



# SANCTUARY OF STEAM

Soak in history at Stockholm's storied bathhouse Centralbadet

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I recline on a wooden bench in the dimly lit "crystal sauna" at Stockholm's Centralbadet and inhale deeply, filling my nostrils and lungs with herb-scented steam. Opposite is a giant amethyst geode, surrounded by a collection of smaller crystals, and a metal basket brimming with freshly cut rosemary stems positioned over one of the steam vents. My shoulders relax. Beads of sweat form on my temples. My to-do list recedes into the background. I'm tempted to linger, but there's still so much of Centralbadet to explore.

Spilling out over 3500sq m, this multi-level bathhouse seamlessly blends old and new wellness modalities, with hot and cold pools, a range of different saunas, an alfresco gym, indoor swimming pool, treatment rooms for massages and facials, and more.

Situated in a stunning Art Nouveau building, Centralbadet opened in 1904, during Sweden's public health reform movement, when campaigns promoted public baths to be as much about civic duty as personal indulgence. Centralbadet thus plays dual roles – as contemporary bathhouse and monument to Swedish social history. With rambling rooftop and ground-level gardens, it is also considered one of Swedish architect Wilhelm Klemming's signature buildings. However, when the taxi drops us off at the front, the street entrance is so understated, I almost miss it.

Once through the doors, a neon sign that simply reads "BAD" (Swedish for "bath") highlights the flight of steps spa-goers take to reach the downstairs reception where staff issue fluffy white robes, two large towels, locker keys, jade green non-slip slippers and a verbal recap of the house rules. You can, for instance, extend a standard three-hour visit by an hour by paying 100 Swedish krona (\$16).

"But do it before your time runs out or it will cost you 150 krona per person," the attendant says.

My husband and I follow our respective paths into the "herr"



(male) and "dam" (female) changerooms. These are usually sterile, utilitarian spaces, but they are stunning, with emerald and terracotta tiling, and vintage design elements, such as white porcelain sinks shaped like cockle shells and decorated with waterlily motifs.

I shower, change into a swimsuit, and head through the next set of doors. Here, there are two thermal baths heated to 38C, one with bubbles, and one without. There's also an ice bath (chilled to a brisk 4C) and a circulation-boosting Kneipp bath, where visitors alternately walk through cold and warm water.

I like that the hooks in the bathing section are numbered. It makes it easy to retrieve the right towel (and to be certain that you're not accidentally shrugging on a robe first worn by that guy with the hairy back).



## IN THE KNOW

Centralbadet is located on Drottninggatan (Queen Street) in central Stockholm and opens daily. Admission includes three hours' access to all facilities (plus 30 minutes in the changing room), with towel, robe, slippers, and locker key provided. From SK595 (\$96) per person. Spa treatments incur extra cost and should be booked in advance.

The writer and her husband travelled at their own expense.

[centralbadet.se](http://centralbadet.se)

After some time spent soaking, I walk through to the next set of changerooms, which separate the pools from the saunas. There's a sign requesting that guests shower again and enter the saunas sans swimwear but – because these are mixed-gender facilities – wrapped in a towel.

The Nordic sauna has that delicious cedar aroma, but because it's also a blistering, dry, 85C, I don't stay for long. Instead, I stretch out on a wooden lounge chair in the cruisier infrared sauna, which promises to deliver the same benefits in less time.

I then meander between the crystal sauna, a second steam room, and the "salt and desert" sauna. The latter employs ionised salt therapy and a "singing dunes" soundscape to amplify the sense of warm desert winds on the skin.

But I spend most time in the 23m indoor heated swimming pool, which is framed by potted palms and trailing vines, bathed in natural light by floor-to-ceiling glass, and hemmed by a row of semi-private timber booths with leadlight accents. The far wall contains three shower stalls featuring intricate underwater designs.

It's a far cry from the original facilities, which included carbon dioxide baths, electric light baths (the equivalent of today's tanning beds) and a cigar shop. Centralbadet also housed a restaurant – as it does today.

Still in robes, with wrinkled fingers and rumbling stomachs, my husband and I head up to Ecobaren. This eatery serves organic dishes on an alfresco terrace, where dappled sunlight sifts through large leafy trees. I devour a warm salad made from sweet potato, beetroot, avocado, walnuts and pomegranate while my husband has a burger made with Swedish fallow deer. We wash it down with Swedish ale, toasting an urban retreat that continues to evolve more than a century after it opened.

Denise Cullen travelled at her own expense.