



# The Swede Ta

The Stockholm Archipelago is a cluster of 25,000 islands, of which one – Grinda



**W**e stood at the small wooden jetty with our bags, watching the rapidly disappearing cruiser that had taken us here churning up the waters of the Baltic Sea like a jet bike in the local swimming pool.

“Daddy,” asked my three-year-old, Evie. “Now are we going to meet the Abba peoples?” As it happens, the question wasn’t as ludicrous as it seemed. Before our trip to Sweden, I had got her excited by telling her we were going to the homeplace of her favourite band. On a tiny island two hours by ferry from Stockholm, her naïve optimism was touching for its innocence. (She would have the last laugh when we later learnt that an adjacent island *was* one owned by Björn, Benny, Frida and poor, reclusive, stalker-deranged Agnetha, and where they had their own recording studio.)

They’re not alone among wealthy Stockholmers wanting to find a little slice of tranquillity. And with some 25,000 islands making up the necklace off Sweden’s west coast that is the Stockholm Archipelago, there’s plenty to choose from. In the summer, especially, much like New Yorkers stampeding to the Hamptons, they decamp en masse by launch, speedboat and ferry to the islands.

After a few days savouring the delights of that beautiful city (see **square mile’s** September issue) we climbed aboard a gleaming ferry with on-board bar to enjoy a leisurely two-hour journey to Grinda, a one-and-a-half square mile paradise in the western archipelago. (Incredibly, the journey is free if you have a Stockholm Card, a pass allowing free entry to most of the city’s galleries and attractions and free use of public transport; buy it at [stockholmtown.com](http://stockholmtown.com)).

The journey there has to be one of the most beautiful in the world, comparable with the ferry ride from Vancouver city to Vancouver Island. The evening was so balmy, the islands we could see in the distance shimmered in the haze. We could have been cruising the Med...

From the jetty, we could see no sign of life – just a track leading up through the

forests and ferns typical of the region. Think the Scottish Highlands in summer but with better weather. So off we trudged (no cars are allowed on the island), up over the gently beetling brow of a hill, down the other side and round a corner – and then we saw it.

Grinda Wårdshus is an imposing and impressive art-deco palace of timber and stone on the far side of the valley you first see it from. Built halfway up a hill, stairs lead from the meadows at the front up to an enormous terrace that serves as the restaurant in the summer. A few hundred yards to one side is the marina with its jetty, a flotilla of yachts and a pub in the middle of a raft of decking.

The silence of the forest through which we had spent ten minutes walking was gone, replaced by some natural acoustic trick of the landscape by the shrills of children, conversations carried across the air and music from the harbour-side pub’s speakers. So *this* was Stockholm at play; *this* was what they did to unwind through the summer months.

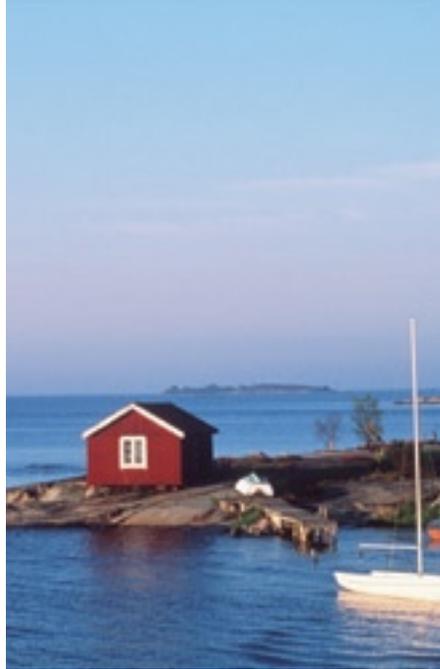
Inside, the hotel is a delight, all dark wooden floorboards and nooks, with an entrance hall that is dominated by an enormous fireplace (constantly stoked by the friendly and attentive staff). The rooms are housed in four »

#### AT ONE WITH NATURE

With no cars on the island, Grinda practically demands that you get into the spirit and go exploring. For such a small island it’s amazing how much solitude you can find. We went trekking off to the other side of the island, climbing a hill of rock that gave wonderful views down over the bays and coves of the south side. There are more secluded and wholly empty beaches than you can shake a starfish at (I tried, when I found one). And go the whole nine-yards by renting a boat with an outboard motor for the day (ask at the harbour or bar); as you circumnavigate the island you’ll find a plethora of coves at which to pull up and enjoy a lazy picnic and some paddling.

