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THE SWEDISH CAPITAL EMBRACES LONG WINTER NIGHTS AND LOWER TEMPERATURES WITH TRADITIONS THAT HIGHLIGHT THE RICH HISTORY OF THE CITY AND THE WARMTH OF ITS RESIDENTS.
BY LOLA AKINMADE ÅKERSTRÖM



As you meander across weathered cobblestones, the spicy aroma of “glogg,” a hot mulled wine, fills the cold, crisp air, guiding you closer to Gamla Stan, the heart of Stockholm’s old town. Past colorful, 17th-century Dutch-style row houses, the piquant scent permeates the air, joined by the sweetness of candied almonds roasting over open flames. As you draw closer to Stortorget, the main square in the middle of Gamla Stan, the glimmer of merchants’ booths and hum of a spirited crowd become apparent. It’s a centuries-old tradition that takes people back in time: Stortorget’s Julmarknad, Stockholm’s most popular holiday market.

It’s barely 4 p.m., yet daylight has already faded away. Once at Stortorget, you bask in the glow emanating from red timber stalls filled with artisans and the interior light streaming from homes, some still touched by medieval decor and masonry.

You’re filled with a sense that this modern cosmopolitan city is still traditionalist at heart—particularly during the winter months. When snow coats Stockholm like sugary white icing, the harbor freezes over and its glossy surface reflects the city lights like twinkling stars. The sky fades to dark indigo and Stockholmers gather in cafes and markets, where the cold air is no match for the local warmth.

Taste of Tradition

Spread across 14 distinct islands, a small number compared to the more than 28,000 islands that make up Stockholm’s greater archipelago, the city seems to be at its most active during the peak of summer when the sun hardly sets. Locals are usually out in full force under the temperate sun, and ferries dart across the bay shuttling both visitors and residents.

Those seeking an insider’s taste of Stockholm, however—away from the crowds and fanfare that often accompany the summer tourist season—should explore the Scandinavian metropolis during winter, when cultural activities and cold-weather culinary offerings give a glimpse into the traditional soul of Sweden.

During December, follow locals to seasonal markets. In addition to Stortorget’s Julmarknad, there is also the Julmarknad in Kungsträdgården where visitors can weave through stalls of vendors selling Christmas decorations, glass ornaments, handmade jams, smoked meats, spices, artisanal cheeses, ginger-snap cookies known as “pepparkakor” and, of course, glogg, which is often served with raisins and blanched almonds. Even the official residence of Sweden’s royal family, Drottningholm, offers its own two-day winter market on the palace grounds, where blacksmiths, woodcarvers, textile weavers and food vendors bring in handmade goods and fresh products to sell.

Skansen, the world’s oldest open-air museum, also hosts a seasonal market. Skansen itself opened in 1891 to preserve and spotlight Swedish culture, making the market a truly transcending experience. The city’s pre-industrial era is alive and well here, giving all visitors a glimpse into old-fashioned Swedish life at the turn of the century. Milling around are traditional artisans at work weaving, smelting and baking while wearing period outfits and scurrying in and out of classic Swedish red cottages. Rustic barns also populate the grounds, with farm animals and a zoo that’s home to Nordic wildlife such as reindeer, lynxes and moose.

While perusing the city’s displays, two distinct figurines will be recurring sights. The first is “jultomte,” a tiny fellow who sports a long white beard and a pointy red cap. Known as the Christmas gnome, modern



SAMPLING SWEDEN

Mulled wine, or “glogg,” is a Nordic tradition that can easily be enjoyed stateside—with the ideal setting being Montage Deer Valley in Park City, Utah. The resort’s mulled wine and cider station fills Vista Lounge with aromas of spice and fruit from 3-9 p.m. during the winter season, and serves up warm spiked or nonalcoholic varieties of the popular apres-ski beverages.



Winter travelers to Stockholm get the opportunity to indulge in seasonal treats such as warm waffles at Christmas markets (top right), semlor (bottom right) and the jultbord (bottom left).



both natural and artificial illumination revered in the Swedish capital. The typical home is usually sparsely decorated with a heavy focus placed on bringing light into the space through windows, lamps, light-colored fabrics and candles.

This preoccupation makes its way onto the streets during winter. An outdoor stroll will reveal strategically placed, hockey puck-shaped candles lining sidewalks all over town, bringing the same ambience and coziness of a Stockholm residence right onto the street.

Fashioned after the 16th-century Spanish tradition of lighting bonfires along the roads to lead people to midnight mass at Catholic churches, the lighting of “luminarias”—candles placed inside sand-filled paper bags—has taken on a whole new meaning in Sweden. These lights are now used decoratively in Stockholm and, considering it’s dark by 4 p.m., the glittering runways safely show pedestrians to festively decorated storefronts.

Along with the candles that dot sidewalks, large, twinkling stars hanging in the windows of both homes and businesses are a common winter sight. Standing in stark contrast against the night sky, these stars—often white or red—brighten the city and make for postcard-perfect scenes. Oftentimes the stars are replaced by electric Advent candelabras that Swedes of any and all religious affiliations display proudly in their windowsills.

