

Gay & Lesbian



Deep heat It's getting hot in Hunter Sauna

Pandas in the mist

Arthur Tam steps into the city's steamiest saunas and finds a legitimate business concept that isn't as seedy as you'd think

Gay hook-up spots have existed for centuries – but certainly not on Google Maps. Only a close circle of homosexual peeps knew of their whereabouts and new gays found the locations only by word of mouth. Those places had to be kept secret because police raids were common and queer men could be persecuted – or even executed – in some societies. A gay dude back in those days often risked life and limb just to find a place to have sex. But, over time, these hook-up joints evolved into the modern-day gay sauna.

Fast-forward from those secretive times to a far more liberal Hong Kong today and we see about 16 of these venues – making HK one of Asia's most sauna-drenched cities. Here, saunas are no longer hidden, but are still located in inconspicuous areas, 'not because the businesses are illegitimate, but because we want to protect the privacy of customers', says Ken Siu, the owner of **Hunter**, a sauna that brands itself as a 'youthful hang-out spot'. Since many gay men in Hong Kong still live in the closet (and with their families), man-on-man sex at home is inconvenient so saunas prove to be the best alternative location.

On average, gay saunas provide about 15 private rooms for guests, with a few lounge areas, a changing area with lockers, an open shower, a dry sauna and a tanning room – all of which provide plenty of space and

amenities for sex and a freshen-up afterwards. A definite upgrade from 'meeting in a smelly bathroom or paying a pricy \$1,000 for an entire night at a hotel', says Siu.

These days, sauna admission rates are becoming even more affordable due to competitive undercutting practices. Coupled with the emergence of mobile dating apps like Grindr and Jack'd, prices have dropped from \$160 to \$60 for admission.

"Before, we would have a customer that would frequent our sauna, possibly four times a month, looking for a possible good match. But now, the same customer searches for a partner using a mobile app first before committing to a sauna visit, cutting his visit down by at least half," says Siu. However, according to Mr Mak, a frequent sauna-goer, customers still visit because 'it's direct and jumps over the bullshit of meeting someone at a bar and [we] can see the person's face, body and dick instead of relying on some photoshopped pic'.

The modern day sauna implements many smart business tactics, which sometimes means rejecting potential customers. "If we let someone in their 60s in or someone grotesquely overweight, then what would our other clients think? We might gain

a few customers, but we will lose a future bulk to our competitors," says Sui. The uber-fugly drunks, drug addicts and reported rabble-rousers are also rejected. "It's like running a restaurant. You want your customers to eat fresh meat. You wouldn't give them a rotten piece of food. They'll get sick and never come back," says David Yeung, owner of the **ABC** group of saunas.

With so many men meeting up for casual sex, it begs the question – are saunas a breeding ground for STDs and other diseases? According to Siu from Hunter: "There are two sides to saunas and two perspectives that surround them. From one perspective,

saunas are immoral, filthy, and only [where the] degenerate go. On the other side, it's a convenient, clean place, where gay guys can feel secure and search for the right hook-up." While the health of the individual man can never be

certain, owners do their best to keep spaces hygienic. "Our facilities are very clean. We clean them at least four times a day. The private rooms are fully stocked with lubes and condoms and are cleaned each time they are used. We are a competing business," says Yeung.

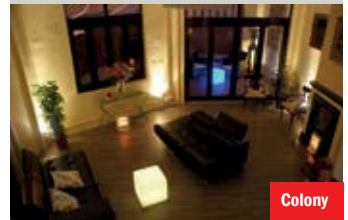
In Hong Kong, where progress means monolithic financial centres and heaven-reaching hotels, LGBT rights are left in the backseat. So what develops in the place of sexual equality are competitive businesses fighting for a piece of the socially repressed man-pie. For the queer who isn't comfortable putting his sexuality out online, gay saunas are great spots for a covert hang-out.

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* Steamy saunas for every gay

Looking for a cruise or just a relaxing steam? Check out **Time Out's** recommendations to find the right sauna for you...



Colony

1. For a comfortable steam

Colony provides space and comfort as the only sauna in town with a wraparound balcony and one of the few saunas boasting a Jacuzzi. Colony definitely brands itself as a sophisticated hook-up spot. Regular entry is \$138 and you can get 20 percent off for entry after midnight.
2/F, 177 Prince Edward Rd West, Prince Edward, 3486 1342.

2. For the new queer in town

Open for just three months, **Club Houzz** is one of the newest saunas in Hong Kong. With a minimalist and chic industrial setting, it gives guests an inviting and sexy feel – great for tourists and travellers. Normal admission rates are \$108 and \$65 Mon-Fri before 5pm.
4/F, Canton Plaza, 1125-1127 Canton Rd, Mong Kok, 3484 2770.

3. For the youthful visitor

Set in a dark black maze, **Double** is probably one of the most happening saunas for the 20 to 30-year-old crowd. Once you enter, anything can happen... but hopefully you come out with good results. Entrance is usually \$138, but there are special nights where entrance fees are \$50. Nude nights are on Thursday and Saturday, and every so often there is a swimsuit night. Oh my.
8/F, Oriental House, 24-26 Argyle St, Mong Kok, 2396 9595.

4. For the sweet-toothed sadist

Alexander, from the ABC group of saunas, is a hit with locals. ABC saunas are the only ones in town with S&M machines. So if you're looking for a different type of fun, you can come here and try it out. In addition they serve ice cream. Normal admission rates are \$130.
1/F, 33 Pitt St, Yau Ma Tei, 2771 0869. **Arthur Tam**



Club Houzz