

SWEDE

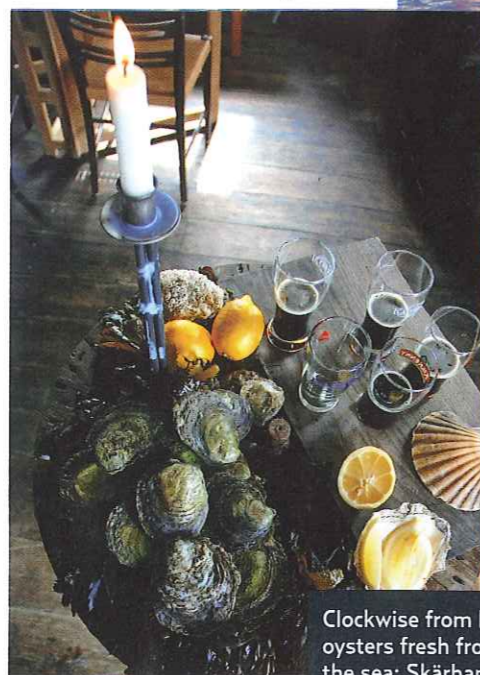
Dreams Are Made Of This

With its fresh seafood and chic hotels, Sweden's west coast is a summer idyll, says Nigel Tisdall

HAVE YOU EVER CHEWED an oyster? I haven't, but now Per Karlsson, a handsome fisherman who harvests 10,000 every year, is recommending that I do. It helps that we're bobbing around in a gorgeous fishing boat built in 1952 from oak and pine, and that his equally handsome brother, Lars, has laid out an accompanying spread of homemade seaweed bread and dark bottles of locally brewed porter.

Raked up from the seabed just minutes ago, the oysters taste exhilarating and super-nutritious, their flavour enhanced by the rich, cold waters of the Skagerrak Strait. Chewing certainly helps you savour the experience, and allows time to contemplate the austere and rugged landscape of inlets and low-lying islands surrounding us. 'So, are oysters an aphrodisiac?' my wife, Alice, asks Per. 'I'd say so,' he replies with a modest smile.

The chance to enjoy tip-top fish and seafood – lobster, crayfish, mussels, prawns, herring – is a prime reason why you might want to hop over to this peaceful corner of Sweden. Known as the



Clockwise from left: oysters fresh from the sea; Skärhamn harbour; Villa Sjötorp; Grand Hotel Marstrand; boat huts at Smögen; a wooden church



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Bohuslän Coast, it runs for 100 miles north from Gothenburg to the Norwegian border and has long been a favoured spot for a classic summer holiday spent enjoying rocks and coves rather than packed-out sandy beaches. The film director Ingmar Bergman had a home here, and from June to August the region becomes a bastion of the wholesome seaside holiday. Our plan is to spend an easy week driving around its jigsaw-puzzle-shaped shoreline, staying in small hotels and hopping between the islands using the

many eye-catching bridges and sweet little egg-yolk-yellow ferries.

On the outside, everything seems very traditional. Our directions to find Everts Sjöbod in Grebbestad, where Per and Lars run their 'oyster safari', included instructions to 'look for a yellow sea hut standing on poles in the water'. Hmm, there's rather a lot of those round here... Inside their wooden boathouse, though, the high design values we've come to expect from Scandinavia are very much in evidence. It's just a simple bothy, but somehow the colourful jumble of tools, nets, barrels, sails and fluorescent oilskins looks as artfully composed as a Vermeer painting.

Bohuslän is reminiscent of Cornwall or the west coast of Ireland, with rugged features interspersed with pockets of chichi. The weather is similar, too – although in Sweden there appears to be no meteorological halfway house; either it's bucketing down so fiercely the wipers on our hire car have to do overtime, or it's so hot all the Swedes are stripping off to sunbathe on the rocks as if auditioning for a swimwear shoot. One moment everyone's zipped up in their best Helly Hansen, the next they're whipping out the bold red Gant shorts.

At Hällevikstrand we board a ferry to Käringön, a traffic-free island where we are surrounded by families clutching picnics, cooler-boxes, pet dogs and elderly relatives. A laid-back fishing village dating from the 1600s, this is the quintessence of the Bohuslän good life,

with its neat sailing dinghies, white clapboard houses and gorgeous cottage gardens bursting with sweet peas and honeysuckle. You can walk round Käringön in half an hour, and when we look inside its pretty, red-painted buildings we find an oyster and champagne bar, gourmet restaurants serving terrific fish soup, and little boutiques selling pink wellies speckled with diamanté.

'It's amazing how the Swedes can do all this without things getting {continued}

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A day-trip down Austria's biking trails is invariably a journey of discovery. Some find their own personal fountain of youth at a glass-clear lake, others find out that parents can let loose as exuberantly as children. And yet, the most beautiful experience for them all is that laughing together is the best part of being a family.

