

A
reluctant
business
traveler
ends up
having the
time of
her life.



Stockholm
SYNDROME

BY GAYLE KECK





IT HAPPENED ON DAY THREE.

I finally cracked. I flipped through the rack of CDs provided in my hotel room, plucked out a jewel case, flicked it open, and fed the disc into the player.

“Gimme, gimme, gimme a man after midnight!” The full-on Popfest that is ABBA spilled forth from the sound system.

“Gimme, gimme, gimme some sun after midnight!” I sang back, boogying onto the balcony and gazing over the treetops of Mariatorget square at the last few rays of light gilding the clouds. It was 11:30 p.m. in Stockholm, twilight on the longest day of the year.

Until that night, I’d considered ABBA to be obnoxious. Now I upgraded the iconic Swedish group to “infectious.” I realized they were the perfect soundtrack to summer in Stockholm.

I’ll have to admit, Sweden was never that high on my list. It seemed out-of-the-way, less-than-exotic, and populated by people who had a suspicious fondness for meatballs. But when business sent my husband to Scandinavia, I agreed to go along. (Perhaps it was the memory of him playing golf and lounging in the spa while I’d been toiling away at a recent conference that cinched the decision. At least there’d be saunas, I thought.)

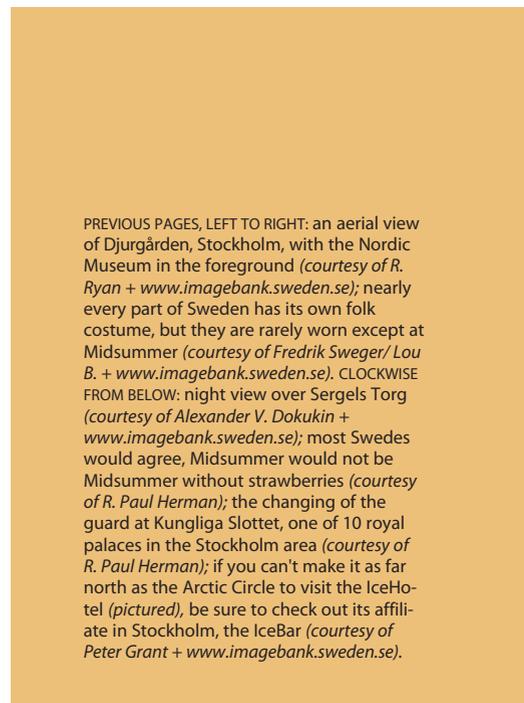
What I hadn’t considered was the pure glory of being amongst survivors of a long, brutal winter when the most splendid time of year finally arrives. Here were people who ecstatically embraced the warm, lavish, generous days of summer. They tended riotous flowerboxes, dined al fresco, and strolled late into the non-night. They were so happy and kind and nice, it almost seemed suspicious. ABBAesque.

And then there was the city itself. Stockholm is arrayed across 14 islands, linked by almost 60 bridges, so there is nearly always a view framed by water, any direction you turn. On one side is the Baltic Sea, on the other, Lake Mälaren. In the heart of the city, pleasure boaters jockey to pass through locks that separate the two bodies of water. Despite the short sailing season, a quarter of the city’s families own boats, many of them lovingly restored wooden classics. The lake is so clean, Mayor Annika Billström has been known to dip a champagne glass into the water and quaff it in front of visiting dignitaries.

The look of Stockholm embraces Medieval, Baroque, Rococo, and Art Nouveau, as well as the sleek modern design for which Sweden is famous. An eight-storey height limit keeps the city at human scale. And with 750,000 inhabitants, the place has big-city bustle and culture befitting a European capital without being overwhelming.

You might choose to lodge overlooking the harbor in the dowager Grand Hotel, where Nobel laureates stay when they come to be fêted and collect their prizes. But we opted for Hotel Rival, a chic boutique hotel created on the bones of a quirky 1937 hotel/bar/restaurant/bakery/theater on the more-residential Södermalm Island. From the original Art Deco bar and warm croissants sent up fresh from the bakery, to the attitude-free staff and the teddy bear perched in each room, the Rival isn’t your usual design hotel. And it just so happens to be owned by Benny Andersson, of . . . ABBA.

“My first name comes from the Viking word for ‘she-wolf,’” guide Ylva da Silva confided. “And my last name means, ‘of the forest.’ So, I am a she-wolf of the forest.” Fortunately, Ylva was also well versed in the city of Stockholm and its denizens. I’d booked a private walking tour via the Stockholm Tourist Centre and Ylva appeared at my hotel to give me an insider’s perspective on the historic sights—a more convivial choice than exploring on my own, and far better than lounging around listening to more ABBA while raiding the minibar.

