

Outdoor hot tub (clockwise); Sandhamn signage; beer and shrimp; fresh chanterelles



SCRUMPTIOUS SCANDINAVIA

OUTDOOR FUN AND FINE FOOD ON STOCKHOLM'S ARCHIPELAGO.
BY CONSTANCE PARTEN

IF YOU'VE BEEN PINING FOR a beautiful European getaway that includes fresh and innovative cuisine, cutting-edge culture and a pristine and breathtaking natural setting—and doesn't require learning another language—Stockholm and its surrounding cluster of islands could be just the thing.

Summer in Stockholm is a relaxed time to visit, and August is often the warmest month of the year. It's also when crayfish are in season. This national delicacy is celebrated everywhere with feasts at which the diners wear party hats! In addition to the Mediterranean weather and the festive shellfish dinners, there's also Stockholm Pride—one of the largest Pride festivals in Europe (boasting some very stylish queer girls). And since almost everyone in Scandinavia's Capital City speaks English, you won't feel excluded if your Swedish is a little rusty. Once you're done with the eating, the partying and Pride, though, you'll definitely want to stick around for other adventures. There's plenty more to do, see and eat—regardless of your venturesome proclivities.

BUNKING DOWN WITH THE BEST

The Grand Hotel is five-star luxury, with Old World decor and service. It's been a destination of choice for Europe's elite since 1874. Whenever the legendary Greta Garbo visited her home city, she invariably chose to stay at the Grand, with its waterfront location

and incomparable views of the Royal Palace and the Gamla Stan or Old Town. The Grand Hotel (grandhotel.se) is also a dining hub: For a world-class Swedish smorgasbord, there's Veranda restaurant; in addition, there are Mathias Dahlgren's two restaurants, which between them have earned three Michelin stars. When you stay, don't skip the Nordic Spa & Fitness club—the Swedes do this so well! Going from the ladies' sauna to the ice-cold plunge pool (it's designed to resemble a woodland pond both in appearance and temperature) is an addictive and exhilarating experience.

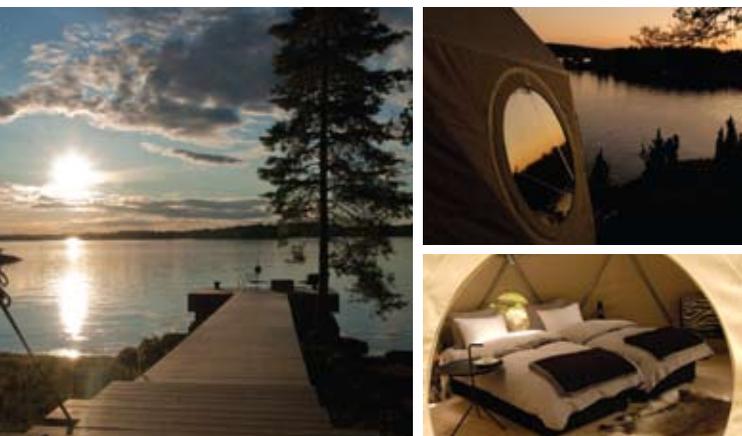
If the Grand is a bit out of reach financially, a more affordable but still stylish option is the Clarion Hotel Sign (clarionsign.com), conveniently located near public transportation and the city center. The hotel's full-service spa is a great place to unwind after a busy day of sightseeing, and the outdoor patio, just steps away, is perfect for a glass of champagne and a light snack while you're still wearing your spa robe. Then get a good night's rest in your spacious room—which of course features modern Scandinavian design—because you'll need to be ready for your next foray into Baltic culture.

ART IN THE ARCHIPELAGO

There are countless cultural wonders in the city of Stockholm, from the brilliant Fotografiska (The Swedish Museum of Photography), open since 2010, to the Nordiska Museet (Nordic Museum), open

since 1873 and featuring the history of Sweden from the 16th century onward. The new Sprit Museum (spritmuseum.se), an unusual and entertaining experience, is dedicated to the history of alcohol consumption in Sweden, and is also a monument to Absolut vodka. Among its offerings, Sprit Museum houses many works of art that Absolut has commissioned to advertise and commemorate its exceedingly gay-friendly liquor. By all means, take the tasting tour. You'll never do a shot of vodka the same way again.

Because you are in Scandinavia, culture doesn't stop in the city but continues all the way to the Arctic Circle. Don't worry—you



won't have to go that far to enjoy Artipelag. It's just a 20-minute drive (or a one-hour boat ride) from the heart of Stockholm (artipelag.se). This new international cultural center, which is the brainchild of the family behind the Baby Bjorn brand, brings together architectural innovation, art exhibitions, cultural activities, music, design and good food in a woody waterfront environment.

