

Sweden is the land



Embrace Sweden and its fantastic array of activities come rain or shine...

In the summertime it is the ideal destination for outdoor types: there's hiking, cycling, kayaking, birdwatching, sailing you name it – if you can do it outdoors the Swedes have got it organised. But in the winter if your taste is for dramatic snow and seascapes Sweden delivers too.

One of the big surprises is that while they may not last long (May to September broadly) Swedish summers are lovely. On a daily basis they are also long lasting – the sun is well up and shining brightly at 3 am! It's understandable that people who have to endure long dark winters, embrace the summer with all the glee of the Famous Five on the first day of the hols. In fact the biggest public holiday is Midsummer Day when every village, hotel and community has its own maypole wreathed in flowers and leaves and everyone turns out to watch the children skip traditional dances around it. Two of our guides were so amazed that we didn't do the same they promptly performed a 'Little Frog' dance for us round an abandoned maypole in a forest clearing. To be fair, another guide said it was at times like this he pretended to be Danish.

Throughout my visit hot sun alternated with heavy downpours, but rain or shine every forest track and lakeside jetty had its group of healthy, tanned people enjoying the great outdoors. And of course the scenery is glorious, from the 30,000 islands, rocks and skerries of the archipelago that lies off Stockholm, serene lakes inland, gentle farmland and vast forests, Sweden is a gift to artists and photographers.

The perfect jumping off point for exploring is Vasteras where Ryanair will fly you in a couple of hours from Stansted. An hour's drive will get you to Stockholm which is a laid-back but immaculately tended city. You can drive easily into the centre, park by the port and lunch extremely well at Pontus by the Sea, a restaurant that has

By Carolyn English

panoramic views and outdoor seating. Across the bay one building that catches the eye has three poles apparently sticking through the roof. This is revealed to be the Vassa Museet an absolutely unmissable museum with just one exhibit: an early 17th century warship with many parallels to the Mary Rose.

The museum has English information including an excellent film of the rediscovery and restoration of the ship with subtitles.

A short walk back from the harbour is the pretty old city, with cobbles and streets of ancient houses and shops. Look out for the street with a Viking runestone at the entrance. The royal palace and cathedral are in this part of town, but the king and queen now live a short boat trip away and use the palace for business. It is guarded by young soldiers doing military service who are quite happy to not only have their photographs taken but will return the compliment and take one of you.

But much of Stockholm's charm lies in the Archipelago so we took an evening boat trip to one of the more remote inhabited islands, Finnhamn, where we were able to get close to nature staying in the youth hostel (perfectly clean though obviously basic) and enjoy a good meal in the convivial Café & Krog. The next day a quad bike and trailer took our bags to the jetty on the other side of the island while we walked through sunlit meadows and woods to meet the owner of a sea kayak centre on a neighbouring island. The scenery is stupendous and the wildlife amazing: she sees sea eagles 'all the time' and it is no wonder that parties of friends increasingly book kayaking breaks in this part of Sweden. Finnhamn is actually a group of islands and became the first recreation reserve in the world in 1943 when Stockholm bought it to prevent commercial exploitation. It is now part of the

for all seasons!

Archipelago Foundation and is apparently an exciting winter destination too, with huge ice floes floating in the sea and wonderful sunsets. Vasteras is Sweden's sixth biggest city and seemed positively thronged after this wonderful escape to the country, but it is actually an immaculate and orderly destination – with an eccentric line in 'hotels.' You can book a night in the world's only underwater hotel (provided you don't mind it being extremely compact and moves slightly with the waves). On the plus side the portholes offer close up views of passing fish. If that doesn't appeal, how about a night in a tree house hotel in the park? It is 40 feet up and reached by a rope ladder so a good head for heights is obviously needed.

By complete contrast our next night was spent in the charming and luxurious Grythyttan Gastgivaregard hotel in one of the region's prettiest, historic villages. Grythyttan sprang up in the 16th century when silver was discovered nearby; it flourished until the mine was abandoned and then development stopped, leaving a small town caught in a time warp – the streets are still cobbled, the houses roofed in the local slate with wooden facades painted in traditional pinks, reds and ochres. The hotel is a fascinating building and has a reputation throughout the country; it's long low beamed lounges are furnished like comfortable sitting rooms from the 19th century, with antiques and oil painting at every turn. The bedrooms are fabulous, especially the 'Four Seasons' in the annexe further down the street. With huge beds, marble bathrooms and in the case of the Winter Room, a four poster hung with crisp white

drapes, an elegant sitting room and a dressing room as well.

The hotel has a superb restaurant which is strong on modern European food but also features traditional Swedish delicacies such as elk meat and cloudberries and the courtyard gardens behind are an ideal lunchtime venue when the sun shines.

I can't imagine a more romantic destination but it is also a sought-after corporate venue and activities can be arranged to keep delegates entertained: try cross-country quad biking, river rafting or a Chrysler Jeep off road experience, after which you can relax in a wooden tub in various versions of the sauna, and perhaps follow it all up with a massage.

Heading back towards Vasteras we went to meet the King of the Forest, the man who talks to elks. They don't quite talk back but they certainly understand him! Actually Marcus Jonson would insist it is the elk who is king, but he has created an appealing little kingdom of his own in the heart of the forest at Kolarbyn.

Marcus is a young man who realised that for most people the elk is as exotic as the elephant; he studied them until he knew their habits and calls so well that he could confidently guide groups to see them. But that's not all; moose tourists live in huts in the forest (including a very beautiful, wildflower garlanded, 'honeymoon' hut), keep the campfire supplied with wood and help cook the communal meals which are eaten sitting on log benches round the fire.

The Swedes of course love it and there is something guaranteed to bring out anyone's Robin Hood and Maid Marian, as you follow a

trail deep into the heart of the forest hoping to get close to the mighty, antlered elk.

Sweden is full of wildlife – beavers and red squirrels, not to mention the most wonderful birds.

Tracking back to Svartdalen, just 30 minutes from the airport, you can sign up for a Bird Safari, guided by enthusiastic experts who can show you unforgettable sights like Black Grouse's lek or courtship display, white tailed eagles hunting, pygmy owls, three toed woodpeckers – the list is endless. And if you need help unwinding after the trekking and excitement, Satra Brunn is one of Sweden's oldest health spas – with up to date facilities set in beautiful grounds – including a health giving spring whose reasonably palatable water you can drink to ensure you head back home enriched by your trip physically as well as emotionally.



Hire a boat and soak up the stunning scenery

INFOBOX

◆ Youth Hostel on Finnham has 80 beds and is open all year round. Tel 08-542 462 12

◆ Holiday cottages (36) can be booked through the youth hostel.

◆ Café & Krog restaurant Tel 08-542 462 12

◆ Kayaking www.kajaker.com or www.paddla.com

◆ Activities on the archipelago route: www.skargardsleden.com

◆ Grythyttans Gastgivaregard tel: 46 (0)591 633 00 www.grythyttan.com

◆ Moose Safari Tours Tel 46 (0)70 400 70 53 www.moosestafari.com

◆ Bird Safari 46 224 740011 e mail: info@svartadalen.nu www.svartadalen.nu/eng

◆ Spa and conference centre Satra Brunn www.satrabrunn.se/eng

◆ Castles, museums and viking graves in Vasteras plus accommodation and camping: Tel 46 2139 0100 or www.vasterasmlarstaden.se

◆ Getting there: www.ryanair.com