

# Nordic Vibe

To get behind the laid-back Swedish way of life and Stockholm's exquisite maritime geography, slowly hop across its islands to experience their unique atmosphere and view them from up high to appreciate their beauty.

*Text Lola Akinmade Åkerström*

# Stockholm really forces people to slow down and unwind

**T**he winding Klockstapelsbacken path is flanked by lush green trees and climbs higher and higher. I am not sure when it will end. Initially attacking the journey with vigorous steps trying to reach the top quickly, I can feel my pace beginning to slow as I continue pressing uphill, unsure of what I will see once I'll reach the top.

We are slowly hiking up to Fåfången, a pale yellow-orange coloured gazebo-style restaurant with white wooden details and surrounded by trees trimmed square like natural walls around it. Fåfången, which means 'vanity' in Swedish, sits atop its very own hill in a fashion befitting its narcissistic name on the northeast perimeter of Södermalm. The latter is one of Stockholm's islands and districts, which was created in the 17th century to serve as a defence fortification, guarding the capital city's harbour entrance and collection of waterways.

After a ten-minute hike, we finally reach the summit, with its trees parting to reveal shimmering blue waters flowing in from the Baltic Sea. From Fåfången's vantage point, Stockholm's beauty and diversity sprawls out before me, and the first words to escape from my lips are: "Oh my God."

The small islands that make up Sweden's capital city are all very distinct in character, so each area you will visit offers you another surprise, in more ways than one. Stockholm is, for instance, also a hotbed of creativity, filled with global entrepreneurial start-ups, such as Skype and music service Spotify. And it houses a popular gaming industry, producing *Minecraft* and *Battlefield*, for example. So, let's discover the many creative, laid-back and historic places that Sweden's capital city has to offer.

## Something old

Spread across 14 distinct islands, and with over 30,000 islands in its wider archipelago, Stockholm is an easy-to-navigate labyrinth of 57 inter-connecting bridges, over 760km of bike paths and more than 35 protected green parks. You are never more than a ten-minute walk from water or green space in any direction, and this therapeutic proximity to water and nature has permeated Swedish culture on a deep subconscious level. So much so, in fact, that a government-instituted law called *Allemansrätten* grants you free public access to enjoy Sweden's nature recreationally and freely camp where and when you like, wander and trek across private land (unless signs prohibiting trespassing are in place), pick wild berries and forage for mushrooms. I fully attribute this natural closeness to parks and water to the Swedes' easy-going way of life. Stockholm really forces people to slow down and unwind, even when they weren't planning to.

To my left lies historic old neighbourhood Gamla Stan, the oldest part of Stockholm. It lies on its very own island, flanked by the 18th-century Baroque-style Royal Palace. You can get lost within the area's cobblestoned alleys, mustard yellow and ochre-coloured gabled buildings housing 19th-century restaurants, pubs, and cafés.

During the day, Gamla Stan can be overrun by the sounds of clicking cameras. But by night, the area transforms into one of the city's relaxed nightlife scenes, with cosy pubs and low-lit taverns. Jazz and blues music-loving locals, for instance, flock into the cellars of two clubs – Wirströms Pub and Stampen – to slowly sway their hips and tap their feet along to the beat of live music until dawn breaks.

From my height on Fåfången, I see narrow white ferries moving across Lake Mälaren's



**Previous pages:**  
Café Mariaberget (Blecktornsgränd 4), at the waterfront of the Södermalm district.

**Right page (clockwise from top left):**  
Back lanes of Gamla Stan (Old Town), Stockholm's oldest area; young Swedish designers can be found all over town; Bondegatan, a popular creative street on the island of Södermalm; trendy coffee corner Drop Coffee.

Getty Images (street Gamla Stan), Karina Tengberg/House of Pictures and production Anette Væring/House of Pictures (wallpaper), Caroline Coehorst (Bondegatan), Denise Keus (coffee)





**Left page (clockwise from top left):** ecological summer café Woodstockholm (Mosebacke Torg 9); view of the Stadshuset (city council) on Kungsholmen island; vintage shop Sodra Skattkammaren (Bondegatan 44) sells 1950s furniture; herring on rye bread served at Urban Deli (Nytogret 4).



blue waters, skimming its surface like slipping stones. They are ferrying passengers over to Stockholm's greenest island, Djurgården.

On Djurgården's southeastern edge lies the angular-shaped wooden façade of the Vasa Museum. This is the final resting place of the *Vasa*, a 17th-century warship, which sank in 1628 within minutes of setting sail out of Stockholm's harbour. *Vasa* was salvaged almost in its entirety, and I see its impressive masthead jutting out above the thick tree line.

It is on Djurgården where I regularly wind down to enjoy its rich history and green parks, soaking up sunrays filtering through tree limbs and branches. I like to relax in the apple orchards of my favourite garden lunchroom, Rosendals Trädgård Kafé. Set amid orchards, greenhouses and flower gardens, this organic café and bakery prepares fresh pastries and bread from biodynamic flour in a wood-fired stone oven. Breathing in the fragrance of daffodils, tulips and wild spring flowers as I sip a cup of tea, time really seems to stand still for me.

