

SPECTACULAR STOCKHOLM

SCANDINAVIAN CULTURE THRIVES AMID STUNNING NATURAL BEAUTY

BY LESLIE FORSBERG

SPRING-GREEN FORESTS OF BIRCH, ASPEN AND OAK COZY UP TO MANOR HOUSES PAINTED IVORY AND CANARY ON THE ISLETS WE'RE GLIDING PAST ON THE *M/S PRINS CARL PHILIP*, A 1901 FERRY WHOSE POLISHED WOOD RAILINGS GLEAM. THE STEAM HORN TOOTS THREE TIMES AFTER PICKING UP PASSENGERS AT A JETTY ON A TWO-HOUSE ISLAND WITH A WHITE GAZEBO. FARTHER ALONG, AN APRON OF SUN-WARMED GRANITE SLOPING UP FROM THE WATERLINE IS COVERED WITH SUNBATHERS, AND GOLDEN POCKET BEACHES ARE DOTTED WITH FAMILIES SWIMMING AND PICNICKING. A STEADY PARADE OF BOATS STREAMS PAST, MANY OF THEM VINTAGE WOODEN YACHTS, ALL FLYING THE SWEDISH FLAG.

Surrounded as we are by such expansive natural spaces, it's surprising to think that we are on the outskirts of Stockholm, Scandinavia's largest city. My travel companion, Eric, and I are in Sweden for a weeklong visit, with equal time in its capital and at an island retreat three hours south, at the southern edge of the vast Stockholm Archipelago. But we don't need to leave the city to enjoy nature. Perched on 14 islands, this beautiful, ultra-modern city is filled with parks and waterways, with graceful bridges knitting everything together. The city is bathed in light during the summer months, with more than 18 hours of sunshine at the summer solstice, a time of celebration here.

We're on our way to Drottningholm Palace, a 17th century royal castle inspired by Versailles only an hour's sail

Sweden's ultra-modern capital retains its links to centuries of tradition.



Near Gamla Stan, 17th-century buildings retain their luster on the islet of Riddarholmen.

west of the city. It's the residence of King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia and, like its inspiration, this UNESCO World Heritage site boasts extensive formal gardens marching off into the distance. It's much smaller than Versailles, though, and is unexpectedly unpretentious, with faux marble walls and floors of wide pine planks. But that's not a big surprise—two of the central tenets of Swedish life are the country's ethos of equality and its belief in moderation summed up by the word "*lagom*," which means "just right."

All of life in Stockholm seems just right, with an abundance of art, culture and design; pedestrian shopping streets; waterside promenades lined by grand hotels on one side, vintage wooden vessels on the other; expansive parks; impressive food halls and restaurants serving abundant seafood and local delicacies; vibrant bars and nightclubs; and museums by the score.

The most-famous, the Vasa Museum, houses an expensive 17th-century mistake that's a remarkably well-preserved world treasure. An elaborately decorated—and seriously top-heavy—Swedish warship outfitted with 64 bronze cannons, the Vasa made its maiden voyage in 1628, sailing only a few thousand feet into the Stockholm harbor before the merest of breezes toppled it. Hauled from the depths in 1961, it was painstakingly restored to its original grandeur. The ship bristles with nearly 700 gilded wood sculptures of mermaids and sea monsters, tritons and warriors.



Bakers show off culinary traditions at Bagarstugan, the bake house at Skansen.

It's a visual feast that's easily rivaled by the city's gorgeous waterside promenade, Strandvägen (Beach Street), where Eric and I rent bikes the next day. We cross a bridge onto the island of Djurgården to visit the new, interactive ABBA museum, whose catchy tunes have everyone, including me, singing, "You can dance, you can jive, having the time of your life."

The musical backdrop shifts to popular tunes of a century earlier, mostly fiddle melodies, across the street and up a hill at Skansen, a sprawling open-air museum and zoo offering living history exhibitions and fabulous hilltop views of downtown. At Bagarstugan, the bake house, a baker is rolling out paper-thin *tunnbröd* (a thin bread typically made from barley) when we arrive. She

uses a paddle to pull a round out of the stone oven and offers samples, which we smear with butter. Its slightly smoky, nutty crunch is absolutely delicious.

Nearby, we come across a demonstration of linen-making. A "villager" wearing a folk dress hands bundles of flax stems to two young girls, and demonstrates how to place them across a wooden rail and wield a lever that crushes them. With each "thunk" of the lever the flax changes slowly from stiff stems to soft, silken, pale-yellow threads. In the sun's glow the flax takes on the same shade and texture as one of the girls' hair.

