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# weden's *Two Faces*

BY BARBARA  
WAYMAN

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## The country's two largest cities provide a comprehensive look at a cultural balancing act.

To understand Sweden, you have to understand *lagom*. The Swedish-English dictionary defines it as "just enough, sufficient, adequate, just right," yet in Sweden, it's so much more.

*Lagom* is a philosophy dating to the Viking era that indicates everyone deserves precisely his or her fair share. Unlike the American "more is better" approach, in Sweden, balance, equality and appropriateness shape every aspect of life. The idea of a proper way to go about things helps to smooth the many jarring contrasts in this land of extremes.

In Sweden, sunlight brightens summer nights while darkness blankets winter days. Once inhabited by fierce warrior tribes, Sweden is now a kingdom of mainly neutral pacifists. While Swedes strongly believe everyone is equal, they support one of the world's oldest monarchies. Profoundly appreciative of nature, the Swedes are known for their sleek, modern fashions and design.

Swedes are justifiably proud of their high standard of living, which is derived partly from the country's natural resources of timber, high-grade ore and water power. Yet it's Sweden's unique social and economic policies that have basically eradicated poverty inside its borders. The surprises continue interpersonally, where you'll find the people's practical, business-like demeanor often masks friendly curiosity and deep warmth.

The country has produced its fair share of famous faces, including Greta Garbo, Ingrid Bergman, Ann-Margaret and the pop group ABBA. Yet contributions from Sweden go beyond popular culture. The world has Sweden to thank for the turbo engine, dynamite, the Nobel Prize and the zipper. Even the classic hourglass shape of the Coke bottle owes its design to Scandinavia's most-forested nation. I took the opportunity to explore Sweden's dichotomies from the perspective of her two largest cities, Stockholm and Gothenburg.

### SPECTACULAR STOCKHOLM

Composed of 14 islands on the Baltic Sea, Stockholm is consistently hailed as one of the most beautiful cities in the world. A wonder of architecture, bridges, boats and woodlands, Stockholm has cobblestone streets and sparkling waterways that delight the senses. Most Swedes would seem to agree it's a nice place to be, as nearly 1 in 6 live in the city or its suburbs.

Stockholm can be explored by foot, bus or boat. Tourist

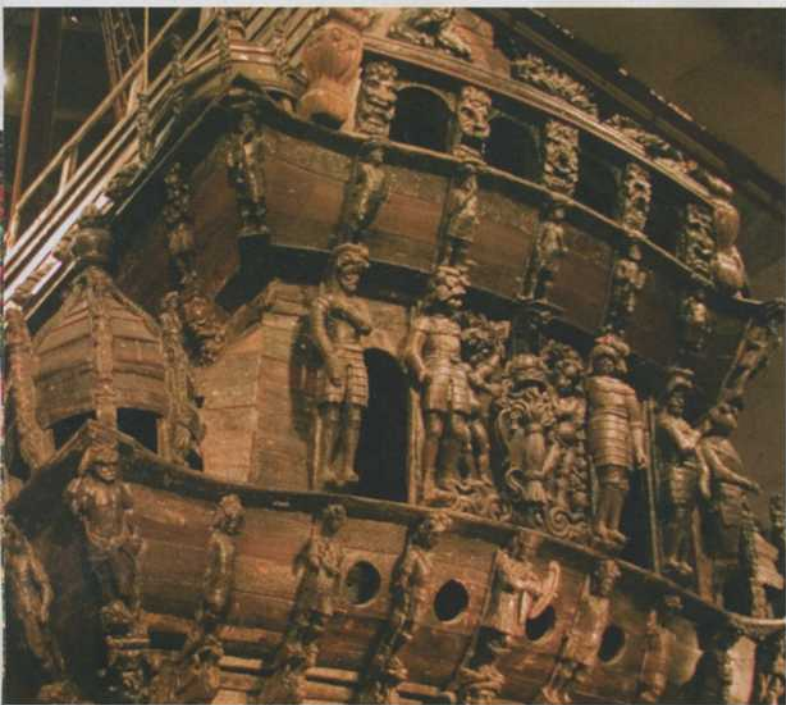


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Theme gardens, greenhouses and a famous rock garden are feasts for the eyes at the 430-acre Gothenburg Botanical Garden (left), while uniformed guards keep watch over Stockholm at the Royal Palace Museum and Armory (above).

offices make logistics easy by offering a Stockholm card, which provides discounted or free entry to 75 different sights and attractions, as well as the public transportation network. Guided boat tours are readily available and are an easy and scenic way to move between Stockholm's main islands of Gamla Stan, Normalm and Sodermalm.

One top attraction in Stockholm is the *Vasa* warship, the world's only preserved 17th-century vessel. Exuberantly decorated with more than 700 carved sculptures on its exterior, the *Vasa* sank less than a mile into its maiden voyage in 1628 and remained submerged for 333 years. The Vasamuseet (the *Vasa* Museum) displays the restored ship and many items found on board, which give a sense of the austerity of navy life in the early 1600s.



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More than 25 million people have stopped to see the *Vasa* warship (above) at Stockholm's Vasamuseet, while in Gothenburg, a different water giant—Poseidon (right)—greets visitors to the city's main thoroughfare.

Another not-to-be-missed spectacle is the changing of the guard at the Royal Palace Museum and Armory. From mid-May until September, a military parade arrives at the Royal Palace in Gamla Stan at 12:15 p.m. Crowds line up to hear the music and watch the display. Sunday's timetable is slightly different, so be sure to check when making plans.

