



# Stockholm in Style

The Swedish capital offers a beguiling blend of high design, Old World luxury and hip hangouts. DIANA HUBBELL sets off in search of the finer side of this graceful northern city

IT IS 3PM on a Sunday afternoon and all around me Swedes are sipping bubbly while nibbling on triple-tiered platters of chilled oysters. The light has that golden, syrupy quality only found during the more languid months at these northernmost latitudes. All of the locals are impeccably, yet effortlessly dressed – no one would be so gauche as to flash conspicuous labels here, but it doesn't take a fashionista to note that these are designer threads clinging to their slender frames.

Sturehof, where I'm working my way through a mammoth lobster, is every bit as tastefully understated as its clientele. Situated next door to Stockholm's Matmarknad, a recently opened food hall with pristine produce displays, the restaurant has been serving its own version of *huskost*, the colloquial term for traditional local home-style cooking, for over a century.

Yet it would be hard to call sophisticated spins on classics like the veal tartare with pickled beetroot and a saffron swirl of yolk or the imposing heap of Neptune's bounty before me humble. This is the kind of place without a stuffy sommelier in sight, but where the wine cellar boasts more than 600 expertly selected vintages, where *Fine de Claires* come by the dozen, and where patrons lick sturgeon caviar from the spoon.

That dedication to sheer pleasure caught me off guard when I first arrived in Stockholm. Much has been made, and rightly so, of Scandinavia's economic prowess and daunting efficiency. Over the past few decades, Sweden has made a name for itself by exporting functional, affordable

design. From the sprawling showrooms of IKEA to the ever-changing racks of H&M, the country has made billions on mass-produced, practical items.

Journey closer to the source, however, and you'll find that Stockholm's tastes veer towards the rare, the refined and the avant-garde. It says something that the most popular restaurant in the city at the moment is a pop-up called *Leijontorget 12 x 8* with a waiting list of more than 11,000 serving the kind of ultra-fine dining once enjoyed by French aristocrats.

Just eight diners have the opportunity to shell out USD 450 for a menu of foie gras, auction-bought birds, and even rarer delicacies paired with wines that would make a monarch's eyes mist over. And while larger labels may dominate the foreign markets, on their home turf Swedes are happy to invest in exquisitely crafted statement clothing and décor from lesser-known local brands, as evidenced by the profusion of eclectic boutiques lining the streets.

Somehow the Swedish *joie de vivre* begins to make sense in context. Few cities are as ruthlessly gorgeous as this cluster of 14 isles,



each divided into districts with their own distinctive aesthetic flair. Gamla Stan, at the heart of it all, is a marvel of classical European architecture veined with cobblestoned streets; Djurgården is an entire island dedicated to the most lavish of public parks; posh Östermalm to the east is populated by mammoth mansions with art deco detailing; Södermalm, once a gritty industrial wasteland, now lures an artsy crowd to Hornstull and SoFo, two in-demand neighbourhoods brimming with upscale vintage shops and designer showcases.

Between the cracks and under the 52 bridges run the shimmering cobalt threads of the Baltic Sea and Lake Mälaren. Comparisons to

Venice are all but inevitable with watery cities. I've been to both "Venices" of the East – Suzhou and Bangkok, though I'm sure others would claim there are even more – and lived near another, Amsterdam, in the West, but this is the one place so striking that the Doges themselves would have admired it.

"Stockholm is incredibly beautiful, with so many old buildings and water everywhere," Sarah Dawn Finer tells me. An entertainer for two decades, Sarah Dawn Finer has released five studio albums and starred on stage in everything from Rent to Cabaret. With her flowing blonde hair and effortless smile, she certainly looks the part of a Swedish starlet. "I travel to New York and London throughout the year, but this is my home."

