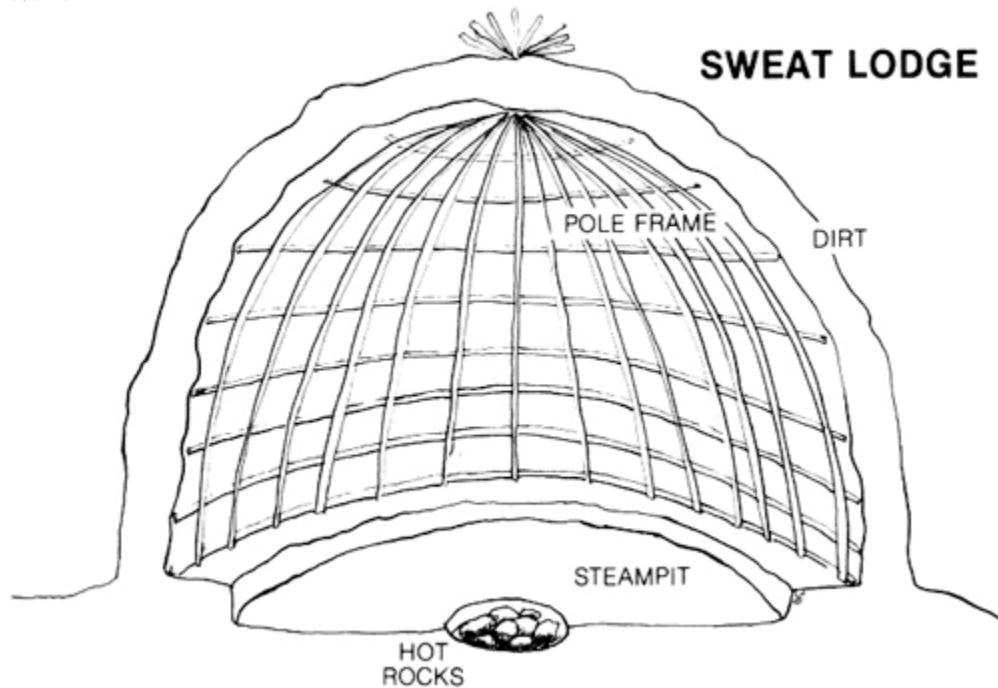


BUILDING A SWEAT LODGE

[Home](#) » [Native Ways](#) » **Building a Sweat Lodge**

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Building a sweat lodge is not particularly difficult, but careful consideration should be given to various details.

Choosing a Location and Sitting the Lodge

A quiet and secluded area is the obvious setting for a sweat lodge. Privacy is essential, yet the area must also be accessible.

Once you have found the site, you must then choose where you wish to place the lodge itself.

There is no hard, fast rule that the doorway of a sweat lodge must face a particular location. The lodge doorways at the base of Spirit Mountain in the **Black Hills** face west. Most **Sioux** and **Ojibwa sweat lodges** face east or west, but you must consider the terrain, location, and setting of the entire lodge area when selecting your lodge opening. In the interest of fire safety, you may have to select your fireplace area first. This will determine the direction of the opening for you, since lodges almost always face the fire.

Fire Safety

Fire safety is of extreme importance in selecting the lodge site and choosing the location of the fire pit. At times, fire pits may have to be dug deeper than what may seem necessary and their location will have to take advantage of windbreaks or shelter from the wind. Even if it is a calm day, assume that the wind could become a factor. Seldom is a sweat lodge built for only one evening's activity; therefore, always consider that high winds can come up during the time the fire is heating the rocks for a later ceremony and resulting sparks and drier conditions could result in a fire.

Heating the Rocks

Early on, assign several participants to gather firewood and rocks. Put one or two persons in charge of preparing the fireplace, building the fire, and heating the rocks. If you start the fire early, the rocks are usually hot by the time the lodge is finished.

Be sure the fireplace is far enough from the lodge so that the ceremony participants can have some privacy. Many times there will be two successive sweat ceremonies, and people usually wait their turn sitting around the comforting fire. Their conversations could be distracting to the ceremony if the fireplace is too close to the lodge.

