



SWEDE SPOT

Story by Caroline Phillips



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 If you don't see any
 blonds during your stay,
 it may be difficult to
 leverage a refund.

When the pilot lands the plane and says in a jolly voice that the ground temperature is minus anything, it's enough to send me back to my bed in thermals and with a steaming cup of ginger tea.

Like now. I hate the cold. Worse than that, whoever does the early March web weather forecast has had a laugh and put a positive spin on Swedish thermometer readings - so I am not now prepared for Stockholm's sub Arctic temperatures.

I haven't planned on minus anything, except arriving minus my heavy winter coat. Which is why - as we walk to the airport cab - I'm now feeling chilled to my neurons by the five below zero temperature and wind chill factor of about minus twenty billion. Meanwhile my husband - whose body thermostat is set about 20 degrees above mine - is looking somewhat smug. Welcome to Sweden, the home of Bergman, Strindberg and Abba.

Stieg Larsson's trilogy *Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* put Stockholm on the

map recently. Much of the city is made up of waterways and parks. It also has numerous islands within easy reach, if you're happy to negotiate ice blocks like large jigsaw pieces floating on the water. What else do you need to know? Sweden has little more than 9 million people, high taxation funding comprehensive welfare and education, world-beating corporations, and all that blah. It's known also for the orderliness of its civil life and the fluency of much of the population in foreign languages, particularly English.

Then there's the more interesting underbelly. Sweden was closely connected to Germany during the war and the Nazi connection ran deep. (The subterranean force of violent Nazism is one of Stieg Larsson's themes.) Now on one level there's commitment to peace and neutrality - yet Sweden has a large arms industry. Poverty, criminality and brutality are reported to lurk under the orderly appearances. Parties of the far right appeal to a significant number of voters. I have to reveal my thoughts on Sweden



Copenhagen (not Stockholm) takes the platinum-plated biscuit for 'most expensive city in Europe'. Closely followed by Helsinki and, let's face it, anywhere in Switzerland.

now and, if you read on, you'll find out why I can't tell you later.

But back to important matters. As we drive into town, I add to my hypothermia the miserable fact that my dad (still warm in London) has just told me that Stockholm is the most expensive city in Europe. (He collects that sort of information: he hasn't even been here. Actually I think he may be wrong and that Copenhagen takes the platinum-plated biscuit for that particular accolade. Closely followed by Helsinki, and let's face it, anywhere in Switzerland.) Anyway, you get the picture of our cheery marital arrival in the blue grey light of Stockholm.

I was not intentionally aiming to go somewhere where our money won't stretch further than a crucified hand: where meals reputedly cost double or triple what we'd ordinarily pay. A beer - not that I drink it - is apparently £10. And from what I see from my taxi seat (£60 with tip for 40 minutes from the airport) and £17 later for a ten-minute journey (but we think that maybe that cab driver took us on the tourists' sce-

nic route) things are not looking good. At such times, Woody Allen's comment - to his pretty girlfriend in a taxi - in the movie *Manhattan* comes to mind. "You're so beautiful I can scarcely keep my eyes on the meter."

I find myself brooding now on the cold and the money. "We have a saying," says our driver in perfect English. "There's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes." Yeah great. I have to report also that he goes ice walking on the river - for fun. Then I find myself considering the fact that I've got a nearly-everything-included press invitation to the Grand Hotel. I reach the obvious conclusion: yes, it's unlikely that we'll be leaving the hotel. At all. Hurrah.

These days the Grand is where they accommodate the Nobel Prize winners. Historically it has housed everyone from Albert Einstein to Maksim Gorky. And, of course, you know the contemporary cast, don't you? Well, don't you? Nonetheless the hotel has a provincial feel - it wouldn't be top drawer if it were transported to London, say - but it is the only

5 star one in town. And clearly it holds a special place in the Swedish psyche. And in the hearts of the reception staff, brunettes to a man and woman - not one blond among them.

Not one blonde. So much for my Swedish stereotype. If you expect an eternity of blonds (we did), forget it. Either they've all dyed themselves brown or they were born that way. Out of 85 people I count from the taxi into Stockholm, only 25 are blond. I see more on a visit to Nicky Clarke's salon.

We arrive at our destination. In the 19th century in the Grand, they used to have stuffed bears at the foot of the staircases, sadly no longer the case. But there's still the original cast iron staircase and beautifully worked banisters. Wander around a much-refurbished building and you can find other details like Victorian ceiling tiles. But the hotel was re-designed in 1926 with wall reliefs with antique motifs. Then they also got into marbled columns and electrical chandeliers.

