

Scenes from a city

Stockholm may be spread over 14 islands but, as Lucy Gordan discovers, there is nothing fragmented about this sophisticated Scandinavian city

Last July 14, smack bang in the middle of Stockholm's year as the cultural capital of Europe, the city's renowned native son, theatre and film director Ingmar Bergman, celebrated his 80th birthday and 60-year career. "Stockholm is not a city at all," he said in an interview. "It is ridiculous of it to think of itself as a city. It is simply a rather large village, set in the middle of some forests and some lakes. You wonder what it thinks it is doing there, looking so important."

Indeed. Looking down from its isolated Nordic perch marking the start of an idyllic archipelago of 24,000 islands, skerries and reefs stretching to the Baltic Sea, Stockholm is a cluster of 14 islands within Lake Malaren and nearby parts of the Swedish mainland. They are stitched together so tightly by bridges, ferries, tunnels and locks that visitors would not know which island they are on. Water, fresh or salt, is always in sight, but water – so clean you can fish for salmon or swim mid-city – unites rather than divides.

With its narrow, winding, pedestrian-only cobblestone streets, the Old Town – Gamla Stan – is every visitor's first destination, the centre of Stockholm's history since the Middle Ages. At its heart is the geranium-bedecked Stortorget, meaning "Great Square", flanked by numerous sidewalk cafes, art galleries and antique shops, as well as the stock exchange and 15th-century merchants' houses.

Even the most hurried traveller will want to see the changing of the Royal Guard outside nearby Kungliga Slottet (Royal Palace). Built principally in the Italian baroque style between 1691 and 1754, the massive 608-room palace (one more room than Buckingham Palace) is one of the few residences of a European monarch that is open to the public. Its State Apartments are magnificent, and the Skattkammaren (Treasury) has one of



The old town: the Swedish flag flying at City Hall; and, right, Gamla Stan

Europe's most celebrated collections of crown jewels.

For the best view of Gamla Stan, go to the top of Stockholm's imposing rust-red City Hall (Stadshuset), the emblem of the city. Built in 1923, this graceful creation, one of Europe's finest pieces of modern architecture, rises from the water's edge, thrusting into the sky a subtly tapered 106-metre Italianate tower. The tower, topped with three gold crowns – in Sweden's national colors, gold and blue – commemorates Sweden's mediaeval union with Norway and Denmark. More than 18 million golden mosaic tiles cover the walls of its Golden Hall; its Blue Hall (never painted because architect Ragnar Ostberg liked the look of bare bricks and changed his mind about plastering over them) is the site of the annual Nobel Prize banquet.

At his death in 1896, the Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel, inventor of dynamite, stipulated that his fortune go "to those who had conferred the greatest benefit to mankind". The annual influx of Nobel Prize geniuses and outstanding achievers has, not surprisingly, made Stockholm a cultural treasure house. It contains museums of dance, architecture, toys, Oriental art, holograms, ceramics, Jewish history, butterflies, coins and banknotes, medicine, photography, puppets, polar exploration, Viking gold, postage stamps, the history of tobacco ... more than 60 in all.

Among this huge diversity are several musts. First, Skansen, often called "Old Sweden in a Nutshell" and the world's first open-air museum. If you have but one day in Stockholm, spend it here.

Skansen is on the island of Djurgården, which means "deer park": it was a royal hunting reserve before being transformed a century or so ago into the city's recreation area. The museum was founded in 1891 by a Swedish teacher, Artur Hazelius, who wanted to show how people lived and worked in all regions of Sweden – from Lapland in the north to farms in the south. More



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than 150 historically or culturally important buildings were moved to Skansen's 35 hectares of winding roads and rolling countryside. The farm buildings, churches, manor houses, belfries and windmills represent the period from 1500 to the 1920s. An entire village of the 1890s has been reassembled, too, complete with a pottery, tannery, glass blower, tinsmith's shop and the house where Hazelius lived while he turned his vision into reality.

Djurgården's other main attraction is the Vasa Museum, where a 17th-century man-of-war of the Swedish Navy, the world's oldest identified and complete ship, is dramatically displayed. (It was salvaged in 1961 from the depths of the harbour.) Sunk by a gust of wind on the very day of its launch in 1628 – not enough ballast is the prevailing theory – the *Vasa* had lain more than three centuries in the mud. Today the 70-metre ship is Scandinavia's number one tourist attraction, a huge spotlight presence within its multi-level exhibition hall. Interpretive exhibits and films show how the *Vasa* was built, why it sank, what life was like on board, and how the remarkable salvage and restoration was accomplished. This time capsule is one of the world's great maritime museums. On board were found more than 4000 coins, carpenters' tools, sailors' trousers (in a color known as Lubeck gray), fish bones and other items of archaeological interest.