**Hipster haven**

A nautical horn blows, signalling the arrival of a ship, and I watch as a seven-storey Baltic cruise liner floats into Stockholm's harbour, past Fåfängan's outpost, dwarfing those white Djurgården ferries.

It moors behind a red-brick art nouveau-style building, built in 1906, which is now home to Stockholm's edgy contemporary photography museum, Fotografiska, showing both Nordic and international talents. If the historic Vasa Museum on Djurgården is an ode to Stockholm's past, Fotografiska – located on Södermalm, the island I'm now standing on – is a symbol of its modernity. Called 'Söder' by us locals, the neighbourhood was once a 20th-century slum. But it was revitalised >

Barbara Groen (boat), Caroline Coehorst

**Places to stay**

**Mälardrottningen Yacht Hotel**  
Docked at Riddarholmen, this floating boat hotel built in 1924 has 61 cabins spanning its three-level deck – from modest-sized sailor cabins to a sprawling owner's cabin. [malardrottningen.se](http://malardrottningen.se)  
Riddarholmskajen 4

**The Winery Hotel**  
Wine lovers should check out Sweden's first combined urban winery and boutique hotel. Its industrial-style interior boasts brick walls, concrete ceilings, wide windows, tavern-style wooden wine barrels and leather sofas. [thewineryhotel.se](http://thewineryhotel.se)  
Rosenborgsgatan 20

**Hotel Skeppsholmen**  
Located on Skeppsholmen island, this hotel is housed in a 17th-century building with bright rooms, contemporary decor and sea views. The iconic Museum of Modern Art (Moderna museet) and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities (Östasiatiska museet) are its nearby neighbours. [hotelskeppsholmen.se](http://hotelskeppsholmen.se)  
Gröna gången 1

**Places to eat**

**Rosendals Trädgård Kafé & Bageri**  
Unique café and bakery set amid greenhouses, flower gardens and apple orchards on Djurgården island. Its tasty dishes, such as pan-seared Arctic char on couscous, are all organic. And its fresh pastries and breads are baked from biodynamic flour in a wood-fired stone oven. [rosendalstradgard.se](http://rosendalstradgard.se)  
Rosendalsterrassen 12

**Eriks Gondolen**  
To dine with a stunning panorama, head up to Gondolen, located in a narrow rectangular structure with large windows overlooking Lake Mälaren and Gamla Stan. Try its saddle of lamb with beetroots and goat's cheese or its poached cod with mussels in white-wine sauce. [eriks.se/gondolen](http://eriks.se/gondolen)  
Stadsgården 6

**Teatern at Ringen**  
A refreshing take on a food court, with Sweden's top chefs joining forces to launch high-quality and affordable food kiosks. Try, for example, a gourmet hotdog from Korvkiosken – run by chef Magnus Nilsson (from Michelin-starred Fäviken restaurant). [ringencentrum.se/teatern](http://ringencentrum.se/teatern)  
Ringen centrum, Skanstull metro

**Tradition**  
Simple yet elegant eatery, serving classics, including meatballs, *gravad lax* and *stekt strömming* (fried herring), with a more modern twist. [restaurangtradition.se](http://restaurangtradition.se)  
Österlånggatan 1

**Things to do**

**Rooftop tour**  
Join Takvandring tours for a walk up 43m along 19th-century rooftops with spectacular views of Södermalm, Gamla stan and Kungsholmen. [takvandring.com](http://takvandring.com)

**Biking Djurgården**  
Grab a rental bike and enjoy a ride around the Djurgården area. [citybikes.se](http://citybikes.se)

**Brunch Cruise**  
Take a three-hour roundtrip brunch cruise on the refurbished 1931 steamboat *S/S Stockholm* to the city of Vaxholm. Enjoy the well-stocked smörgåsbord of Swedish classics like pickled herring, smoked and cured salmon, salads, potatoes, breads and desserts. [stromma.se](http://stromma.se) **VVV**

# “There’s a young and creative optimism here within art, fashion, food and music”

to become the city’s most eclectic island, a modern-day showcase of urban gentrification.

Södermalm truly exudes Stockholm’s vibrant and throwback style, and it also happens to be my favourite island. Its Sofo district remains the most relaxed spot in town, and is filled with creatives, indie musicians, rockabilly hipsters, fair-trade cafés and vinyl record stores. Offbeat boutiques are spread across Sofo, such as bike shop/café Bonne Mécanique (Bon Meq), where you can indulge in organic grilled-avocado sandwiches and homemade soup while getting your bike fixed.