Skansen is the most popular tourist destination in all of Sweden. It's an open-air museum founded in 1891 that features 150 historic buildings. Everything from the modest cabins of tradespeople and farmers to a country manor house are open to tour. I thought of it as a less-developed Swedish Colonial Williamsburg. Wild animals also make Skansen home—I was amazed to see a fox roaming the grounds.

Stockholm's 70 museums attract nine million visitors a year. But if you spend all your time in museums, you'll miss exploring Gamla Stan, the oldest part of Stockholm, with its winding cobblestone streets, antique shops, restaurants, cafes and pubs.

When it comes to cuisine, Sweden definitely has a sweet tooth. I was delighted by the abundance of candy stores and ice cream stands throughout the country. If you're daring, try a licorice flavored cone—it's delicious. If the many candy choices stump you, go for the Bilar. The car-shaped little marshmallows are Sweden's number-one candy. And at least one day, be sure to stop for *fika*—the cinnamon bun (*kanelbulle*) and cup of coffee that is Sweden's answer to England's afternoon tea. Be warned, though—nearly all coffee and tea in Sweden is caffeinated. Every time I asked if decaf was available, the answer was, "Sorry, no."

Ostermalm is the most upscale part of Stockholm, with fine hotels such as the Hotel Diplomat on the main street of Strandvagen. Even if you don't stay there, you can find a prime people-watching venue in a seat at the hotel's outdoor cafe. In line with the philosophy of *lagom*, Swedes don't like to stand out too much. They tend to dress in neutral colors and wear smaller accessories, but they're still very fashion-conscious.

## SWEDEN'S SECOND CITY

In keeping with Sweden's dual nature, it's only fitting the country's two biggest cities lie on opposite coasts facing different directions. A high-speed train will get you from Stockholm to Gothenburg in three hours, offering views of one picturesque Swedish farm after another.

Visually, Gothenburg and Stockholm could not be more different. With fewer bridges and sparkling canals, Gothenburg seems land-heavy, and its architecture reflects a more practical sensibility. But scratching the surface reveals a lively city that celebrates the arts, cuisine, shopping and fun.

Kungssportsavenyn is the city's main thoroughfare, similar to Chicago's Magnificent Mile. There's a giant statue of Poseidon at one end of the street, which helps you get your bearings. Poseidon stands amid many fountains of water, and the story goes that at this statue's unveiling, locals were unhappy with certain aspects of his masculine anatomy. The issue became so controversial, the statue was revised to be more visually pleasing. You will have to judge for yourself if it is.

The biggest attraction in Gothenburg is Liseberg, an amusement park with rides, games, concerts and plenty of fair food. Three million visitors from all over Scandinavia and beyond come to play here, and to ride Balder, voted the best wooden roller coaster in the world for the past two years in an annual Internet poll. I got rather queasy on some of Liseberg's rides, which may have had something to do with all the mashed potatoes, ice cream and veggie dogs I had eaten first.

Gothenburg's Botanical Garden is really special. Meandering gravel walkways casually showcase massive flower displays, charming Japanese gardens and even a waterfall. The garden greenhouses are home to 4,000 different plants, including 1,500 orchids and a rare Easter Island tree.

Eating well is easy in Gothenburg. The city is one of Europe's top culinary destinations. With more than 40 vendors, the Feskekorka (fish church) displays the freshest seafood for purchase and has lots of restaurants if you would rather just dig in. Herring, salmon, gravlax, oysters, crayfish and shrimp are on many menus throughout the city.

Gothenburg's Sjomagasinet is ranked as one of the best seafood restaurants in the country, attracting celebrities such as U2's Bono and Mick Jagger. My three-course dinner of caviar on brioche, fried cod with browned chanterelles and white chocolate mousse with cloudberry jam was so incredible, I asked the chef to sign my menu as a souvenir. Other superb restaurants in Gothenburg include Basement, Fond, Thornstroms Kok and Kock & Vin.

Haga is Gothenburg's answer to Gamla Stan, the oldest part of the city with cobbled streets and a special type of three-story house construction, featuring one story in stone and two in wood. Cafes, antiques and craft shops make the Haga district a pleasant morning or afternoon destination. Jacob's Cafe on Haga Nygata has tasty pastries and filling pasta dishes and is well located for a meal break.

Like Stockholm, Gothenburg's tourist board sells a city pass that gives free or discounted admission to museums, sightseeing tours and transportation. The city's many museums cover science, art, world culture, design and decorative arts, so there's something for every interest.

If you want to rent a car in Gothenburg, be aware of the tram-only roads, which suddenly arise from non-tram-only roads with little warning. You won't really need a car much anyway, as trams and taxis cover the city, and foot travel is easy as well.

## 'JAPAN FOR BLONDES'

One of my American friends who spent quite a bit of time in Sweden described it as "Japan for blonde people," and I found the analogy apt. The Swedish pressure to conform leads to some curious sights, like gaggles of young women wearing nearly the same high-fashion outfit.

Yet the assumption that everyone will follow the rules leads to a very laid-back, interactive vibe. It's always presumed people have the proper ticket or paperwork, and everyone's demeanor is very calm, which certainly makes for a pleasant vacation.

Sweden does feel foreign, with its rocky landscape, musical language and surprisingly comfortable, futon-like beds. With a culture that once explored all of its surrounding waters, Swedes can't get enough of the scenery or comforts of home and excel at decorating, cooking and enjoying family life.

With all its extremes and contradictions, Sweden is an easy country to love. The *lagom* ideal says that for everything in life there is the perfect, right amount. So *lagom* really equals perfection. How fitting.

Barbara Wayman  
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## PLANNING YOUR TRIP

For specific information on Sweden, visit [www.visitsweden.com](http://www.visitsweden.com) or [www.goscandinavia.com](http://www.goscandinavia.com). For travel planning information, visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

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