Also on Djurgården is the 155-metre high Kaknästornet (Kaknas television tower), the tallest man-made structure in Scandinavia. Two elevators take visitors to an observation platform, where you can see everything from the cobblestone streets of Gamla Stan to the city's modern concrete and glass skyscrapers laid out on the archipelago below.

Topping the list of last year's cultural celebrations, and Sweden's most ambitious architectural project in decades, was the re-opening in mid-February of Moderna Museet, Stockholm's waterfront museum of modern art, architecture and photography.

Here the Mediterranean elegance – high-ceilinged, pavilion-like cubes with pyramid roofs crowned by lanterns – of the internationally acclaimed Spanish architect Rafael Moneo meets the finest of contemporary Swedish design.

Economy-minded visitors should use the green Stockholm Card for admission to all museums and many attractions, including Drottningholm, dubbed the Versailles of Sweden, with the world's only unrestored 18th-century theatre; Millesgården, Carl Milles's waterside villa and sculpture garden; and the amusement

park Tivoli Gona Lund; plus free sightseeing by boat during summer, discounts at Pippi Longstocking's house, the planetarium Cosmonova, and buffet cruises on the *MS Victoria*. It also gives you free travel on T-Bana, the underground. Some 70 artists contributed works to decorate its 100 stations, hence its claim of being "the longest and deepest art gallery in the world". Also free are buses and local trains. The Stockholm Card is available at the Sweden House tourist centre, Central Station, Kaknas TV tower, some hotels and Pressbyran news stands. Adults: 199 krona (SA42) for 24 hours, \$84 for 48 hours, and \$105 for 72 hours. Children: \$5, \$11 and \$16 respectively.

Besides museum hopping, shopping is a must in Stockholm. Non-Scandinavians who want to take home either an antique or piece of cutting-edge contemporary design – the city's best buys, even if often at dazzling prices – should shop in stores with the yellow and blue tax-free shopping sign. You pay the tax (14–18 per cent) called MOMS with the purchase, but get a tax refund voucher to be cashed when you leave Sweden. Take note: You can't use your purchase in Sweden, and it must be taken out of the country within one month.

For ceramics: Blas & Knada, Hornsgatan 26, and Keramiskt Centrum Gustavsberg, Varmdo Island, where you can watch potters at work or even paint your own piece. Handicrafts and gifts: Slottsbodarna in the Royal Palace; Brinken Konsthantverk, Storkyrkobrinken 1 in the Old Town; Svensk Hemslojd (Society for Swedish Handicrafts), Sveavägen 44; and Svenskt Hantverk, Kungsgatan 55. Home furnishings: Nordiska Galleriet, Nybrogatan 11. Toys: Bulleribock, Sveavägen 104. Department stores, Svenskt Tenn, Strandvägen 5; Nordiska Kompaniet (NK for short), Hamngatan 18–20; and Ahlens City, Klarabergsgatan 50, the largest store in Sweden.

At Loppmarknaden Skarholmen, the biggest flea market in northern Europe, you can buy just about

anything. It is open Monday to Friday 11am–6pm, on Saturday 9am–3pm and on Sunday 10am–3pm, but go on Saturday or Sunday – the earlier the better – when the market is at its peak.

Ostermalms Saluhall, Nybrogatan 31, is one of the most colorful, old-fashioned indoor food markets in Scandinavia. Since restaurants are also expensive in Stockholm, you may want to gather picnic fare, or lunch on oysters, shrimp and smoked salmon at the bistros of fishmongers Lisa Elmquist and Gerdas.

Travellers on a budget can rejoice over a recent trend: self-



Around town: views over Gamla Stan, above; and clockwise from top left, the grandeur of Drottningholm Palace; more glimpses of Gamla Stan, its street lamps, narrow streets and bars; the 17th-century man-of-war, the *Vasa*; the imposing interior of the Stadshuset (City Hall) tower; and contemporary art at the Moderna Museet



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STOCKHOLM FACTS

Known as the Venice of the North, the name Stockholm dates back to the 1250s when the regent, Birger Jarl, fortified the old town.

Population 1.4 million (greater Stockholm)

Time zone One hour ahead of GMT. Summer time, between March 30 and October 26, is another hour ahead.