# ste of Freedom

– gave Eugene Costello and family peace, good living – but no Abba...



ISLAND LIFE: (clockwise from top) like father, like daughter; the calm of the Archipelago; the first view of the hotel

» buildings behind the main house that could have come straight from the pages of the Ikea brochure – luxurious simplicity, if that’s not an oxymoron, made of wooden clapperboard and painted a reddish-brown. Inside, the rooms are a revelation – crisp Egyptian cotton sheets, Bose digital radios (there is a welcome policy of no TVs in rooms) and an en-suite bathroom of white bevelled tiling and chrome fittings.

After a quick pit-stop for freshening up, it was time to move – Evie was determined to track down those pesky, elusive “Abba peoples”, and no one was going to stand in her way. Dragging me by the hand, it was full steam ahead to the nearby harbour.

At the pub – or Bistro Framfickan to give its proper name – business was brisk. With seagulls wheeling overhead and the sun slowly refusing to yield to night the tables outside were all full of impossibly healthy and attractive people who all seemed to be eating fried food (fish and chips, but posh) and drinking copious amounts of lager. A bit like Bermondsey but, as I say, they were impossibly healthy and attractive.

“O, wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has such people in’t!” as I casually remarked to Evie, earning me a withering look of scorn and a demand that we clamber over the moss-strewn rocks nearby as a matter of some urgency.

So off we set, leaving my ex-wife to make small talk with beauteous mankind as we went

to conquer new lands and claim them for our lineage. Three minutes later we were back, starving and thirsty. Nothing an enormous plate of crayfish salad and chips, washed down with schooners of lager couldn’t cure.

As Evie joined the serried ranks of youths break-dancing on the decking, we got chatting to a couple from the mainland, doctor Marcus

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and journalist Birgitta. Though by now 10pm, it didn’t feel like proper dusk, and our kids were happily dancing away. The flickering of lanterns around the marina showed new arrivals constantly arriving by boat.

Marcus explained that many were touring the archipelago and stopping for the night for food and beer, and to use the showers. Others would be staying on nearby islands with no bar and coming over to party, while many others yet visit as day trippers and take the late ferry back to the city. The whole atmosphere was infused with a sense of wholesome yet hedonistic inclusiveness that is hard to envisage elsewhere.

It was a theme expanded on the next day by our host, hotel manager Eric Lind. The island had been bought by the City of Stockholm in 1944, along with many others in the archipelago, to give deprived children from the city the chance to enjoy healthy outdoors holidays. Though now owned by the Archipelago Foundation (and leased to the hotel, which also owns the harbour-side pub, a general shop, a café and the boat rental hut), that spirit of getting away from the city and being among nature endures. Hence no TVs.

The house itself had been built in 1906 by Henrik Santesson, the first director of the Nobel Prize Committee. Lind feels quite sure it was the fact that Santesson invited so many of Stockholm’s great and good out to Grinda that led to the policy of buying up islands to give Stockholmers a taste of the good life.

Talking of tasting the good life, the hotel’s restaurant is superb. That evening, we ate a dinner to compete with anything you’d find in the West End. Seared loin of tuna was fantastic – barely-cooked pink with a peppercorn crust – while the hot smoked salmon, sourced locally, was so good we deliberated whether to order a second piece. It’s not dirt cheap – around £100 for two with wine – but sitting on the terrace looking down over the harbour and out to sea where the sun tickled everything (including us) pink, it must be one of the most beautiful locations in which to eat. The good life had never felt so indulgent... ■

*Doubles at Grinda Wårdshus, £150 b&b (£220 including three-course dinner); grindawardsbus.se; for ideas on holidays in the Archipelago, call Sunvil Discovery (020 8758 4722; sunvil.co.uk). For more information on travel to Sweden, call 020 7108 6168 or go to the website: visitsweden.com.*

#### CRIMBO

Grinda Wårdshus is amazing in the summer, where the days virtually refuse to budge up to make room for night. But during the Christmas festive period, it’s a place of magic and sparkle, too. A white winter wonderland, the short days lend themselves to sprawling on one of the sofas in front of the enormous lobby fireplace, making the most of the well-stocked bar, reading a good book, debating whether you’ve left a sufficiently-respectable period between lunch and dinner and thanking God that the gaudy hell that is Oxford Street is several hours – and a world – away.