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travel

Stockholm

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT ABBA AND IKEA... THE SWEDISH CAPITAL HAS MUCH TO DELIGHT THE MUSICALLY INCLINED TOURIST

Although Stockholm was put on the musical map of the world by Agnetha, Benny, Björn and Anni-Frid, the town has erected no monument to ABBA. Instead, a statue of one of the most famous sopranos of the 19th century, the "Swedish nightingale" Jenny Lind, stands in the former royal playground of Djurgården. At times, Stockholm can feel like a rather aristocratic and conservative place. But I like to believe that Stockholm, despite its air of aloofness, is a great destination for tourists – especially those interested in music.

The city is built on 14 islands, which makes it hardly surprising that waterways and parks take up more than half of Stockholm ("holm" means island). In general, Spring and Summer brings out the best both in the town and the locals, as Stockholmers seem to blossom and shed their steely blue-eyed Viking austerity. But the very cold months have their own magic too, when the archipelago freezes over, and the young and old skate around the islands.

Stockholm is many things to many people. It is a well-known hub for design; seriously discerning gourmets know their way around; and if historic buildings give you a thrill, the Old Town should get you buzzing. Fans of Swedish crime fiction will probably expect a city plagued by violence, but nothing is further from the truth.

If you start your visit in Gamla Stan (the Old Town) it's easy to imagine you're

in the Middle Ages. I particularly love the saffron and firebrick-red houses with leaning facades. Strolling along the narrow cobblestone streets and hidden alleyways, one is easily sidetracked into the many cellar vaults now turned into restaurants or shops. Västerlånggatan is the main drag and gets crowded, but is worth seeing for the ornate Baroque friezes, portals and escutcheons, before making an escape via the very narrow lane Märten Trotsigs Gränd (90 cm at its narrowest point).

From here it is a short walk to the spectacle that is the Changing of the Guard, every day at 12.15pm outside the Royal Palace. The massive residence (605 rooms) also presents an opportunity to see priceless examples of the restrained 18th-century Gustavian style contrasted with the opulence of the late 19th-century Oscanian era. The Royal Armoury situated in the vaults of the Palace is fascinating for its carriages and splendid weapons, but the horrid highlight is its collection of blood-stained garments worn by various mortally wounded royals. Any opera buff would surely want to see the costume Gustav III wore when he was shot at the masked ball in 1792, which inspired Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

Opera in Stockholm centres around its two major opera houses, which espouse very different artistic policies. Folkoperan is an intimate venue, more concerned with change than tradition and employing only freelancers. The repertoire is sung in Swedish,

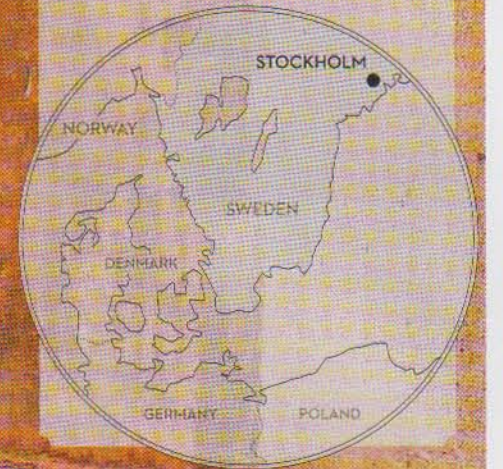


TRAVEL INFO

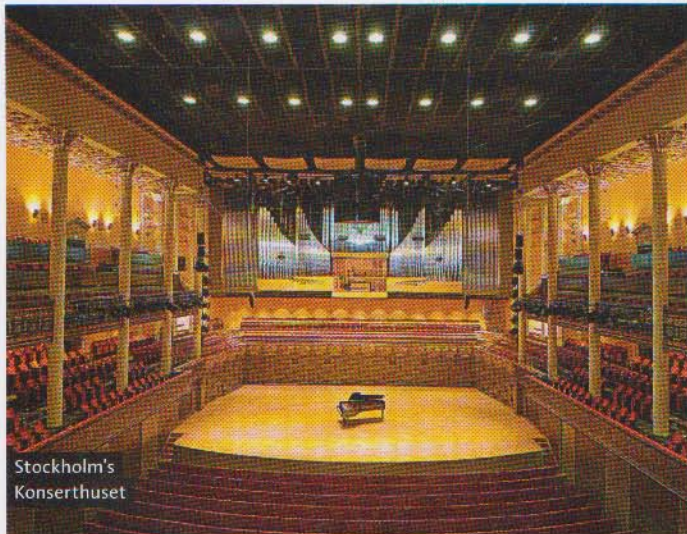
Average Temperatures:
Winter: -6°C–1°C Summer: 13°C–22°C
Currency: Krona (AUS1=7.15kr)
Best time to visit: Stockholm is a winter wonderland from November to March. The warmest month is July.