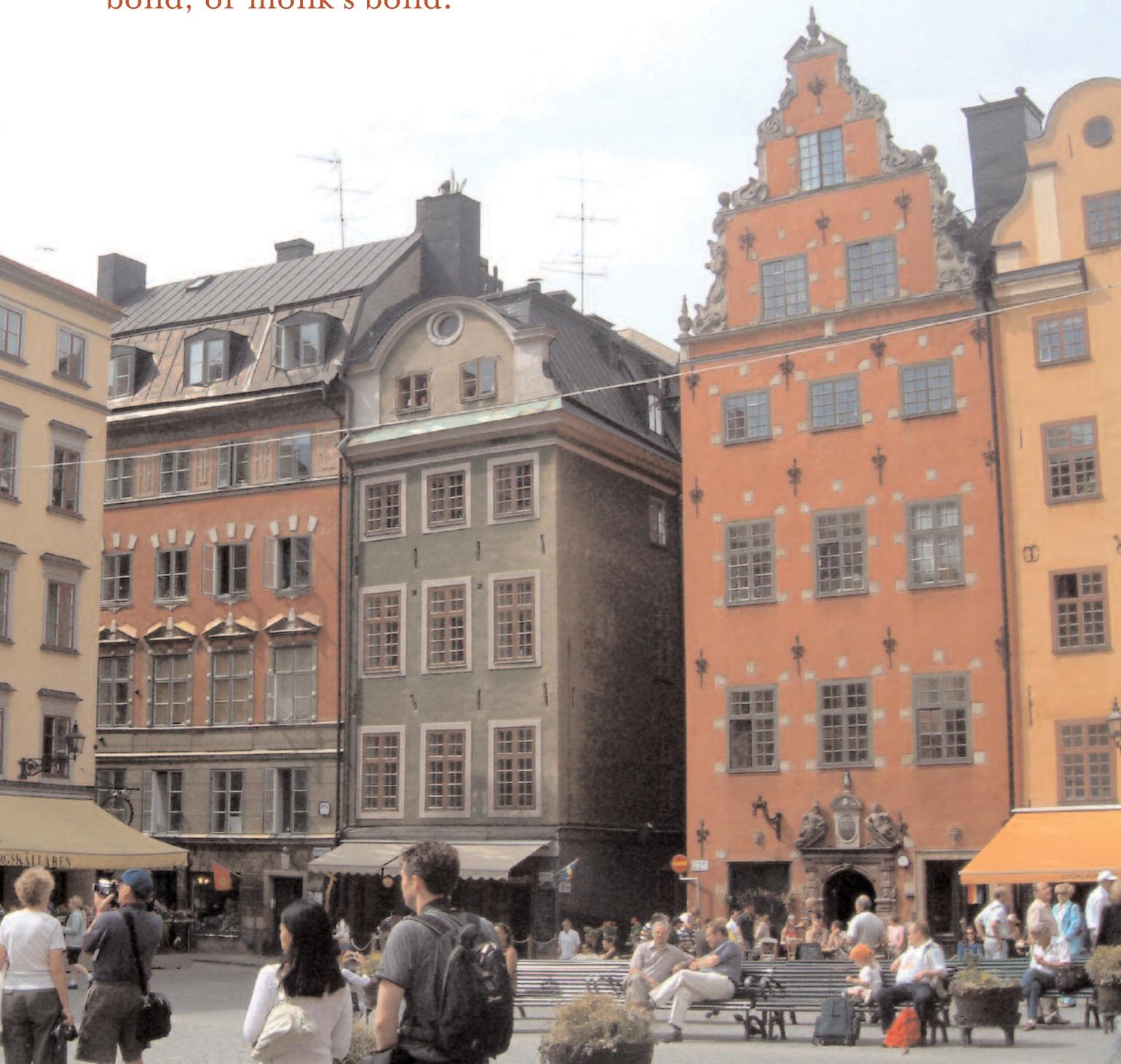


PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT: an aerial view of Djurgården, Stockholm, with the Nordic Museum in the foreground (courtesy of R. Ryan + www.imagebank.sweden.se); nearly every part of Sweden has its own folk costume, but they are rarely worn except at Midsummer (courtesy of Fredrik Sweger/ Lou B. + www.imagebank.sweden.se). CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: night view over Sergels Torg (courtesy of Alexander V. Dokukin + www.imagebank.sweden.se); most Swedes would agree, Midsummer would not be Midsummer without strawberries (courtesy of R. Paul Herman); the changing of the guard at Kungliga Slottet, one of 10 royal palaces in the Stockholm area (courtesy of R. Paul Herman); if you can’t make it as far north as the Arctic Circle to visit the IceHotel (pictured), be sure to check out its affiliate in Stockholm, the IceBar (courtesy of Peter Grant + www.imagebank.sweden.se).