For those not fortunate enough to maintain an apartment in town, Stockholm's oh-so-chic hotels beckon. Design junkies will gravitate towards Hotel Rival, a textbook case of modern

minimalism done right, while those seeking something a bit more intimate will be drawn to Ett Hem. The latter's name literally translates to "at home," which guests most certainly feel in this 12-key five-star housed in a stunning 1910 private mansion. More than a few famous faces have been spotted cosying up in the hotel's library and lush gardens, though the hotel's owners are, of course, far too discreet to divulge which ones.

When it comes to pure, unadulterated luxury though, it's hard to top The Grand Hôtel. From Frank Sinatra to Greta Garbo, Martin Luther King Jr. to Princess Grace of Monaco, the list of former guests at this majestic haven reads like a who's-who of the last century



and a half. Some of the historic luster here comes from the fact that the hotel was used to host the first Nobel ceremony, and while the official proceedings eventually outgrew the premises and were moved to Stockholm City Hall in 1929, to this day the laureates still enjoy its peerless hospitality.

To take a peek for myself, I don my highest heels and an LBD I keep in the closet for just such an occasion. Some grande dames have the tendency to fossilise over the years, but regular renovations have kept this one up one up to date without slavishly conceding to trends. With its crystal chandeliers, powder-blue wallpaper and marble detailing, the Grand Hôtel possesses a glamour that feels both current and timeless.

Though there's a justly famous spa and a very fine dining establishment by Michelin-darling Mathias Dahlgren, I, like most Stockholmers, have come for drinks. While some hotel bars can be stuffy, tedious affairs, The Cadier Bar, named for the hotel's founder Régis Cadier is the sort of place where distinguished locals come to clinch deals and dazzle dates. The wine list resembles a dictionary; the Champagne flows fast and steady; and there's an undeniable whiff of decadence after all these years.

#### HIGH CULTURE AND DESIGN

Art is all but inescapable in Stockholm. This is, after all, the city that converted its metro into the longest permanent visual installation in the world. This 110-kilometre subterranean network boasts works in 90 out of its 100 stations. Using mediums ranging from mosaic to paint to sculpture, 150 artists transformed this public space into something extraordinary. I'm reminded of the local love of beautiful things continuously as I pass the shadowy silhouettes outlined on the walls under the central train station.

That commitment to the aesthetic manifests itself in some of Europe's

THIS PAGE: NOW-CAPPED ROOFS IN STOCKHOLM'S OLD TOWN (PICTURE: JEPPE WIKSTRÖM)

OPPOSITE PAGE: THE HISTORICAL CITY HALL AND SURROUNDING AREA IN WINTER; CITY VIEW AT DUSK (PICTURE: YANAN LI)



boldest museums and galleries. My personal favourite happens to also be one of the newest. Opened in 2010 in a striking Art Nouveau space directly on Södermalm's waterfront, the Fotografiska would be worth a trip for the views of passing ships and the fantastical, fairytale theme park on Djurgården alone. In lieu of a fixed collection, the museum features only rotating exhibits. The constant influx of fresh talent, along with exceptional photo courses, a luxe Nordic restaurant serving produce-centric small plates on the top floor, and an undeniable buzz place, go a long way to understanding why a high percentage of the half a million visitors per year are members of the substantial local creative class.

As I prowled the exhibits, I stumble past looming, solemn portraits of

wildlife in Kenya and Tanzania by conservationist and photographer Nick Brandt. Shot on film in black-and-white, the photos have haunting, human quality to them. Brandt knew many of them by name and describes them as he would old friends – a proud, aging matriarch elephant and her daughter who were photographed days before their death at the hands of poachers, to a forlorn chimp gazing into space. Their faces linger with me long after I leave the darkened hall.

#### DRINKING AND DINING

"Socially, Stockholm is a lot more diverse than people think and the city soaks up all these external influences, which make it a lot more vibrant than its stereotype," says Lola Akinmade Åkerström. Since moving to the city with her Swedish husband six years ago, this prolific writer and photographer has gone on to found Slow Travel Stockholm and is a co-founder of the NordicTB collective of travel influencers and digital storytellers.