Rocks should be of limestone or granite, without significant cracks. Use rocks a little larger than a softball, or the size of a cantaloupe. Never use sandstone or other porous, water-absorbing-type stones. Wet sandstone can explode when heated in the fireplace. Lava rocks are probably the best rocks to use because they seem to retain their heat and also convey unusual images when they are heated to a red glow and are observed within the dark confines of the lodge.

Several hatchets, a shovel, and a pitchfork are useful tools for the fire and stone heating.



Building the Frame

If everyone pitches in, you can build a sweat lodge in three to four hours. All it takes is a knife, a hatchet, and a ball of string. The frame is usually made of willow, but any sapling will do.

The average size lodge will comfortably seat eight to twelve people. To estimate the size, first draw a circle two feet in diameter in the center of the lodge site. This will be the rock pit that you will dig later. Sit cross-legged on the ground facing the circle, and leave at least a foot or two between your knees and the center circle's outer edge. Place a stick with a string tied to it in the center of the circle. Run the string a few inches behind your sitting position. The string serves as a radius for the lodge, and you can then draw the circumference on the ground. A nine foot diameter lodge will seat twelve people comfortably. A ten foot diameter lodge will seat fifteen to sixteen people. Remember, however, that a large lodge will be difficult to heat unless it is well insulated. With the black tarp found in so many hardware stores and the blankets participants bring, however, a large lodge can be built that will hold the heat.

Cut twelve saplings with a base approximately the size of a quarter or fifty cent piece. After the saplings have been brought to the lodge area, remove the branches and sharpen the bottoms. If you have selected willow, use the soft branches and leaves for the floor of the lodge. Place the sharpened ends into the ground at an equal distance around the drawn circumference, leaving an opening for the doorway. You may use a heavier pointed stake to make the holes for the saplings, or use a hunting knife if the ground is very hard.

Be sure the saplings are embedded deep enough into the ground so they hold firm when they are bent and tied together to form the domed frame. The bend of the sapling should allow for a large man to sit comfortably. Don't build your lodge too tall or it will be difficult to heat. Bind the saplings with string, fishing line or willow bark peeled in long strings.

To strengthen and reinforce the lodge, tie sapling cross braces horizontally to the upright saplings. While work is progressing on tying the saplings together, send part of the group to gather grass, sage, cedar, or leaves to place on the floor for people to sit on. If wildflowers are available, a sprinkling within the lodge adds a pleasant aroma. When placing the seating material, leave room for the rocks to be rolled into the lodge, usually a foot wide path from the doorway to the rock pit.



Covering the Sweat Lodge

Tarps are excellent for covering the sweat lodge frame. They are waterproof, and if it rains, participants will find a dry haven inside the lodge. The best method is to cover the frame with a tarp and then cover the tarp with clean blankets. The blankets provide heat and sound insulation and also block out all the light. The more blankets draped over the frame, the better the insulation, and the fewer rocks you will need. If it is colder weather, drafts will not penetrate inward. Use a thick blanket, or several blankets for the doorway. For an adequate supply of blankets, ask each participant to bring one or two. To prevent blankets from sliding off the lodge, use twine or tie the corner of each blanket to the corner of a counter balancing blanket draped on the opposite side of the lodge.

Transporting the Rocks

The ceremony can begin when some of the rocks are glowing red. A long handled pitchfork is a convenient tool for adjusting rocks around a fire and transporting them to the lodge.

You will also want to have several five gallon buckets of water both for the ceremony and for dousing the fire when everyone is ready to leave the area. You will also need a dipper and a two to three gallon pail for splashing water onto the heated rocks.

Sweat lodges are easily constructed structures made of saplings bent together and tied with twine to form a half sphere. A pit is dug in the center for heated rocks. The structure is covered with a tarp or blankets. In days past, hides of buffalo robes covered the frame. The earthen floor is strewn with sage, flat cedar, flowers, grass or reeds. Participants gather within the darkened

interior to endure the steam generated by dippers of water poured over the hot stones. Inipi is the Sioux term for the sweat lodge.

