

# Swede DREAMS

**Eugene Costello** goes to Stockholm with his ex-wife and three-year-old daughter and finds it the perfect spot for (modern) family fun

**T**he last time I went to Stockholm, it was January, the honey-coloured buildings of the Old Town – Gamla Stan to Stockholmers (and smarty-pants) – were dappled with flecks of silently falling snow and the day was about six hours long. (Employers, take a leaf and all that...)

This time round, it was to be a tale of two cities. I would eschew the seductive stole of Santa's season and accept the light, flirtatious caress of the 'Summer Night City', as Abba so memorably sang. (See what I did there?)

I'm glad I did. The old myth about Stockholm being full of beautiful people is no myth. Stockholm, a city of interlinked

islands, is awash with long-legged, bronzed, blonde beauty in summer. (Would they be as beautiful if they had curly ginger hair? And why do such fair people tan so well, unlike, say, pasty Geordies? It doesn't seem, well, fair.)

Lest I be too distracted by such considerations, the editor of this august organ (Er... it's September – Ed) had decided he wanted a travel piece with a family angle. So it was that I arrived with my ex-wife and three-year-old daughter in tow. (She mentioned that the men are just as beautiful. The ex-wife, that is, not the daughter.)

We were whisked by taxi from the airport (thank you, Sunvil holidays) to our city centre hotel. Hotel Hellsten ([hellsten.se](http://hellsten.se)) is a

boutique hotel housed in an 1898 merchant's townhouse, with a compellingly eccentric nature. Bohemian meets minimalist by way of the anthropological – this means, in practice, a Mac Air laptop sits on a glass table next to a plush red velvet sofa, while a wholly glass elevator winks knowingly at a Masai wood-carving opposite. It shouldn't work, but it does – in spades. And the enclosed courtyard makes a superb breakfast area where the highlight for my daughter was that you can help yourself to batter to make your own waffles. You don't get *that* at Center Parcs, as I told her to point out to the other kids when she got back to the nursery.

First stop on Friday night was the »



» superb birds-eye views over this enchanting city from cocktail bar extraordinaire Gondolen (eriks.se). A serious lift-ride above the city is this wood-decked paradise, where those beautiful people come for cocktails or for fine dining – but above all, to see and be seen. It's unlike anything you might find in London, thanks chiefly to your vantage point – out to the Baltic Sea or inland towards Lake Mälaren.

(On the subject of cocktails, my daughter recommends the pureed strawberry confection, though a very strong peach-and-vodka champagne bellini got my vote.)

A stroll through the Old Town, Gamla Stan, an island in its own right, brings you back to Norrmalm, the north side where the hotel is. Head as we did for Bistro Berns (berns.se). A modernist glass-and-wood structure in the middle of the attractive urban park Berzelii, it sits in front of a Stockholm institution, the Berns Hotel. Take a seat outside near a patio heater – though warm in the daytime, summer Stockholm gets chilly in the evening as there is virtually no cloud cover – and enjoy French-inspired Swedish cuisine at its finest – and reasonable, at around £35 per head with wine.

The music coming from the club in the basement of the adjacent hotel drew my daughter to put on a dancing display in the

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middle of the park, with a smorgasbord of enthusiasts cheering her on from the terraces and balconies of the hotel. Too cute by half – and try explaining the concept of night-time to a highly headstrong child in the land of midnight sun... Let's hope she doesn't get a taste for dancing for strangers. It's not the career path that I would have chosen for her.

On Saturday morning, we set off for a walk from Norrmalm to Östermalm, Stockholm's answer to Knightsbridge. And the analogy isn't just owing to the fashionable apartment blocks for the wealthy – it has its own, arguably superior, version of Harrods Food Hall, an indoor Victorian palace, Saluhall.

All those ice-bedecked lobsters and noisettes of reindeer made this a mouth-watering sojourn. Thankfully, it is a short walk to another Stockholm institution, the Grand Hotel, for

FANTASY ISLAND

The 'Venice of the North', Stockholm is a series of linked islands. Make the most of the city with the Stockholm Card (£28 one day, £50 three days, stockholmcard.com) that allows free use of boats, buses, Metro and virtually all museums and sites. If you're here with kids, head for the 'fun island' (10 mins by boat from near the Grand Hotel), Djurgården.