Seasonal temperatures January -3°; April 8°; July 17°; October 9°

Telephone Country code, 46; city code, 08

Festival days New Year's Day; January 6 (Epiphany); Good Friday; Easter Day; Easter Monday; May 1 (May Day); Ascension Day (late May); Whit Monday (late May, early June); Flag Day (June 6); Midsummer Day (June 20); Water Festival (mid August); All Saints Day (October 31); Lucia Festival (December 13); Christmas Eve (December 24); Christmas Day (December 25); Boxing Day (December 26).

Currency One krona (crown) is 100 öre.

Tippling Stockholmers often leave from 10-20 kr, or up to 10 per cent of the total bill, in restaurants if the service has been good. A service charge is included in all prices at hotels and restaurants and for taxis.

Sales tax Up to 25 per cent value-added tax on goods and services.

Passport/visa requirements

Australian citizens do not require a visa if they are staying for 90 days or less.

Health No vaccinations are required.

Pharmacies Look for the sign Apotek. 24-hour medical advice hotline. Tel: 644 9200.

Interpreters Available at all times. Tel: 642 9020.

Tourist information The Sweden House, Hamngatan 27, Box 7542, S-103 93 Stockholm. Tel: 789 2490

Police Tel: 769 3000.

Emergency Tel: 90 000 (free call).

Australian Embassy Block 5, Sergels torg 12. Tel: 613 2900.

service museum restaurants delivering quality food at reasonable prices. (Hours are the same as the museums'.) One of the best is the Atrium at the National Museum. Not only does it resemble a Venetian piazza but when did you last visit a cafeteria where you could eat tortellini stuffed with ricotta and dried tomatoes with smoked salmon, basil, spinach and parmesan strips for about \$2.50?

As far back as the 1700s, Stockholm was home to 700 inns, one for every 100 inhabitants. One, Den Gyldene Freden ("Golden Peace"), at Osterlanggatan 51 in the Old Town, was a firm favorite of poets over the centuries. It serves traditional Swedish fare: yellow pea soup and Baltic fish.

For other top local fare, go to Grand Veranda, in Stockholm's finest hotel; Eriks, Osterlanggatan 17. It is Sweden's most expensive restaurant, but chef Pontus Frithiof's culinary wizardry is worth the price of \$250 for two - especially the monkfish with ragout, morels and fennel. There's also Stortorgskallaren, Stortorget 7, Eriks Bakfika, Fredrikshovsgatan 4, and the six Stockholm restaurants with a Michelin star: Bon Loc, Bergsgatan 33, specialising in Mediterranean dishes; Fredsgatan 12 at the same address; Operakallaren in the Opera House; Paul & Norbert, Strandvagen 9; Wedholms Fisk, Nybrokajen 17; and Edsbacka Krog, Sollentungavagen 220.

But the best smorgasbord (a cardinal rule: never put fish and meat on the same plate) in all of Sweden is served only at lunchtime at Ulriksdals Wardshus, a short taxi ride from town on the grounds of Ulriksdal's Royal Palace on Edviken Bay, opening on to gardens still owned by the king and queen. Most people eat the smorgasbord's 86 delicacies (\$42) in five courses. First, herring followed by salmon, then meat dishes including *frikadeller* (meatballs) or perhaps reindeer, then a selection of cheeses, and finally dessert. Some dishes are based on old farm-style recipes such as Lansson's Temptation - anchovies, heavily creamed potatoes and onion. Over the Christmas season the buffet is almost double in size and price, and lavishly decorated.

Christmas, with its fair in Stortorget, Walpurgis Night (celebrations with bonfires, song, dance and speeches to welcome April 30, the advent of spring), and June and July with the midnight sun, are the best times to soak up the atmosphere in Stockholm. July is Sweden's favorite vacation month - which drastically reduces the number of business travellers and the cost of hotel rooms. Hotels to consider include the Grand, the First Hotel Reisen, Lady Hamilton Hotel, Lord Nelson Hotel, and Victory Hotel, all in the Old Town and charmingly decorated with nautical antiques.

It takes only a few days in Stockholm before the urge to get out on the water becomes strong. Perhaps because the archipelago, easily accessible by ferry from the quay in front of the Grand Hotel, seems to intrude ceaselessly into conversation and consciousness? To Stockholmers it's more than an accident of geology, it's an accessory of life - a preoccupation, a passion, a summer pilgrimage, a spiritual restorer. "You've only seen half of Stockholm," said Ingmar Bergman, "if you don't visit the archipelago." ■

Stockholm is one of more than 590 destinations that can be reached when purchasing the Qantas and British Airways Global Explorer ticket. For details contact Qantas on 13 13 13.





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Night and day:
clockwise from top,
the Cafe Opera crowd;
dining alfresco
by the water in the evening sun;
window shopping in Gamla Stan;
and Millesgarden's divine
alfresco sculpture