritual is accompanied by music, storytelling or entertainment. While performing the Aufguss ritual, a sauna master acts as a lifeguard and watches out for the general safety of the bathers, reminding them that they can leave the powerful heat whenever they feel like it.



An Aufguss ceremony at Aquadens in Verona, the largest thermal park in Italy.

Another important part of the Aufguss experience is the essential oils which are mixed with balls of crushed ice and fill the room along with the steam. Smells have scientifically been proven to go straight to the emotional and memory parts of the brain which explains why the oils have become so popular with Aufguss bathers.

Aufguss is a German word for infusion, and before the word became attached to the sauna ritual, Aufguss was used to describe the process of pouring hot water over plants or herbs to release healing and aromatic substances that were either drunk or inhaled.

Aufguss schools, competitions and events are found all over Europe, and in 2017 the Global Wellness Institute called the Aufguss ritual one of the "hottest wellness trends" of the year. At this time, Aufguss is relatively unknown in North America. In Finland, the home of the sauna, the Aufguss ritual is regarded unfavorably by many Finns who don't appreciate the entertainment and commercial aspect often associated with something they see as contemplative and personal.

The Aufguss ritual comes in many forms, but the three basic categories are Classic Aufguss, Show Aufguss, and Competition Aufguss. Classic Aufguss is mostly about steam distribution, essential oils and the well-being of the bathers. Show techniques are sometimes mixed in. Show Aufguss is more entertainment focused, using music, lighting effects, and often costumes. Storytelling is often featured. Competition Aufguss combines classic and show techniques and judges score competitors based on a variety of criteria, including towel waving techniques, professionalism, use of essential oils, and in the case of team contests, team spirit, and synchronization.



Contestants at the 2018 Aufguss World Championships at the Satama Spa in Berlin, Germany.

## Ancient storytelling revived

The Aufguss storytelling ritual has its roots in ancient history. Storytelling and the sweat bath go back to the ancient Greeks and Romans whose baths regularly included entertainment on the agenda. We have no tangible proof, but storytelling was probably an important part of the earliest sweat bath rituals, going back to the dawning of human consciousness when humans first harassed the power of fire.



The Diocletian bath rendered by Edmund Paulin. More than 3,200 Romans could bathe and exercise together.

Humans, we know, are natural storytellers and from an evolutionary point of view, our ability to create and retell meaningful stories have helped us survive as a species. Storytelling gives us a way to feel in control of the world, but it also attaches emotions to facts, which more effectively communicates useful information that might have been otherwise overlooked. Fire is hot is factual. A powerful fire killed my wife and family is a story that will be more likely remembered as a cautionary tale.

Humans have shared stories in many ways, through oral traditions, printed books, theatre and opera, movies and even computer games. The Aufguss storytelling ritual combines elements of the ancient past, with modern technological twists that include music and lighting effects. The stories themselves range from the silly to the profound.

Aufguss stories range from dealing with serious issues of today (like immigration and gender) to more light-hearted pure entertainment (like a re-enactment of the movie Night at the Museum). Stories typically last 6-12 minutes, sometimes testing the limits of the audience who are soon drenched in sweat.

As the Aufguss storytelling ritual matures and spreads around the globe, other stories tailored to the Aufguss format will emerge. These unique stories have the potential to communicate complex ideas and concepts through heat, steam, sound, and smell, in a novel way that lead us beyond our heads directly to our hearts.

For more on Aufguss, take a look at my book Perfect Sweat: Sauna Aufguss, which is full of images and stories. You can preview the book [here](#) on Blurb or buy it [here](#) on Amazon.