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Banya No 1 was opened by Andrei Fomin 11 years ago

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## “ Our goal is to take the banya into the global mainstream of wellness and spas

**Andrei Fomin**, founder and managing director, Banya No 1

When you enter the original Banya No 1 in London's hip neighbourhood of Hoxton, you're greeted with celebrity photos – Justin Bieber, Kate Moss, Renee Zellweger – all of whom have come here for the famous Parenie treatment. A revitalising ritual performed in a special Russian sauna that uses super-heated steam, Parenie uses oak, birch and eucalyptus branches to move the hot air around. It's similar to augguss, but the warm leafy bunches are also pressed to the body for

Fomin is looking at further sites in Georgia, France, Spain, Austria, Dubai and the US

deep muscle relief. Following this, a sauna master guides you to a cold bucket shower, then to an icy-cold plunge – to create a sense of invigoration, as well as to boost circulation and improve the immune system. But after the cold plunge, you don a snug robe and spend time resting before starting all over again.

Opened 11 years ago, Banya No 1 has steadily built up a following among both locals and visitors, according to founder and managing director Andrei Fomin. In 2021, a second location launched in the west London neighbourhood of Chiswick and

last year, the first international Banya No 1 opened in Tbilisi, Georgia, which includes overnight accommodation.

But Fomin also has his sights set further afield. “Our goal is to take the banya into the global mainstream.”

### Rest and refuel

The Russian banya has been around for centuries and Fomin knows he's not the first to open one in London, explaining that they were popular with Jewish immigrants in the late 19th century. But the last facility closed in 1943 and he feels Banya No 1 brings something different to the table.

Its cycle of hot-cold-rest-repeat sees guests usually booking a three-hour session. And the ‘rest’ part of the cycle is crucial, says



Fomin. "The banya session is very flexible. Some people visit the steamroom a couple of times, then have the Parenie or another treatment, while others go five times or even more. The only thing we recommend is to take a rest. The golden rule is to spend double the time that you spent in the steamroom for the rest."

Food and drink are also key - they refuel you and replenish the water and electrolytes lost when sweating. Guests are designated a restaurant booth for their stay and served traditional food like salt-cured salmon, mushroom tea or Kvass, a fermented drink made of rye bread and honey.

#### Banya to the core

The Hoxton Banya No 1 includes a public, shared area with a large steamroom, cold plunge ▶

► and bucket shower, with prices ranging from £80 (US\$102, €92) for a 3-hour, off-peak banya with Parenie, to £190 (US\$241, €220) for the full package, including a three-hour banya at peak times, Parenie, honey and salt scrub, 25-minute massage, sea buckthorn tea and other delicacies.

A private banya, called Taiga, is also available to rent for up to 10 people at £200 (US\$251, €230) per hour for a minimum of 2 hours. It's popular with couples or groups of friends and packages including treatments are also available.

But at the heart of the offering is the banya. "Unlike saunas, which are often secondary facilities, it's a focal point," says Fomin. The authentic cabin is built from 6m-long kelo logs – a type of Arctic pine he's particular about because it continues standing for 50-100



Banya No 1 is a family-friendly experience

years after it dies and when cut is fully dried and immediately airtight so steam cannot escape. Humidity inside is up to 60 per cent and the 60-70°C steam – created at a scorching 700°C in a massive brick stove lined with cast iron – feels intense.

### Global expansion

The experience at Banya No 1 is family-friendly. In the public banya, children must be at least eight years old, but in the private banya, it's at the discretion of the parents. Unlike many spas, the male/female ratio is an almost even 52/48 split. More than half (55 per cent) come with their partners, 30 per cent are solo guests and 15 per cent come as part of a group.

"Banya No 1 customers are typically well-travelled, curious people who love to try new things," says Fomin. "And because we take them out of their comfort zone, that creates a memorable experience. We're now building on the success story of the banya concept and taking it around the world – be it a

plug-and-play addition to a hotel spa or a standalone bathhouse."

A third London location in Fulham spanning 800sq m will open in 2025, as well as a larger facility in Tbilisi that will offer traditional mud treatments. He's also looking at sites in France, Spain, Austria, Dubai and the US.

"Banya is cultural," says Fomin. "It has nothing to do with nations or politics. Banya is everywhere – Kazakhstan, Armenia, Ukraine and the Baltic states. It might have different names – like in Latvia, it's a part – but the principles are the same."

He points to a sign from the 19th century for an original Russian banya in London, a copy of which is on display in the restaurant. 'Keep fit and well by regular visits to the real Russian Vapour Baths,' it reads.

"It's so interesting to me," Fomin concludes, adding that the marketing message hasn't changed in 100 years. "These are old and time-proven practices. It's all about the benefits of the heat and the cold. Everyone knows this now." ●



The sauna masters are specially trained

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