It has it all. A 17th century ship, the Vasa, raised in the 1960s. An open-air folk museum, Skansen, showing how people live in the far north, and with bears, wolves, deer and other Nordic species. A childrens' museum based on Astrid Lindgren's Pippa Longstocking books. And best of all, a huge funfair, Tivoli, with no pickpockets or glue-sniffers – just loads of great rides. We'll be back...

one of the greatest meals you are likely to have. The stupendous Smorgasbord at this legendary five-star hotel's Veranda Restaurant is an Everest of a meal, with foothills that exhaust before revealing yet another peak to be tackled. It's a buffet, with soups, pickled herrings, gravadlax, cold meats, hot meats – including a whole leg of reindeer – and hot dishes from traditional meatballs to roasts. As you plead for mercy, the dessert trolley is silently brought to you. And the *coup de grâce* is delivered in the form of a cheese trolley. All liberally accompanied by plenty of firewater – *aquavit* – and local wheat beers. Eat here and die – though at £35 per head, it won't be the price that does for you.

Allow most of the day for this is my heartfelt advice. You won't need to eat again for days. That said, after a few beers in Kungsträdgården (half-avenue, half-park, dotted with outdoor bars and ice cream parlours, and where kids cool off in the fountains) we *might* have found space for a late-night snack on the short walk to the hotel. Even the fast food is out of this world in Stockholm – cheaper than a London kebab is *tunnbrödrulle*, a heavenly concoction consisting of a frankfurter, mashed potato, salad and relish, all rolled up inside a bread pancake. Just don't tell the chef at the Grand Hotel. ■

*A three-night stay at the four-star Hellsten hotel in Stockholm costs from £613 pp (two sharing) with Sunvil Scandinavia (020 8758 4722; sunvil.co.uk). Includes return flights (Heathrow), private transfers and b&b. For more information on travel to Sweden, call 020 7108 6168 or go to visitsweden.com. The hip pocket expert 'Hedonists' Guide to Stockholm' (£12.50) is indispensable. See the full range and more at hgE.com*

THREE DAY ESCAPE

# An Incredibly Rough Guide to Wonderful Copenhagen

Owner and publisher Tim Slee goes to Denmark and learns – well, virtually nothing, as will you

THEY SPEAK BETTER English than we do, they don't appear to mind the English and they are considerably more attractive than us. Welcome to Denmark, more specifically Copenhagen. What a place.

The beer is bloody expensive. That's the downside. That's it. Now, there's probably not much point in reading any more of this article; I mean, if you've already been before then you probably know more than me, if you haven't been before and were thinking of going, then perhaps I can give you a nudge in the right direction and if you have already booked your ticket and are looking to glean some insiders' knowledge before you go there, then buy a guide book. I'm not a bloody journalist. I have been roped into writing this piece by the deputy editor of this magazine as he knows I went there recently. When I say recently, it was actually four months ago so any specifics about the place have long since been erased from my mind. It has a river. With swans. OK, it has more than that but I'm under pressure here, we go to press on this September issue of *square mile* in less than seven hours and I promised this piece to the editorial department weeks ago.

Having chosen Denmark as a destination for no other reason than I hadn't been there seemed excuse enough to head over there for a weekend getaway with a few other mates from the City. In fact, it wasn't until we had our boarding cards in our hands that I realised just how little I knew about the country – let alone Copenhagen. Asking the question out loud, here is the list we came up with:

Things we know about Denmark: Bacon,

Carlsberg, Vikings, Peter Schmeichel, Peter Schmeichel's son. Hmm, not much material there, then. Though it did start an interesting argument about who Peter Schmeichel's son now plays for (just Googled that and I was right – Man City – so thanks very much, get in, back of the net). Google also informed me

If you're looking for inside knowledge, buy a guide book. I'm not a bloody journalist

he was born in Copenhagen (and there I was thinking I wasn't going to educate you).

So it's fair to say we didn't have much in our armoury of knowledge. It was unlikely we were going to bump into either Peter Schmeichel, his son or a Viking. It soon became evident once we arrived and checked into a cracking hotel (more luck than judgment) that you didn't need to know a whole lot about this place in order to have a good time. With language being absolutely no barrier our guide book for the three days came in the form of anyone who was behind the front desk of our boutique hotel, Hotel Avenue. Told we needed bikes – we got them. If you're still reading this, by the way, I recommend this as the best way to get around, not as mad as Amsterdam for the number of bikes but still easily the most popular way for the locals to get around.



DANISH APARTMENTS: probably with old stuff inside

Bars are aplenty. We tried to get through as many of them as we could. On the Saturday we found ourselves playing pool and drinking pints while watching Premier League football. I know that last sentence is not one you are likely to find as a quote on the front cover of the Danish Tourist Board's brochure, but the point I'm making is this is such a relaxed easy city to visit that you can either relax like you are at home for the weekend or go out and seek a bit of culture, of which there is plenty. (We didn't see a lot of it, admittedly, but we went past the outside of loads of buildings that looked like they housed old paintings and things...)

So, go to Copenhagen. It's good. You'll have a good time. You'll eat well, drink well (with a little dent in your pocket), see nice-looking buildings, maybe go inside some, ride a bike, look at attractive people and discover that they even make a better bacon sandwich than us. ■