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Stockholm Syndrome?
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The actress Sarah Bernhardt always kipped here. Playwright August Strindberg stayed when he was standing trial over his 1844 play *Getting Married*, (which was a severe indictment of the hypocrisy of Swedish society and attacked God, the King and the fatherland.) And Queen Margaret of Italy took over the entire first floor in 1904.

Given that we're neither taking over a floor nor staying a month, I could feel somewhat short-changed. But we do get a reassuringly old-fashioned bedroom overlooking Stockholm Harbour. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford caused a riot when they checked in here, opened their windows and waved at their fans. I try it, but just get frostbite.

They do themes in the restaurants at the Grand. A caviar buffet in January. In the autumn, shellfish weeks. We have picked what seems to be their salmon fest. Or perhaps it's the Time of the Herring. In The Veranda restaurant (which has lovely staff) they are serving six different types of lax (that's salmon trying to pretend it's something else) and a decade's worth of herrings.

There's herring with salt and garlic, herb herring, cured herring, lemon ones and others cooked in salty water – which you must eat with knackerbrod, if only for the name. The Prince of Wales (as in Edward) ate herring at the Grand. I read all about it in the coffee table book about the hotel. There's also a photo of him looking distinctly queasy afterwards. It's enough to make me a royalist.

The dinner at the Mathias Dahlgren Food Bar in the hotel is, by contrast, exquisite. It offers a one star Michelin spin on fast food. Sort of TV dinners go designer. You eat while perched on a rather hard chair or with sheepskins

if you sit on a banquette. (They're keen on sheepskins and blankets in Sweden. But the restaurant is actually an award-winning Ilse Crawford design: Swedish meets international.) The food is served on trays and the bread comes in individual brown paper bags. "It takes five to eight minutes per course from kitchen to table," explains executive chef Martin Berg. So I guess you could, tenably, scoff a decent meal and leg it within twenty minutes.

But I could happily spend all night eating here. We feast on steamed coalfish from Bohuslan then salmon and reindeer sashimi served on a slate, all perfect and meltingly fresh. Then leaves, sprouts and herbs from Ugglarp. Afterwards baked wild chocolate from Bolivia, ('37609 sold...and counting!!' is scribbled on the menu.) It's what the renowned Swedish chef Mathias Dahlgren terms Natural Cuisine – fresh, simple and local – and at its best. It's faultless. The bill also comes to £254 for two without service.

The rest of the time we sit in the delightful Raison d'Être spa. (Think Scandinavian ash blond woods and local stone floors.) In this weather there is, frankly, no need to go anywhere else in Stockholm or probably even Sweden. Particularly if you're into Nordic bathing facilities. The rotunda sauna is big enough to seat a group of eight naked women of all shapes and sizes. One lady hops down to cool off in the 12 degree plunge pool – screaming as she enters the freezing water, screaming as she stays there and screaming as she gets out. It must be a Swedish custom. "You cannot do it without shouting," she says, glowing as she comes back. "You have to be mad to do it," she adds, asking me to join her. Reader, I do it. With

British stoicism. And no screaming. It's exhilarating and puts a zing in my circulation. But I don't avail myself of the nearby bucket of ice afterwards. It's intended for bodies not gin.

Meanwhile, hubbie is happy warming up in the men's sauna, amidst fellas wearing Swedish cloud berry face masks. But we stir ourselves to go to the spa suite, with private sauna and jacuzzi in which you can sit and wave to the King. (It overlooks the palace across the water.) Here we indulge in skin brushing and peat wraps. We also have an unusual couples treatment in which – whilst lying down – our feet are placed in a machine that rocks and sways to calm us. Then we're massaged with products based on Nordic herbs and flowers. I confess to my therapist that I've hardly stepped outside, not simply because my feet are now suspended mid-air. "Most Swedes just stay in until it's sunny," she replies, reassuringly.

Greta Garbo, in fact, only stayed in at the Grand. She would lock herself into her suite and would permit nobody but the floor manager to deliver her dinner. When he came in, she would hide in the bathroom and instruct him to put everything down and she would re-emerge to lock the door only after he had left. At least we're in good company. And even though we didn't go out much, unlike Garbo we did make it downstairs....

Information on the Grand Hotel in Stockholm can be found online at grandhotel.se and by contacting +46 (0)8 679 35 60 or by emailing reservations@grandhotel.se. More information on the Mathias Dahlgren Food Bar is online at mdghs.com. For more information on flights visit British Airways online at ba.com.