



Gamla Stan, Stockholm's Old Town, is the historic center of the city and the location of the Royal Palace.

Stunning Stockholm

Sweden's capital boasts beautiful scenery and cultural treasures

By Eric Lucas

Like other European capitals, Stockholm enjoys a rich diversity of ethnicities, professions and styles that bring a vibrant, fresh feel to this centuries-old city. Office workers in fashionable black business suits pedal along on their bikes. Backpack-toting college students cluster on park benches and trade digital photos. Grizzled fishing-boat captains coil ropes along the waterfront. Camera-in-hand tourists stroll the cobblestones looking for the best picture.

The resident family we're admiring at the moment, though, is distinctly different. Its members are clad in feathers, tromp around on scaly feet, and have a culinary fascination with bugs and grubs. Oh, and don't violate their distinct personal-space

boundaries, which extend about three feet.

They are a swan and her cygnets, appearing to relish life on a small patch of shoreline along a southwest-facing promenade. They've homesteaded this little comma of placid beach at the edge of Djurgården, a vast island park facing a

busy harbor through which boats of every description pass. Across the water is a huge, 10-level Baltic cruise ship; close by is a wooden rowboat in which an energetic resident gets his morning exercise.

We're about as close to the heart of the city as, say, the Brooklyn Promenade is to Wall Street. But it is also wildlife territory.

This is typical of Stockholm, which is distinguished, among other things, by the amount of parks and open space. A map of the city is almost one-third green; yet another third or so is blue, for all the waterways. Urban development is clustered

in compact zones of tidy historic buildings, which are set back from the water.

The result is an effervescent city that literally and figuratively sparkles. Gem-ish clichés are almost impossible to avoid when admiring what's universally considered one of the world's most beautiful capitals. The iris-blue waters catch the Scandinavian summer sun and flick it onward a thousand angles a second. Graceful but unshowy gardens front stone and stucco buildings, the latter painted the cheery hues of zinnias. The sky is topaz at dawn, opal at noon, amethyst as evening descends. Good-natured helpfulness is endemic.

For instance, the docent at the Museum of Ethnography is not only eager to assist when she asks, "Can I help you," she has also easily discerned that I speak English. Virtually everyone in Stockholm knows some English. And they seem able to recognize English-speakers such as I at a glance. I muse about this as the docent explains the provenance of a remarkable exhibit of photos from China's Cultural Revolution.

It's handy to be able to converse in English with everyone. But Swedish is a lily among languages, a lilting, rhythmic and graceful tongue whose dips and trills sparkle like the waters of Stockholm. So I encourage my wife, Leslie, whose heritage and temperament are both Swedish, to

practice the language here.

Her chance comes in Gamla Stan, the city's medieval heart. Most of it did not undergo "urban renewal," and is now a colorful warren of cobblestone lanes and old townhouses. Flowerpots bear geraniums beneath windows; granite blocks buttress steep hills; schoolkids sing nursery rhymes while swinging in a small play yard; gargoyles spill water into hillside fountains. We stop to admire the Italian Baroque style of the Royal Palace, Kungliga Slottet, which was completed in 1754.

Wandering on, we find a coffee shop, outside which are patio tables, and inside which waft the aromas of java and pastries.

"Ask her to make me a four-shot dry cappuccino," I tell Leslie. But before she has time to order, the barista responds.

"You must be from Seattle," says the young woman with purple-tinged tresses and a sunny disposition. The coffee is great, the conversation pleasant—she's never been to Seattle, and don't ask me how she guessed we're from there—but I'm beginning to wonder when Leslie will get

to speak Swedish.

She finds an opportunity as we walk along the waterfront looking for the ferry to take us to several of the city's best attractions. We stop to ask directions of a cheerful fellow, literally whistling as he works, at an ice cream kiosk adjacent to a small park plaza.

"Hej, vi letar efter färjan till Vasamuseet. Kan du hjälpa oss?"



Skansen, Europe's first open-air folk museum, features about 150 historic buildings.

DETAILS

DINING

LEIJONTORNET is a Michelin-starred restaurant in Gamla Stan's Victory Hotel. Some consider it to be one of the birthplaces of contemporary Nordic cuisine. Diners enjoy inventive preparations such as lamb baked on applewood, lobster with beets, oysters with ox filet, and cloudberry pudding; 46-08-506-400-80; www.leijontornet.se.

ROSENDALS TRÄDGÅRD, a horticultural attraction in the middle of Djurgården, has a cafe housed in buildings once used as greenhouses. Specialties include fresh breads, soups, salads and sandwiches, often made with ingredients from nearby organic gardens. The food is great, and the setting is divine, with tables scattered around a flower-bordered patio, or out in an adjacent garden; 46-08-545-812-70; www.rosendalstradgard.se.

THE VERANDA restaurant in the Grand Hôtel serves one of the city's most extensive classic Swedish smorgasbords, with everything from pickled herring to gravad lax (cured salmon) to lingon-berry-topped *CONTINUED ON PAGE 117*



CHADEHLERS / ALAMY



Sailboats anchor in a calm island harbor in the Stockholm Archipelago.

“Ja, det ligger runt hörnet, till vänster,” he tells Leslie.

“Tack så mycket!” she thanks him.