Swedish Soul Food

Those willing to brave Stockholm’s winter temperatures are rewarded handsomely by its abundance of hearty fare. The city has its share of Michelin-starred restaurants on the forefront of the new Nordic cuisine trend as well as a burgeoning food truck culture to appease palates of all kinds. To get the most out of the Swedish culinary experience, however, one must delve into Sweden’s version of soul food, called “husmanskost.”

versions of the figure resemble the American Santa Claus. Alongside the jultomte often stands the Yule goat, called the “julbock,” a symbol dating back to the 1800s when it was presumed that someone dressed as a billy goat doled out Christmas gifts to children. Though its meaning has shifted with the popularity of the modern Santa Claus, the julbock is a common ornament during the holidays, often made with woven straw or raffia, or sometimes carved out of wood. The two characters can be found not only in homes, but also storefronts and restaurants during the holiday season.

Lighting the Night

Navigating seasonal markets (not to mention the rest of the city) is made easier during winter months thanks to the Swedish fixation with light. Centuries of dark winters—during January, Stockholm can get less than six hours of daylight—have made



Popular city blocks are draped in lights and other festive decor during winter.

While a typical Swedish smorgasbord has a few base husmanskost staples such as pickled herring (“sill”), meatballs (“kottbullar”), and cured salmon (“gravad lax”), this traditional buffet morphs into the “julbord”—Christmas smorgasbord—with dishes added during the winter season.

From glazed ham and pork sausages to egg and anchovy mixtures, herring salad, homemade liver pate and a special potato and pickled sprat casserole called Jansson’s temptation (allegedly named after Pelle Jansson, a food-loving Swedish opera singer from the early 1900s), various incarnations of the julbord are served in more than 100 eateries. Restaurants such as Fåfången, with its views of Stockholm’s harbor; Bockholmen, out in the archipelago; the upscale Berns Asiatiska downtown; and even the world’s largest Ikea in Kungens Kurva serve popular spreads.

Fika Like a Local

No matter which restaurant sates your appetite, be sure to save space for coffee. As a city with one of the highest volumes of coffee consumption in the world, Stockholm’s cafe culture quickly captivates visitors. This tradition isn’t centered around the act of drinking coffee, but rather the ceremonial sharing with friends, colleagues and family in a social situation known as “fika.”

Pronounced “fee-ka,” the cultural institution is widely translated into taking a break from work and daily tasks to socialize over cups of joe, which are often accompanied by freshly baked buns. Collectively known as “fikabrod,” the most popular type of these pastries are the cinnamon buns, known as “kanelbullar.” During winter, festive golden buns called “lussekatter” are also popular. Infused with saffron and dark raisins, the bread makes for a sweet, warm treat on any brisk night.

Between January and March, Stockholm’s bakeries are stocked with cream-filled wheat buns known as “semmla” or, in plural form, “semmlor.”

Like glowing orbs oozing with decadent almond-paste fillings, they lure window shoppers in with the sweet smell of cardamom and have become a signature scent and taste during cold-weather months.

Semmlor became popular in Sweden as early as 1541. Originally eaten only on Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday, locals now start indulging in semmlor immediately after New Year’s Eve, and the pastries are enjoyed up until Easter. The treat’s allure is legendary—in 1771, King Adolf Frederick of Sweden was rumored to have died as a result of a hefty dinner followed by 14 servings of semla, his favorite dessert.

While dozens of cafes carry their own variation of the sweet buns, be sure to sample those of Vete-Katten bakery, whose version has won awards and also comes in lactose- and gluten-free varieties.

Although many winter travelers seek warm-weather escapes, those that take to Stockholm while it’s blanketed in white will gain an uncommon appreciation for the capital. The city’s modern infrastructure provides convenience, while the history and traditions that have been so immaculately preserved shine through dark nights, offering a warm hospitality that is simply timeless. **M**



Stockholmers partaking in “fika,” or a coffee break

SEEING STOCKHOLM

Making the trek to Stockholm during the winter months gives travelers a closer glimpse into local culture. There are, however, a few things to keep in mind to ensure an enjoyable journey.

AVOID RENTAL CARS: Stockholm’s public transportation is punctual and extensive, so renting a car is unnecessary. Also, travelers who aren’t used to driving in snowy conditions should avoid it altogether.

PLAN YOUR SIGHTSEEING HOURS ACCORDINGLY: The city covered in snow is an absolutely stunning sight, but with only about five to six hours of daylight at the peak

of winter, sightseeing can be difficult. Be sure to schedule your trips so that you get the most out of the sun’s rays—either for taking photos or navigating the city’s sites and attractions.



PACK AND LAYER PROPERLY: Gloves, jackets and warm hats may not be enough for travelers who aren’t acclimated to the area’s seasonal temperatures. Be sure to invest in some long wool or cotton underwear, which can be worn beneath pants to provide extra warmth.

SHOP EARLY: Many stores have modified business hours between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m., with few staying open past 6 p.m., so plan your shopping for earlier in the day.

WEAR FLAT, STURDY BOOTS: Avoid heels and opt for boots that feature friction tracks or grooves. While the cobblestones in some parts of the city are charming, they also cause sidewalks and paths to be slippery and uneven.

