

New Lonely Planet guide to Sweden: extract

Written by Johan Nylander

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Extract from Lonely Planet Sweden (5th Edition).

Frozen wastelands, cosy cottages, virgin forest, reindeer herders and viking lore - Sweden has all this, and mad style too.

-- Swedish style

In some ways, visiting Sweden feels like walking right into a fashion or home-decor magazine. There are no boring outfits on the streets of Stockholm, and the care with which houses, cottages, cafes and public spaces are decorated and kept up throughout the country is truly inspiring.

But Swedish style is never too showy; form and function are tightly linked in this society known for valuing moderation, practicality, order, simple lines and clever designs.

-- Landscape

Truth be told, the best thing about Sweden is its natural beauty. But to really appreciate this country's charms, you have to leave the city behind. Whether that means sailing across an archipelago to visit an island or two or trekking along a kingly trail through the northern wilderness just depends on your preferences why not try both?

Hiking, camping, cycling, skiing, boating, fishing and foraging for mushrooms and berries are all

major Swedish pastimes, and it's easy to get in on the action from just about any place in the country.

-- The Sami

The northern part of Sweden is home to the indigenous Sami people, whose traditionally nomadic lifestyle is built around reindeer herding. Sami culture, including handicraft, homes and villages, methods of transport and style of cooking, is one of the many things a visitor can become immersed in while spending time in Lapland.

Don't miss the chance to learn about this unique group of people: spend a night or two in a Sami reindeer camp or take a dog-sledding tour. If you're on a more limited schedule, have a meal in a Sami restaurant or pick up some hand-made Sami woodwork or leather goods to take home as souvenirs.

-- Vikings and history



Ancient rune stones poke up out of the grass in parks all over Sweden; huge stone ship settings and unobtrusive burial mounds are almost as common. Walled medieval cities and seaside fortresses are regular stops on the travellers' circuit. Viking ruins and the stories surrounding them are very much a part of the modern Swedish landscape, and it's easy to feel as if you're walking through history. In fact, you are.

-- Top experiences

Stockholm

Stockholm's good looks and mad style could almost be intimidating. But this city is an accessible beauty, as easy to explore as it is rewarding.

Its layout, spread across 14 islands connected by 57 bridges, sounds complicated but it is compact and easily walkable. Each neighbourhood has a distinct character, yet they're close enough together that you can spend time in several of them on a day.

The old town, Gamla Stan, is one of Europe's most arresting historic hubs: a concoction of storybook buildings, imposing palaces and razor-thin cobblestone streets.

Meanwhile, just a few metres from this time capsule, the modern city centre shines like a fashion magazine come to life. Downtown is a catwalk, showroom and test kitchen all in one. Everything here is the very latest thing.

And it's all surrounded by pristine forests and an archipelago. What's not to love?

- Hiking

Particularly in the northern reaches, Sweden has some absolutely gorgeous hiking trails, most of which are well maintained and supplied with conveniently located mountain huts along the way.

The season is relatively short, but it's worth a bit of extra planning to get out into the wilderness. Good places to venture out to include Kungsleden and Padjelantaleden trails, Sarek National Park and Tyresta National Park, just southeast of Stockholm.

The best hiking time is between late June and mid-September, when trails are mostly snow-free.

After early August the mosquitoes have gone.

- Medieval cities

The port town of Visby is medieval eye candy and enough in itself to warrant a trip to Gotland. Inside its thick city walls await twisting cobbled streets, fairytale wooden cottages, evocative ruins and steep hills with impromptu Baltic views. The city wall, with its 40-plus towers and the spectacular church ruins within, attest to the town's former Hanseatic glories.

A UNESCO World Heritage site, Visby swarms with holidaymakers in summer, and from mid-June to mid-August cars are banned in the old town. For many, the highlight of the season is the costumes, performances, crafts, markets and re-enactments of Medeltidsveckan (Medieval Week; medeltidsveckan.com), held during the first or second week of August. Finding accommodation during this time is almost impossible unless you've booked ahead.

- Local cuisine

Traditionally, basic Swedish cuisine is a humble, healthy enterprise based around fish, potatoes and preserved meat.

But in recent years the country's top chefs have pushed the boundaries so that alongside classic everyday dishes such as fried herring or meatballs, or even more exotic northern fare such as arctic char or reindeer with wild berries, you'll also find innovative, experimental dishes that are fiercely global in influence and ambition. Dining out in Sweden can be an experience on a par with some of the best food cities in Europe.

- Göteborg

The edgy alter ego to Stockholm's confident polish, Sweden's "second city" of Goteborg is a city of contrasts, with slick museums, raw industrial landscapes, pleasant parks, can-do

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designers and cutting-edge food.

Try shrimp and fish straight off the boat or at one of the city's five Michelin-rated restaurants. There's the thrill-packed chaos of Sweden's largest theme park, the cultured quiet of its many museums, and you can't leave without window-shopping in Haga and Linne

- Kingdom of Crystal

With its hypnotic glass-blowing workshops, the "Kingdom of Crystal" (glasriket.se) is Sweden's third-biggest drawcard after Stockholm and Goteborg. There are at least 11 glass factories, most with long histories: Kosta, for example, was founded in 1742.

The glassworks have similar opening hours, usually 10am to 6pm Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm Saturday and noon to 4pm Sunday. Expert glass designers produce some extraordinary avant-garde pieces, often with a good dollop of Swedish wit involved.

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