“Oh, no worries,” he replies in flawless English. “Aren’t you also going to visit Skansen?”

We are, in fact, though not today. Vasamuseet—the Vasa Museum—is an astounding restored ship; Skansen is a vast open-air museum devoted to Swedish folklore and folklife that opened in 1891. The two are the most popular attractions in Stockholm. As we board the schoolbus-size ferry back to Djurgården, we avoid talking to anyone just so we can enjoy the music of Swedish conversation. Also, we’re storing energy for the task of taking in just a small fraction of Stockholm’s museums.

There are more than two dozen of these, devoted to everything from architecture to armaments. From the Nobel Prize to weaving to wine, Swedes seem to celebrate anything.

That includes our first stop after we dock, the Vasa. This 226-foot, 1,200-ton oak warship was built at the behest of King Gustavus Adolphus in 1628. It set sail one August afternoon to join the war on Poland, bearing two gun decks with 64 cannons. Oops—too heavy. The Vasa made

it a few hundred yards into the harbor, keeled over and sank in 100 feet of water.

There it stayed until 1961, when it was painstakingly refloated and preserved in its own museum. It’s breathtakingly big, poised on its keel in a climate-controlled building. The special wax that preserves the wood gives it an intriguing shine.

Boats remain integral to the daily life of Stockholm, perhaps more than in any other city I’ve seen. Ferries and skiffs and cruise ships and tugs and barges ply the waters; graceful yachts poise along the promenades, tall masts lining the sky. One fine morning, with white-clover clouds on the western horizon, we board another ferry for a day trip into the Stockholm Archipelago. The city itself is built on 14 islands, but that’s just the gateway into a mind-boggling aggregation of approximately 30,000 other islands, islets, skerries and above-water rocks stretching east into the Baltic. We head for Utö, which means “outer island” and sounds, appropriately, like “out there.”

Stunningly lovely, Utö has several tiny hamlets, a guesthouse, cafe and store, and,

FROM PAGE 115 meatballs. The gorgeous setting overlooks the harbor; 46-08-679-35-86; www.grandhotel.se.

LODGING

Although numerous hotels are found throughout Stockholm, the most desirable locations are on the city’s many waterfronts.

GRAND HÔTEL is on the waterfront, with a splendid vista across the harbor toward the Royal Palace and Stockholm’s Old Town, known as Gamla Stan. The hotel’s service is impeccable; rooms are large and comfy by European standards; and the location is ideal for access to all of Stockholm’s sights. The Grand is one of the truly grand hotels of Scandinavia; from \$400; 46-08-679-35-60; www.grandhotel.se.

THE HOSTEL AF CHAPMAN is actually on the water—this retired three-mast ship with a steel hull was built in 1888 and is moored along the shore of Skeppsholmen across from the Royal Palace. The hostel has 125 beds on the ship, as well as 155 beds in a nearby 18th century building; from \$29 a bed or from \$69 for a single room; 46-08-463-22-66; www.stfchapman.com.

HOTEL ESPLANADE is also on the water, not far from the Royal Dramatic Theater, and within walking distance of most of Djurgården’s attractions. Many of the ferries depart from docks just steps from the Esplanade, which occupies the first two floors of a six-story 1910 Art Nouveau building. Rooms are brightly lit and spacious; from about \$190; 46-08-663-07-40; www.hotelesplanade.se.

best of all, a bike-rental shop. After a two-hour journey through the islands to Utö’s harbor at Gruvbryggan, we hop on cruiser bikes to head out into the countryside. Pedaling past massive old oaks, new-mown

hayfields, and sun-dappled birch forests, we wander unpaved lanes up-island from which brief glimpses of the blue Baltic set off the tan, taupe and olive of the woods and fields. Back in Gruvbryggan, a local bakery provides a classic Swedish lunch: fresh wheat-rye bread, sliced cheese and ham. It all has a rich, earthy taste, as if drawn directly from the nearby fields.

In Stockholm the next day, we dash through Skansen, marveling at the colorful panoply of Swedish folk costumes and the lively rhythm of folk-fiddle “walking” tunes, which are indeed played while the musician strolls. Outside Skansen, strolling ourselves, we wander into Rosendals Trädgård, an organic demonstration garden. Set beneath a tidy mustard-colored stucco estate house, it holds unusually fragrant roses, and borders a greenhouse complex in which a cafe offers light meals of salads, sandwiches, soups and pastries. We take our trays outside and watch kids take turns “riding” a small stone sheep set in the grass.

After lunch, we pass a crew of gardeners stirring a mysterious, earthy liquid concoction in big barrels next to the greenhouse. I raise my eyebrows inquiringly to the fellow who seems to be in charge. Of course, he launches into English.

“It’s, how you say, food for plants. Fertilizer?” I nod.

“Org-, er, orch-,” he struggles to find a word.

“*Naturlig?*” Leslie offers.

He brightens. “Yes. Exactly. The best.”

Yes, exactly, just like Stockholm. ▲

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GETTING THERE



Use Mileage Plan miles to visit Stockholm via partner airlines Air France, American Airlines, British Airways, Continental Airlines, Delta Air Lines, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines and Northwest Airlines. For more information or to enroll in Mileage Plan, go to alaskaair.com or call 800-654-5669.