**CLOCKWISE** (FROM TOP LEFT): FAÇADE OF THE GRAND HÔTEL; ALL BEDROOMS AND SUITES AT THE GRAND HÔTEL ARE LAVISHLY DECORATED; SHOPPING AT COCKTAIL DE LUXE IN SÖDERMALM (PHOTO: MIKAEL SJOBERG); THE MARKET HALL ÖSTERMALMSHALLEN (PHOTO: STAFFAN ELIASSON)



She's explored the capital from all sorts of angles, discovering in the process that the culinary scene is much more varied than one might expect. "While Swedes still eat traditional meatballs, cured salmon and fried herring, we really can't survive without blending and fusing together various international cuisines. From kebab pizzas to Japanese restaurants making sushi out of native Swedish ingredients to Thai woks and kiosks all over the country, fusion allows us to travel vicariously through food."

Nowhere is that staggering abundance of global cuisine more evident than in the city's sudden surge of food trucks and gourmet market halls. The former were banned until a couple of years ago and have been on the rapid rise ever since. Currently, more than 20 trucks roam the city streets hawking everything from Bon Coin, with galettes and bechamel-slathered croque monsieurs, to Wonderboon, with gourmet, all-natural dog treats for pampered pooches.

Food halls have a far older, grander place in town and I decide to begin my survey of the city's gourmet side at the most famous of all: Östermalms Saluhall. Founded in 1888 in the ritziest district, this cavernous venue is an ode to the best of Scandinavian gastronomy. The original brick building is undergoing a top-to-toe renovation – so until 2018, foodies will have to get their fix at the temporary Östermalmstorg next door. Much to my delight, I discover that minimalist substitute has a flair of its own and a dizzying array of delicacies. Diners can sample razor-thin slices of cured gravlax, briny oysters shucked to order, sashimi and imported lobsters. Even smörgås, the ubiquitous open-faced sandwiches, as elevated to art here with towers of avocado, skagen (shrimp salad), fried herring and other elegantly arranged toppings.

To seek out a more contemporary addition to the food hall scene, I head south towards Södermalm's more recently opened Teatern. From the outside, this buzzy newcomer to the culinary scene doesn't look terribly promising. It's located in a strip mall and as I pass rows of fluorescent-lit chain stores, my expectations start to dip.

Once inside though, I find a tastefully mod space shielded from its commercial surroundings. Even the humble hot dog stand in this food court is the pet project of a two-Michelin-star chef and the pastries are by the master baker behind the Swedish princess's wedding cake. Like the city itself, there's much to discover here and visitors willing to linger longer may find themselves smitten. [📍](#)

## THREE GREAT PLACES IN STOCKHOLM

### PERUSE AND TAKE IN A SPECTACULAR VIEW AT MILLESGÅRDEN

Few panoramas are as striking as that of Stockholm's harbour viewed from above at this exceptionally curated museum and sculpture park. Wander through the gardens with the Greco-Roman-inspired statues, then stop for a light lunch on the sun-drenched terrace.

[millesgarden.se](http://millesgarden.se)

### TAKE IN A CONCERT AT SÖDRA TEATERN

Built in 1859, this magnificent theatre south of the city centre is both the city's oldest and grandest. Velvet, crystal and gold touches give the interior a sense of opulence that enhances each performance in the 450-seat space. In the summer, locals flock to the attached Mosebacketerrassen, a sprawling concert venue overlooking the city, while in winter, the more intimate side theatres fill up for poetry readings and jazz.

[sodrateatern.com](http://sodrateatern.com)

### DISCOVER AN ANCIENT SHIP AT THE VASA MUSEUM

Surrounded by the lush, manicured greenery of Djurgården, the Vasa Museum is a must for anyone with even a passing interest in maritime history. This majestic battleship capsized and sank to the bottom of Davy Jones in 1628, only to be salvaged and hauled to shore 333 years later. As the only surviving vessel from the 17th century, the ghostly wreck is both historically significant and undeniably eerie to behold.

[vasamuseet.se/en](http://vasamuseet.se/en)