

August 19, 2011 10:07 pm

## Escape to the archipelago

By Carl Wilkinson

Swedes flee Stockholm in summer for the restaurants and rustic good life of the city's islands, islets and skerries



Ann Nystrom's house on Lådna

**A**fter about half an hour in Stockholm, we began to play a game: spot the Swede. Where were they? In Norrmalm, the Operakällaren restaurant, one of the city's swankiest, was closed for the summer. In Gamla Stan, the old town in the centre of the city, there were plenty of people but they were visitors, busily snapping photographs of other visitors in a sort of kitsch parody of tourism. Yet there were no Swedes.

Finally, in Södermalm, we found one. "Where is everyone?" I asked. "Oh, they're all at their summer houses in the archipelago," he said. "I'm going next week."

Today, almost 60 per cent of Swedes have access to a summer house and, for those living in Stockholm, the summer is an opportunity to flee the city for the calm, bucolic surroundings of the 30,000 odd islands, islets and skerries that lie just east

of the city centre.

The islands offer smooth granite rocks, dense, silent pine forests and, on the eastern extremities of the archipelago, sandy beaches. No wonder many Stockholmers move out between May and September, sporadically jumping on the ferry for the hour-long trip back to the city for supplies.

After a couple of quiet days strolling through the streets of Stockholm, my girlfriend and I also jumped on one of the prompt, speedy ferries that service the islands and headed first for Grinda. Henrik Santesson, the first director of the Nobel committee, bought the island in 1906 and commissioned a large house to be built near its centre. Today, Grinda is owned and maintained by the Archipelago Foundation, which was set up in 1959 to preserve the archipelago and now looks after about 12 per cent of the land. Santesson's large stone-built art nouveau house has been turned into the Grinda Wårdshus, an inn with a collection of cottages nearby where guests can stay, a guest harbour with berths for 100 boats and a small shop.

Swedes flock not only to the islands, they also flock to the islands' restaurants, many of which open only during the busy summer months. On Grinda, the Wårdshus restaurant, considered one of the best in the archipelago, is busy enough to serve the traditional specialities of *toast skagen* (shrimp on toast), pickled herring with strong local cheese and meatballs with lingonberries all year round. But Framfickan, a tiny marina-side bar and restaurant, also opens during the summer for yachties in need of *pytt i panna* (fried diced potato and pork with an egg yolk perched atop it and a garnish of beetroot and gherkins – utterly delicious) or steak and fries. Sitting on the terrace as the sun sinks below the pine forest, you can watch many of your fellow diners head home by motorboat to adjacent islands.



We spent three days here, wandering through the nature reserve beyond the island's farm, along tracks fringed with blueberries and wild strawberries, down to secluded rocks from which we swam between nearby islets in the archipelago's surprisingly unsalty water (the Baltic Sea is one of the largest bodies of brackish water in the world). As a result, it feels more like being on the shore of a large lake than on islands in the sea. Everywhere, couples and families moor their boats – everything from 1930s-style wooden cruisers to sleek modern yachts and tiny speedboats – and swim or light barbecues on the rocks.

For Swedes, summer is not just a time to enjoy good weather and long, light

evenings; it's a part of the national identity. Around 1900, writers and artists began a movement known as national romantic, linking Swedish national identity with folklore, ideas of romanticism and the great midsummer festival that rivals Christmas. Today, the long summers spent outdoors that the majority of Swedes enjoy can be seen as a direct result of this movement and they take it very seriously.

From Grinda we took another ferry further east, to one of most popular islands, Sandön, known to all as Sandhamn. The island features in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson, one of many writers and artists who have been drawn here. Anders Zorn, a leading artist at the heart of the national romantic movement, painted here and, in 1873, the writer August Strindberg summed up the island with the line: "Sandhamn, a place of natural beauty, surrounded on three sides by water and on the fourth by the sea."



The pine forest on Sandhamn

The busy port and marina, and cute little old town of wooden houses (including the rather ramshackle Strindberg Café and a great bakery selling freshly made cinnamon buns for *fika*, the traditional coffee and cake break) thrum with tourists during the summer months. Further along the marina, the Seglarhotell, where we stayed, is the place to hang out if you're a yachting looking for late-night parties.