We headed toward Gamla Stan, the oldest part of the city, where many of the buildings pre-date the religious reformation of 1527. As we followed the narrow, winding, cobblestone pedestrian streets lined with buildings painted terra cotta, butterscotch, and melon, Ylva explained that Catholic monks had brought with them a particular style of brickwork known as the Flemish bond, or monk's bond.



OPPOSITE: the main square in Gamla Stan (Old Town) is the original part of the capital and closely situated to the Royal Castle (courtesy of R. Paul Herman). THIS PAGE: Jesper Nylén, manager of famed Swedish design emporium Svens Tenn, displays bolts of hand-printed fabrics (courtesy of R. Paul Herman).



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Thanks to the Reformation, Stockholm also has some of the best-preserved wooden religious sculptures in the world. These Catholic artworks were secreted away in 1527, and as a result are in astonishing condition. A 1489 statue of St. George and the dragon, in Gamla Stan's Storkyrkan church, is a stellar example (and while you're there, see the oldest painting of Stockholm, dating to 1520).

Without Ylva, I never would have found Brända Tomten ("Burnt Piece of Land"), where legend has it a restaurant once stood.irate neighbors torched the place when they discovered the owner was serving stew made from local cats. But when the fire brigade arrived, they couldn't turn the narrow corner to reach the fire, so the site of the restaurant has been left as an intimate, triangular square—for fire access and, no doubt, in memory of a few felines.

Ylva also pointed out how the buildings nearest the water on Gamla Stan appear to be cracking off from the remainder of the island. "Ice from the Ice Age didn't melt here until 8,000 years ago, and the land is still slowly rebounding from its weight," she told me. "But the outer ring of buildings is built on top of trash people threw out their windows hundreds and hundreds of years ago, so it's not rising like the rest." A reclamation project is underway to stabilize the area.

One structure that looks old—but isn't—is City Hall, built in 1923. A splendid mélange of eras and architectural styles, it has a covered version of an Italian piazza, site of the Nobel banquet (where, by the way, there's a high incidence of the official tableware getting nicked, including even statuesque water pitchers). The most spectacular space, though, is the Golden Hall, covered with 18 million 23.6-karat gold mosaic tiles, in a dazzling Byzantium-meets-Art Nouveau style. Stockholm is represented by the queen of Lake Mälaren, flanked by iconic structures from around the world, including the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, and a mosque.

Although Sweden is arguably one of the world's most egalitarian countries, there's a working royal palace (one of 10 in the Stockholm area) smack in the center of things—not far from Parliament—where visitors can tour various wings, ogling a display of the queen's ball gowns; a stunning treasury with dazzling crowns, scepters, and orbs; or for the more ghoulish, outfits worn by several kings when they were killed in battle or

assassinated. There's a flashy changing of the guard, which includes women soldiers who are the cherished quarry of countless Japanese photographers, as they stand stern-faced, gripping some very serious weaponry.

"Would you like to see inside the Parliament building?" Ylva asked. "I work there as a civil servant during the winter when Parliament is in session." With a flash of her ID, we were inside, winding past media broadcast rooms and overlooking the floor of the house chamber. "Our Parliament is a true cross-section of the population," Ylva said, "with 50 percent women, 20 percent immigrants, a blind member, and two in wheelchairs." Career politicians are rare, but "with only nine million people, our country is a bit easier to govern," she added.

I told Ylva I was surprised at the number of immigrants and the diverse look of Stockholm's residents. They were far from the homogenous blond Viking stereotypes I'd been expecting. Being blond myself, I'd been hoping to finally land in a country where brunette jokes were universally popular. Instead, niceness is universally popular. The cattiest comment I could pry from Ylva was, "Our king is a commoner, you know." Sweden's current royal line is descended from one of Napoleon's generals, brought in to reign as the result of a political crisis in the early 19th century.

As we sat waterside, behind City Hall, sipping what Ylva declared to be "the best coffee in Stockholm," she swept her hand across Lake Mälaren toward the cliffs of Södermalm Island. "You know, in the wintertime, you could walk from here to your hotel across the ice."

The closest I was going to get was a visit to the ICEBAR, a portal to the Arctic Circle, tucked inside the Nordic Sea/Nordic Light hotel complex. One afternoon, seeking a frigid escape from Stockholm's summer heat, I donned the silver hooded poncho and thick gloves provided to all patrons and ventured inside the 23°F ice-lined bar.

The place is a chip off of Sweden's famous ICEHOTEL, with décor and cocktail glasses cut from the very same Arctic river ice. The creative drinks on offer all include vodka, in some cases combined with Swedish juices, like elderberry or lingonberry. It's not exactly the sort of bar where you want to nurse your drink (especially if you happen to be wearing sandals), but as a novelty, it's not to be missed.