Bon Meq exemplifies what the entire island of Södermalm stands for: a relaxed, trendy, eco-friendly and socially-conscious atmosphere. “On Södermalm, there’s an inspiring blend of older working-class residents and newly-built up-and-coming creative communities by the sea,” says Bon Meq’s owner Jimmy Östholm. In addition to running the bike shop/café, Östholm also designs ergonomic city bikes called Vélosophy, using sustainable materials, and for every one sold he donates a bicycle to a schoolgirl in Ghana. This social-consciousness is the unifying thread you will find woven throughout Södermalm’s many businesses and boutiques. “There is a young and creative optimism here within art, fashion, food and music. The mix of hip brand stores and easy-going street life is great,” adds Östholm.

If you’re looking for some offbeat shopping experiences, Södermalm is the place to be. It is peppered with vintage boutiques, like Sivletto, offering fashion from the 1940s and ’50s. The store also has a hair salon, where Stockholm’s bearded hipsters go to trim up and rock new haircuts. You’ll also find hipsters congregating around Södermalm’s Hornstull district, which is full of their favourite hangouts, such as old-fashioned barbershop Roy & Son, with a long family history of hairdressing.

Unlike Gamla stan’s pub-driven nightlife, Södermalm caters to a younger crowd with after-work lounges and cosy ‘hole-in-the-wall dive bars’ transporting you to another decade. Linje Tio, a popular after-work lounge, is named after a historic tram that once ran between the harbour and the Hornstull district. And sister clubs Debaser Medis and Debaser Strand host an edgier live music scene.

### Coffee breaks

We finally settle on outdoor wooden benches along Fåfångan’s cliff, and order traditional *fisksoppa* (fish stew filled with chunks of wild salmon and crayfish) and dill potatoes served with slices of cured salmon. Just as Stockholm’s proximity to water and nature facilitates slow living, traditional Swedish cuisine embodies slow food, as it’s simple, unpretentious, full of flavour, and inspired by the sea. Alongside classics, such as *sill* (slowly pickled herring) and *gravad lax* (raw salmon cured for a few days), you’ll find slowly-cooked *grytor* (stews) and casseroles.

Slow living in Stockholm starts with the cultural tradition of *fika*, which means taking coffee breaks several times a day. But beyond the act of drinking coffee and biting into freshly baked *kanelbullar* (cinnamon buns), *fika* is about temporarily disconnecting from daily hectic life with one’s family, friends and colleagues. *Fika* often lasts longer than the typical coffee break so that people can fully reset themselves mentally and emotionally before hopping back into the thick of things. All over town, you’ll find simple cosy cafés designed for you to *fika* for hours.

To get my personal fix, I head to organic Café Muggen on Södermalm. Its dimly-lit 1970s-style interior mixed with contemporary elements and chandeliers feels like a revival of the hippie era of love and peace. Its decor

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Right (clockwise from top left): The popular Scandinavian brand Marimekko; Bondegatan, Södermalm’s hippest street; Kungsträdgården metro station; Traditional bakery Fabrique (Götgatan 24 and 90) prepares the best Swedish pastries.

Alamy (metro), Caroline Coehorst





You have to savour the city slowly to fully appreciate it

Lola Akinmade Åkerström

Left page: Fåfängan restaurant and hill on Södermalm island.

## Stockholm

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- 4 Rosendals Trädgård Kafé
- 5 Fotografiska museum
- 6 Bonne Mécanique bike shop/café
- 7 Café Muggen
- 8 Teatern at Ringen food court
- 9 Sivletto vintage shop
- 10 Linje Tio bar
- 11 Mälardrottningen Yacht Hotel



Jaemijn Evans/Art Associates

is designed to calm you and keep you indoors, chatting over several cups of coffee. I often grab a fresh salad piled high with baby shrimps and avocado, and sit on a barstool by the ceiling-to-floor windows, watching a cross-section of Stockholm slowly walk by. Muggen's modern menu includes fair-trade coffee and eco-friendly teas paired with organic pastries, smoothies and freshly-made dishes – again displaying the common thread of socio-responsibility that's so typical of Södermalm.

Culturally, Stockholm has also embraced the concept of all-day breakfast brunch restaurants. You can get poached Eggs Benedict and smoked salmon or spinach, and fluffy American-style pancakes piled high with seasonal berries at popular brunch spots like Sthlm Brunch Club and Greasy Spoon. You can even enjoy live jazz bands play groovy tunes as you tuck into brunch at Södra Teatern, while admiring the stunning harbour views – another favourite pastime of mine. When summer rolls around, the locals retreat further into Stockholm's archipelago to relax, basking under the never-setting midnight sun amid wooden cottages painted Falu-red, white sailboats

bobbing by islets and coves, and seasonal summer crayfish parties called *kräftskivor*.

Looking at Stockholm from above, at Fåfängan, I admire and take in Stockholm in all its splendour. That slow hike up and subsequent view from the summit epitomises all that Sweden's capital represents to me: a laid-back city you have to savour slowly to fully appreciate just how geographically stunning and culturally rich it actually is. ■

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