Situated on a 54-acre island and nestled among pine trees, with magnificent views of the water, the building was designed by the late Swedish-American architect Johan Nyrén. View the art and architecture, walk the nature trails around the island, then enjoy a romantic dinner at Baggen Restaurant (be sure to make a reservation), taking in a beautiful sunset over the archipelago.

GO ISLAND HOPPING

If you're ready to explore the 60-kilometer-wide oasis of islands and islets that is the archipelago, consider a lunch cruise aboard the SS Stockholm, from Stockholm to the picturesque town of Vaxholm. Not only will you get a lovely view of the islands, the lunch offers a variety of classic Swedish fare, including local salmon, fish roe, dilled potatoes and shrimp salad. Vegetarian and vegan options are available upon request.

To truly experience the tranquility of the archipelago, there is a place that's perfect for groups or couples seeking total seclusion: Island Lodge (islandlodge.se). This rustic, sustainable and yet luxurious accommodation is a short boat ride from Vaxholm and was designed by two very smart Scandinavians. Torkild Berglund, from Norway, and Kristina Bonde, a Swede who has spent time in South Africa, both of whom understand glamping (glamorous camping) at its absolute finest. This private, uninhabited and undeveloped island has seven geodesic dome tents, a tented lodge and kitchen,

outdoor showers and an incinerating toilet. All the structures are in harmony with the surrounding environment, but for that little touch of glam, the tents feature designer beds, tasteful furnishings and compact wood-burning stoves. The large outdoor hot tub, which overlooks the Baltic Sea, is heated by a wood fire. Soaking in it at sunset, as the sea birds arc overhead on their way to roost, is an unforgettable and very romantic experience.

Accommodating two to 21 people, Island Lodge is just the spot for an idyllic wedding, a family gathering or an extraordinary anniversary celebration. Bonde and Berglund offer a host of customized experiences, everything from berry picking to beverages on their private dock. Local chefs can be engaged to provide daily meals during your stay. Berglund and Bonde both speak fluent English, will answer any questions through their website, and are eager to make your visit the experience of a lifetime.

SAND DUNES AND SALTY AIR

For a well-populated experience, head to Sandhamn (sandhamn.com), a quaint old fishing village on a small island on the outer edge of the archipelago. Sweden's answer to Martha's Vineyard, it has just 100 permanent residents, but don't expect Sandhamn to be quiet and sleepy, especially in the summer. It is a favorite destination of pleasure boaters and sun seekers, who gather at the town's marina, its restaurants, bars, cafés and sandy beaches to celebrate the short sweet season.

Surprisingly, Sandhamn doesn't feel crowded, even at the peak of the tourist season. One reason is that the island doesn't allow motorized vehicles, so the only way to explore the quaint shops and laneways—or the island's beaches (warning: the water is a bracing 68 degrees at most)—is by foot or on a bicycle.

When it comes to accommodations, try Seglarhotell, the largest of a handful of hotels in Sandhamn. Situated on the marina, it is at the center of everything. While the average double room is small, the furnishings are comfortable and the food at the restaurant is outstanding. The smoked shrimp with garlic aioli should not be missed and, paired with an ice-cold local beer, the meal is a Swedish culinary gem.

As you wend your way through the islands on your return trip to Stockholm, courtesy of Cinderella Boats, you'll notice some lovely vacation homes, no doubt owned by Sweden's elite; but you'll also see tents pitched on the hills, people hiking and sightseeing, fishing and boating around the shore. All this outdoor recreation is not financed through Parks and Recreation permits or seasonal fees, but is available because of a basic Swedish law known as *allemansrätt*, literally "all-mans-right," which allows everyone to roam and camp freely, as long as they keep an agreeable distance (150 meters) from a landowner's primary dwelling. Martha's Vineyard it's not, so raise your glass of aquavit and say *skål* to the ever-tolerant and generous Swedes, who will give you a summer vacation to savor.

HOW TO GET THERE

Gay-friendly SAS flies direct from New York to Stockholm (flysas.com). For the Vaxholm cruise, a brunch or dinner cruise, a boat to Artipelag, or the Cinderella Boats, Strömma Kanalbolaget offers reliable, clean, efficient and affordable service (stromma.se). To begin creating your itinerary go to visitstockholm.com/gay-lesbian. ■