

Travellady Magazine TM

Summer Stockholm: Great Weather, Beautiful River Sights and Fascinating Royal History

By Larry Bridwell

The rich five hundred-year history of the Swedish Royal Family blends with egalitarian politics to create an enchanting country. Elegance is combined with an absence of royal snobbishness. For example, visitors are welcomed into the inner courtyard of the Stockholm Palace to see the daily hour-long changing of the guard. Military units with colorful flags and uniforms perform precise maneuvers, and a 30-person Navy band plays marches and classical music. Compared to the more famous changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace in London, Stockholm's visual and sound experience is democratically intimate and more thrilling than its counterpart in England, which lasts for just a few minutes and must be viewed through iron fences.



As a visual contrast to the urban Stockholm Palace, the rustic countryside Drottningholm Palace is a pleasant forty-five minute boat ride away. Two hundred and fifty years ago, the ambitious King Gustav III wanted to match the splendor of his royal counterparts in Russia, France and England, so he built a palace with the best features of the residences of his peers and surrounded it with splendid gardens, fountains, parks and water. It was constructed in perfect proportions, creating an exquisite, serene setting. This tranquil juxtaposition of architecture and nature reminded me of India's Taj Mahal.

Summer in Stockholm is relaxing, especially for families with school-age children. The weather rarely gets hot, and in the town center, the major attractions are easily accessible on foot or by boats that move among the islands of the

archipelago. In digestible bites of history provided in English by tour guides, children and adults can easily learn how kings, queens, Vikings, armies and democratic movements have contributed to the evolution of the successful Swedish society. The unusual combination of a strong royal tradition and progressive politics is exemplified by the fact that the popular heir to the throne is a woman, even though she has a younger brother who in many royal families would be the next monarch.



Women also hold prominent political positions, and they are a majority of the Stockholm City Council, which meets in the architecturally magnificent Stockholm City Hall. Viking legend has it that when sailors wanted to communicate with seaside villages, they would take their ships to shore, turn them upside down and create a meeting space. The tall roof of the City Council Chamber resembles the inside of a Viking ship, with artistic wood beams painted in

colorful Swedish folklore tradition.

The majestic Blue Room of the Stockholm City Hall is the site of the annual Nobel Awards dinner for 1300 guests. The Blue Room designation is misleading, because this ten-story open space is dominated by tall walls with several shades of red brick. In the official construction plans, the architect planned to paint the room blue, but when he saw the different hues of the natural red bricks, he changed his mind. The roof is painted like a sky with white clouds, and is framed with large windows, creating the illusion of an open Italian square.



Next to this room, up a wide staircase, is the Gold Hall, with four tall walls of mosaic art portraying the history of Sweden. This large space becomes a dance ballroom during the Nobel dinner.

Part of the sophisticated ambiance of Stockholm comes from its cuisine. Outdoor cafes in the Old Town offer tasty choices. At the Bistro Ruby recommended to us by the Governor of Stockholm, my guest and I shared an appetizer of carpaccio with spinach, Parmesan cheese and basil oil--a sensual delight. The main course of moist, oven-baked Scandinavian salmon with salad Niçoise and lemon potatoes was another delicious ensemble. Dessert of passion fruit curd with vanilla ice cream and raspberry meringue was original and completed the meal nicely.

Although Stockholm is near the Arctic circle, the summer is warm and inviting. And so is Sweden's royal history and modern egalitarian spirit.

If you go

Official Stockholm Visitors Guide <http://www.stockholmtown.com>

The Stockholm Card

As in other major European cities, Stockholm prices are not cheap, but one can keep costs reasonable. For \$36 for adults and \$14 for children, the "Stockholm Card" allows free access to most of the major attractions, museums and the mass transit system including many of the boats. The Stockholm Card can be purchased on-line at http://www.stockholmtown.com/templates/stockholmscard_9989.EN.aspx.

Take the Train

We took the train from Copenhagen via the recently built bridge to Malvo, Sweden, to board an overnight sleeper car. The private compartment was well designed, complete with a shower within the bathroom. The sleeper car requires a supplement of approximately \$100 and an advance reservation. Remember the reservation number when you arrive at the Malvo station because the compartments are listed by number, not name. From the airport, the train is the best way to downtown.

For this rail journey and others on our trip, we used a rail pass from Rail Europe, which provides many options for one, two, three or more countries. Go to Rail Europe's web site (or call a reservation agent) to decide whether your trip is best done with point-to-point tickets or a pass or combination of the two. Passes are sold only to non-European residents. www.RailEurope.com or 888-382-7245.

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Guidebook

Insight Guides' "Sweden" has chapters on history, modern life and culture as well as descriptive sections and information about the country's places of interest. Also maps and useful tourist information. \$23.95. <http://www.insightguides.com>.

Photos by Lucy Komisar