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Scrub-a-dub-dub — It's Off to the Banya for You …

By The Moscow Times

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Not so long ago — when it was still so cold that steam hot enough to turn your skin lobster-red was an appealing thought — I went to a Russian banya for the first time. As I gingerly walked out, I don't think I've ever felt cleaner. I *also* felt minus a layer of skin or two, but it grew back, I promise. Eventually.

So here — for those of you shrinking violet expats who have not yet found the nerve to take part in this most Russian of pastimes — are some learnings from my one and only trip (to-date) to the banya, which I hope will enrich the experience for you when you finally get around to going.

- Swimsuits are not required. Nerves of steel, a devil-may-care attitude and previous form as a sportsperson used to nakedness in the changing rooms are good substitutes if you have them. Otherwise, just grin and bare it (boom boom).

- For women, however, a fading mark from your g-string bikini suntan *is* acceptable. (Please note: This badge of honor is unrelated to the size of the woman concerned). I can't speak for the men since in all respectable Russian banyas, men's and women's facilities are separate, and never the twain shall meet.
- Take your own towel. In fact, bring two. Especially bearing in mind my previous comment about swimsuits *not* being required. You have to sit *somewhere* in the sauna, and I didn't notice the attendant sluicing down the wooden steps after each new shift of customers came in ... (plus, that bright red spot on your buttocks from sitting on a too-hot step is not attractive, trust me on this one. And sitting down at work the next day is always nice ...).
- Listen out for the regular warning calls that they are about to lock the door of the sauna from the inside. (Yes, you *will* be able to get out). If you don't then race into the industrial-sized facility and secure a spot, you will end up having to wait another half hour to do so, and if you don't get there early enough you will end up having to sit next to the furnace (*ow*), or on the step below a lady (or gentleman) with — how can I put this — rather less inhibitions than you. Should that happen, do not UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES turn around to glance behind you.
- Make sure you have your own very attractive felt flowerpot hat to wear while in the sauna to protect your head from the heat. (For the ladies, these can be purchased in a range of fetching pastel colors and/or with appliqued flower motifs from the check-in desk at the entrance. I like to think that men's banya hats come accessorized with suitably macho designs like guns and bears, but that's just my overactive imagination.) I know, it's counterintuitive to sit there naked in God knows how many degrees while wearing a hat — and obviously, it looks hilarious — but trust me, it works. I still have hair.
- If you decide to have a body scrub while on your visit, do try not to act all surprised when you realize that the lady (or, I assume, gentleman for the men) giving you the all-over scrub will *also* be unclad (see how I'm trying to avoid using the 'n' word here?). Apart, of course, from their gloves, which feel as if they're made from a slightly less abrasive version of wire wool — but only slightly.
- And when she walks toward you holding a hose trickling warm water, keep calm. It's not what you think ... (unless you're thinking soap doesn't work without water. In that case, you're spot on).
- Do not laugh as she scrubs your feet and tickles your toes — remember, you still have to roll over so she can do your front. All of it. (Like I said — never been so clean).
- And finally, do not speculate with the friend lying on the next table who is also having a scrub about just how unlikely the "naked client, naked scrubber" situation would be to happen back home. The ensuing giggles are not dignified. Although, of course, neither is lying starkers on a table while being scrubbed all over by a naked woman wearing gloves made of wire wool.

Please note: No bloggers were harmed in the making of this post. All advice is subjective. Get your own banya hat — mine is not for sale.

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