Another fascinating portal takes you back nearly four centuries to an ill-fated warship. If you set foot in only one of

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STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

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Stockholm's 100-plus museums, it should be this one, the Vasamuseet, home to the spectacular ship that sank in Stockholm harbor during its maiden voyage in 1628. After 333 years on the bottom of the Baltic, the Vasa was salvaged in 14,000 different pieces, carefully reassembled, preserved, and put on display with a fascinating array of intact provisions (shoes, mittens, hats, spoons, game boards, the world's oldest existing sails, and 12,000 meters of hemp rigging).

The 226-foot long ship looms in the heart of the six-level museum, covered in ornate allegorical carvings that make it seem more a work of art than a weapon—until you glimpse the sinister rows of gun ports, which may have actually been the ship's undoing. There's much speculation as to what caused the ship to topple—too much sail, not enough ballast, top-heavy gun decks—but it's clear that nobody wanted to tell the king, who was off warring with Poland, that his glorious new ship was a tad tippy, even after a disastrous stability test. The political story is as fascinating as the artifacts.

I was interested in collecting a few "artifacts" of my own, one of the best perks afforded a business trip hostage. Lotta Carlsen of Smart City Shopping was a gracious accomplice. I'd told her in advance that I was interested in quintessentially

Swedish design, so Lotta organized an itinerary and took me to six spots that fit my specs perfectly. But what made the outing really remarkable was that Lotta had arranged for me to be welcomed at each shop by the store manager, who walked me through the merchandise, telling me about the designers and craftspeople who had created it (Lotta can also set up visits before and after a store's regular hours—a real boon for business travelers).

Most impressive were the Orrefors Kosta Boda flagship store, a glittering paean to Scandinavian glass (and supplier of those disappearing Nobel water pitchers), and Svenskt Tenn, a lightning rod for fine Swedish design since it was founded in the 1920s. As Svenskt Tenn's manager, Jesper Nylén, unfurled bolts of hand-printed fabrics and pointed out an exquisite hand-made chest of drawers included in the collection of the Swedish National Museum, the thought of a shipping container momentarily flashed in my head. But, I settled for a more packable pewter "vase" of six canted tubes, each meant to hold a sprig of flowers.

All that shopping can leave you hungry. I opted for Östermalms Saluhall, a historic market hall brimming with lush displays of fresh foods and upscale stalls selling pastries

and savory lunch items, like the classic Skagen, an open-faced sandwich, piled with shrimp tossed in mayonnaise and fresh dill. Wandering the hall, I realized that even traditional Swedish cuisine goes far beyond the dread meatballs, with fresh fish as its centerpiece.

My husband and I had the chance to push the limits of modern Swedish cooking when we dined at F12, one of five Stockholm restaurants that have garnered Michelin stars. In a hip, contemporary room, F12 offered two different eight-course tasting menus—"Innovative" and "Tradition"—but it's doubtful a Swedish grandmother would recognize anything traditional in either line-up.

"Skagen" appeared as a stack of lobster medallions and paper-thin toasted bread with mayonnaise ice cream on the side. Cod was cooked "sous vide" for a texture like velvet. And a calf's tail "shepherd pie" brought rich bites of meat in an intense, reduced sauce, topped with potato-truffle puree. Sweden's infatuation with summer was obvious in every bite, as the fresh flavors of the season shined through.

Digging deeper into Stockholm's psyche, we visited Djurgården Island, a bucolic former royal hunting ground that's a warm-weather favorite for locals. At Rosendals Wårdshus,

we dined outdoors, under a canopy lit by chandeliers. And at 10 p.m., with plenty of light still in the sky, we wandered the nearby botanical garden and nursery, pressing our noses against the shop windows to see pots of jam for sale, made from produce grown in the surrounding gardens.

But to really revel in the season, nothing beats Midsummer's Eve, which Swedes celebrate on the Friday closest to summer solstice. And in Stockholm, the place to be is Skansen, a vast open-air museum where 150 historic buildings have been collected from around Sweden. Midsummer is about tradition—raising a maypole (even though it's actually June), picnicking on new potatoes, pickled herring, and strawberries, and wearing flower garlands in your hair while frolicking to fiddle music. It's also considered to be a time of magic. If a young woman tucks a bouquet of seven different flowers under her pillow, she'll dream of her future husband, legend says.

And so I found myself in a pack of hundreds of partiers, holding hands with strangers, skipping around a towering maypole twined with greenery and flowers, grinning like a summer-struck fool.

I don't usually do this kind of thing. I blame it all on that ABBA song . . . ET