TOURIST INFORMATION

www.visitstockholm.com/en



Stockholm's Old Town



Stockholm's
Konserthuset



Gustav III of Sweden,
immortalised by Verdi

like in Ingmar Bergman's *Magic Flute*.

The productions at the Royal Opera (Kungliga Operan) are far from revolutionary, but the singing is of the highest quality. Sweden has quite a record for generating top-class tenors (Jussi Björling, Nicolai Gedda, Gösta Winbergh), not to mention sopranos (Birgit Nilsson, Elisabeth Söderström, Anne Sofie von Otter, Katarina Dalayman, Miah Persson, to mention but a few). All these singers had their breakthrough at the Royal Opera. And if nothing else, the sight of the opulent Gold Foyer is almost worth the price of the champagne on sale in the bar.

The orchestra is also pretty remarkable. Kungliga Hovkapellet (the Royal Court Orchestra) is first mentioned in the Swedish King's accounts in 1526. In the 17th century it was augmented with singers and most members were German. Before King Gustav III

was assassinated, he decided that Hovkapellet should become the house orchestra for the newly formed opera company.

Stockholm is blessed with two other top-notch orchestras. The Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra should be quite familiar to listeners of ABC Classic FM; they are worth catching live at their (underground) home at Berwaldhallen. Look out for concerts that include the world-class Swedish Radio Choir.

The Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra has always had a solid reputation and has moved into a higher league since Finnish chief conductor Sakari Oramo took over four years ago. Their base is at the Stockholm Concert Hall, also the rather glitzy venue where the Nobel prizes are awarded.

Across the market square from "Konserthuset" is the department store PUB. Greta Garbo worked here for nearly

two years in the millinery department and made her debut in the store's promotional films before her acting career took off. For a mature and tested look head for Malmstensbutiken which stocks classic furniture and arts and crafts by the legendary Carl Malmsten, but also promotes funky new designs.

Finally, if you are looking for a place to stay, the Riva Hotel has boutique written all over it and is located in a square in the trendy Södermalm area. The cocktail bar and the in-house cinema are genuine art deco pearls. It's hardly a monument, but it offers an oblique way to pay homage to a member of ABBA, Benny Andersson, who owns the hotel.

Fans of crime thriller author Stieg Larsson can be seen posing on the park bench in the square, where Larsson himself had a picture taken sitting fearfully between two skinheads. He died of natural causes. ●



Nina Stemme

The Swedish Soprano Epidemic

If Jenny Lind were alive today she would struggle to hang on to the title "The Swedish Nightingale". Why does Sweden, with a population of nine million, punch above its weight when it comes to singers? There are some academic explanations. Classical music training is available in primary school; there are universities and colleges throughout the country offering professional music courses and four major opera stages. Or there may just be some genetic reason for Sweden's producing so many great female voices.

Nina Stemme is now one of the world's leading dramatic sopranos with every major opera house vying for her interpretations of Wagner and Richard Strauss. Annalena Persson started out by winning two major singing prizes in Bayreuth in 2003. No prize for guessing what composer she does best with a voice described as "vocal lava". Contralto Anna Larsson is a particularly fine Lieder singer and is also much in demand for her Mahler and Wagner.

For a lighter touch and superb Mozart there is Camilla Tilling and the lyrical Miah Persson. The young one to watch is soprano Ylva Kihlberg, currently at the Royal Opera in Copenhagen. She will make her UK and Edinburgh Festival debut as Emilia in Janáček's *Makropulos Affair* this year.