While the sweat lodge itself is simple to describe, it is impossible to convey the ultimate culmination of spiritual, mystical and psychic expression of the [Sweat Lodge Ceremony](#). You have to experience it to fully understand its fullness and depth.

The average-sized lodge is approximately eight feet by twelve feet. A group can get together on a remote or semi-remote area and build its own “little church” in a few hours.

In the past, participants visited the sweat lodge prior to engaging in the [Vision Quest](#), [Sun Dance](#), and Spirit Calling Ceremonies. Traditional Native Americans held these main ceremonies to meet the spiritual needs of the tribe, group or individual. The sweat lodge prepared them for a higher, deeper plane or dimension. Before the [Sun Dance](#), sun dance pledgers cleansed themselves physically and spiritually within the steamy mist of the sweat lodge. Then the Sun Dance chief or assisting holy man would conduct the Inipi in the early morning hours, before or while the sun rested on the horizon. Vision Questers would cleanse and prepare themselves in the sweat lodge before ascending a lonely hilltop or before the long climb to the top of Spirit Mountain (Bear Butte) in the Black Hills.

Today, however, the cleansing experience is fast becoming a major ceremony for those of all races, creeds, and nationalities who seek natural, nature based, Mother Earth based expression. Even among Native Americans, for whom it was once only a preparation, the sweat lodge experience is becoming a major ceremony, especially among Native Americans living in cities, who have limited access to other tribal ceremonies.

Once the lodge is covered and the ceremony is under way, the participants find a deep connection back into a past. A tribal closeness to the Natural Way unfolds like a budding blossom. A natural bonding begins within the misty, generative womb of Mother Earth. A bonding to one’s own concept of God, the Creator, and the created Mother, upon which we all thrive daily. The spiritual bond is likened to an attachment to Mother Earth as one sits within her warm womb. It can be a key function in the search for a spiritual link to God’s creation-nature, the environment.

Eagle Man, an [Oglala Sioux](#), equates the Inipi as the ceremony that “intermingles and conveys the lifeblood of the world.” Water is the lifeblood of this ecosystem of fire, water, air, and earth,-the four elements. Although the Pipe Ceremony precedes a Sweat Lodge Ceremony, the [peace pipe](#) is not smoked until after the participants have endured the Sweat Lodge Ceremony.

The Pipe Ceremony honors and brings forth universal truth, but first the lifeblood of water must come forth from the participants.

The four directions are called upon within the lodge. The misty fire heated steam covers you, bringing forth your own mist (sweat). Your universal lifeblood comes forth and intermingles with the misty waters of your brothers and sisters around you. The waters of the world (the bucket of water), which have been brought into the lodge, join and mix with the air of the four directions when the dipper of water is ladled onto the hot stones, making steam. The four winds will carry the life blood out of the lodge to the four quarters of our planet. A part of your lifeblood will seep back into Mother Earth.

The peace pipe is smoked after the four endurances of the Sweat lodge. The participants are refreshed; their lifeblood is traveling through the ecosystem; and their visible breath, symbolizing truth, will be carried throughout the universe. The sweat lodge, in conjunction with the peace pipe, makes for very powerful ceremonies.

The Sweat Lodge Ceremony recreates time and space, at least in the Indian sense. Powers wrote in Oglala Religion,

“The placing of tobacco representing the four winds, zenith, nadir, and Spotted Eagle in a sacred pipe renders the pipe powerful because it contains the entire universe. When it is lighted, life and breath are invested in the universe; and when it is smoked, the universe passes through one’s own body and is sent back to Wakan Tanka.”

The universe stands for truth. It is the Great Spirit’s ultimate creation, and all universal things work synchronistically, harmoniously, in accord with the [ultimate truth](#) of the Great Mystery Creator. All traditional Indians are very careful about what they say while holding the pipe. Their visible breath of their words must be truth, otherwise they would be very disrespectful of the universe and the Creators ultimate power, which was passed through the pipe.