Climbing back onto our bikes, we cycle through a leafy tunnel of trees before emerging at a boat basin, then double back alongside a canal filled with pleasure boats. Up a short hill, we come to one of our favorite places, Rosendals Trädgård—an organic garden where light meals and desserts fashioned from garden goodies are on offer in a greenhouse. Buying open-faced ham sandwiches on dark, house-made rye bread, we join families picnicking in the cool of the orchard, where clusters of apples decorate heirloom trees. Decorative pendants dangling from branches politely request in Swedish that visitors, "Let us grow in peace. We will be pies and cakes." The bucolic scene, with children playing in the dappled shade, all the little girls in summer dresses, feels like a return to another time.

Just a 15-minute ferry ride west, time seems to have also stood still at Gamla Stan (Old Town), the medieval city center that's home to The Royal Palace and colorful, slightly off-kilter buildings filled with antiques shops and cafes. My favorite, Chokladkoppen (The Chocolate Cup), overlooks the main square, where primrose-colored 17th- and 18th-century buildings are likely the most-photographed edifices in the city. I'm fascinated by the Vikings, and on our last day in Stockholm

GETTING YOUR BEARINGS

Find the National Museum, central train station, the famous Drottninggatan pedestrian/shopping street and major hotels in Stockholm's **NORRMALM DISTRICT**, with **GAMLA STAN** and the **ROYAL PALACE** across a pedestrian bridge to the south. The well-heeled **ÖSTERMALM DISTRICT**, east of Norrmalm, boasts the spectacular **STRANDVÄGEN PROMENADE**, the city's top foodie venue—**ÖSTERMALMS SALUHALL**—and the **SWEDISH HISTORY MUSEUM**. With expansive swaths of serene parkland, as well as attractions including **THE VASA SHIP MUSEUM**, **SKANSEN** and **ABBA: THE MUSEUM**, **DJURGÅRDEN ISLAND** is a summer playground.

Most of the city's neighborhoods, sights and attractions can be reached by walking, biking or streetcars. My Stockholm Pass, valid for 1–4 days, provides free transportation and entry to more than 75 city museums and attractions.

Midsommar, or the summer solstice, is a time for celebration throughout Stockholm, and summer is all about swimming and picnicking. Fall is beautiful, with richly colored forests reflected in the surrounding water. Winters can be very cold; the waterways sometimes freeze, turning them into public ice rinks.





The *Vasa* fares better as the centerpiece of a museum than it did at sea.



Alfresco dining at Rosendals Trädgård.



Baltic herring, mashed potatoes and lingonberries form a tasty combination.

we wander through the Swedish History Museum—which boasts the world’s most-extensive repository of Viking artifacts. As I gaze at an exquisite 1,200-year-old necklace with a metal Thor’s hammer pendant, I summon up a mental image of the proud Viking maiden who wore it.

After rounding out our afternoon shopping for Swedish design textiles, we indulge in traditional Swedish cuisine—Baltic herring with mashed potatoes and lingonberries—on the patio of our favorite restaurant, the historic Ulla Windbladh, surrounded by parkland, on Djurgården.

In the morning, we join throngs at a pier waiting for a passenger ferry. Nearly 30,000 islands and skerries are scattered in the Baltic Sea off Stockholm like a field of dandelion seeds blown by the wind. Many thousands of Stockholm residents have summer cabins in the archipelago, and visiting the islands is a cherished rite of summer. We’re bound for Smådalarö Gård, a resort on an island three hours south by ferry.

Over the next three days we ramble about the island, hiking through its pine forest and staining our fingers and mouths with the sweet-tart juice of lingonberries and bilberries—an intensely flavored wild blueberry—that grow in a dense, knee-high blanket of plants stretching as far as the eye can see. One day we paddle a canoe in and out of coves and around islands, admiring simple, charming cottages and waterside estates, their docks filled with sleek sailboats and vintage wooden motorboats, before finding our own tiny, deserted islet for a picnic lunch. As the sun climbs in the sky, we climb granite mounds to high spots overlooking the islands where, one afternoon, we watch the king of the Swedish skies, a sea eagle, circling on a thermal.

And as night falls, after a sumptuous feast of local lamb, we cozy into the sauna and watch dusk color the sky before jumping into the brackish water, making ripples in our own little corner of the Baltic Sea. Lagom, indeed. ❶

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