A short walk away from the town is a forest whose sandy floor is covered with low blueberry bushes and where the warm, sweet scent of pine resin fills the air. Beyond are the beaches at Trouville on the island's "fourth side", facing the sea proper. Here, stunning summer houses look out over the water amid giant smooth-surfaced rocks on which visitors lie sprawled in the sun. Follow the coast round and the sand

becomes coarser, the coastline wilder (this is the outer edge of the archipelago now) and the tourists fewer.

Again the food here was outstanding. At the hotel we ate delicious Lofoten cod from the Arctic in a lemon butter sauce with creamed potato. We were surrounded by champagne-swilling yachties celebrating the good life before hitting the nightclub downstairs. The following evening at the old Wårdshus by the harbour we had a more low-key, candle-lit dinner of rosemary-marinated goat's cheese with beetroot, pike-perch with potatoes, sautéed pork, and sour apple and crayfish salad, followed by an exceptional dessert of crème brûlée with rhubarb sorbet and a fine liquorice coulis. But the best was still to come. For the final evening we were to live, briefly, like the Swedes we had been searching for; we were taking over a little private summer cottage on the tiny island of Lådna.

First we took the ferry to Svartsö, not far from Grinda, and settled in for a late lunch at Svartsö Krog, a small, smart but relaxed restaurant where we sat out on the terrace under black-and-white striped awnings watching customers vying for parking spaces at the restaurant's private jetty. The restaurant was set up in 2008 and is open only from the end of April to the beginning of October.

We tucked into a spectacular feast of gruyère-covered chanterelles on toast with bleak roe terrine followed by a sublime fish soup (like a bouillabaisse) containing chunks of salmon, white fish, scallops, shellfish and fennel, and a rhubarb pie to finish.

Happy and immensely full, we were ferried in a small motorboat across to nearby Lådna by Ann Nystrom, the summer house's owner, mooring up at a little jetty in front of the house.

Ann's own home is next door, and she has lived on the island for 25 years. She remains through the winter, swapping her boat and quad bike for a snowmobile and cross-country skis. The appeal of Lådna, she says, is "the nature and sea and birds. It's genuine, not flashy."

Indeed, Lådna feels unpretentious and a million miles away from civilisation. The summer house is like many of the others you see from the water: a small, rust-red wooden building with well-kept garden and apple trees. Inside, it is like an interiors magazine's dream of the chic rustic good life – painted wood floors, antique furniture and tiled chimneys. The toilet is a fascinatingly high-tech electric



The Strindberg Garden restaurant

incinerator and the shower is outside, hooked up to the kitchen sink via a hose – although most archipelago regulars wash in the sea using special eco-friendly soap.

In recent years, much of the archipelago has become more expensive and more exclusive. “It has changed,” says Ann. “The old archipelago people are going; they’re dying away. It’s getting more and more exclusive; it is a bit for the rich people.” But despite that, there are still islands – such as Svartsö and Lådna – that feel utterly unspoilt, timeless and quintessentially Swedish.

Strolling along one of the island’s gravel tracks beside a meadow of bright yellow marigolds, the field fringed by a dark pine forest and beyond the silent brackish water, we stopped to watch two young deer grazing in the golden evening light. No wonder the Swedes leave Stockholm each summer.

.....

## Details

Carl Wilkinson flew to Stockholm with SAS (returns from London start at £119; [www.flysas.com](http://www.flysas.com))

He stayed at the Berns Hotel in Stockholm (doubles from SKr1,990 (£190); [www.berns.se](http://www.berns.se)), at Grinda Wårdshus (doubles from SKr900; [www.grindawardshus.se](http://www.grindawardshus.se)), and at Seglarhotell in Sandhamn (doubles from SKr2,390; [www.sandhamn.com](http://www.sandhamn.com)).

Ann Nystrom’s cottage, sleeping up to two, costs from SKr800 per night; [www.hyrasommarstuga.com](http://www.hyrasommarstuga.com)

For the Svartsö Krog restaurant, see [www.svartsokrogen.se](http://www.svartsokrogen.se)

For more information on Stockholm and the archipelago, see [www.visitstockholm.com](http://www.visitstockholm.com) and [www.visitskargarden.se](http://www.visitskargarden.se)

**Printed from:** <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/e98ed434-c720-11e0-a9ef-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2011 FT and ‘Financial Times’ are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.