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'The blurring of life, nature and art continues
at a sculpture park on Tjörn island'



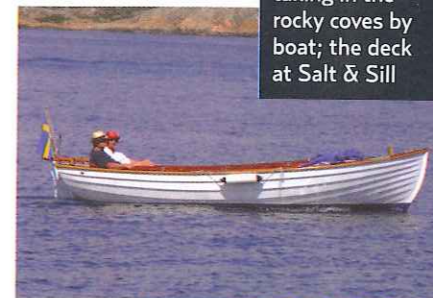
twee,' I compliment one glamorous shop-owner. 'Twee? Vot is twee?' she asks. I try to explain. 'Well, it's a bit like naff.' 'Naff? Vot is naff?' I give up and wander on, admiring the effortlessly stylish holly-hocks and the golden-haired children jumping off the rocks like some Boden ad.

Inland, the landscape is equally enrapturing. Dotted with huge rolls of hay wrapped in white plastic, the recently harvested cornfields might well be an expensive piece of conceptual art, while all the farms have log piles arranged as neatly as cigarettes in their packet. The blurring of life, nature and art continues at Pilane, a sculpture park on Tjörn island, where sheep graze amid a landscape planted annually with engaging works by leading artists from around the world. And when we later visit the Nordic Watercolour Museum, back on the coast at Skärhamn, the restaurant – with its simple wooden tables lit by hurricane lamps – seems as carefully created as the works displayed in its galleries.

Isn't it funny how being on holiday makes you so hungry? After all, you're not doing that much – yet somehow Alice and I find ourselves on the waterfront deck at the Salt & Sill restaurant in nearby Klädesholmen, merrily tucking into its 'famous herring board' just a few hours after we've laid waste to the substantial candlelit breakfast that is customarily served at Swedish hotels. Just as posh chocolate now comes enlivened with all sorts of bizarre tastes from peppercorn to lavender, so is this cold raw fish spiced up with blackcurrant, horseradish and fennel, and even rhubarb and vanilla (very good). We sit and admire the wealthy diners who motor up to the deck in their sleek Nimbus yachts, wearing gilets {continued}



From top: Tjörn island; seafood at Everts Sjöbod; taking in the rocky coves by boat; the deck at Salt & Sill





From top: a room at Stenungsbaden Yacht Club; Marstrand harbour; a typical clapboard house; balcony view from Grand Hotel Marstrand



to match and carrying little dogs in designer lifejackets. It's a splendid Riviera moment – but without the Eurotrash.

Maybe it's the glorious sunshine – we get three days out of six (they like equality here) – but looking out at the flat blue sea, I can't help thinking I'm holidaying in a land of higher beings. Many Swedes enjoy an enviable lifestyle – and

some have had it good for years. Visiting Villa Sjötorp, a monumental summer home near Lyckorna that dates from 1901, it feels like we've opened the door into some dreamy Edwardian painting. A glossy green lawn slopes down to the sea, a swing hangs invitingly from a venerable copper beech, tiled stoves stand sentry in the drawing room. Lunch is served on the verandah – beetroots glazed with dandelion honey, a crayfish and dill casserole, fresh berries from Skafteröd with organic ice cream.

This sense of period glory continues when we cross over to Marstrand, another car-free island that has had aristocratic airs ever since King Oscar II visited in 1887 – and liked it so much he returned almost every summer for the next 20 years. There's a splendid Grand Hotel, which looks onto a tree-lined park complete with bandstand, as well as many elegant summer villas and the magnificent Societehuset, an entertainment hall built in 1886 that now has a beautiful ballroom with contemporary chandeliers.

By chance, Alice and I arrive when there's a regatta in full swing and the harbour is packed with boats. When we make a hearty yomp around the island – taking turns to peep naughtily at the nude bathing stations out on the rocks – we spy distant sails on the glittering ocean. There's an excitable mood in the designer shops and quayside bars, and at night the restaurants are so busy we end up sharing a table with a hunky Ukrainian yachtie who competed at the Beijing Olympics.

'You know, there's 400 sailors in town,' a waitress tells me. 'And they're all very attractive,' Alice adds, rather unnecessarily. This is a weekend, clearly, when an awful lot of oysters will get chewed. ■

Book now

- Sunvil Discovery (sunvil.co.uk) offers tailor-made packages to West Sweden. In April, a six-night tour costs from £825 per person, including return flights to Gothenburg, car hire and accommodation in four-star hotels with breakfast.
- Recommended places to stay are Salt & Sill (saltosill.se), Villa Sjötorp (villasjortorp.se), Stenungsbaden Yacht Club (stenungsbaden.se) and Grand Hotel Marstrand (grandmarstrand.se). See karingon.com for apartments on Kåringön, and evertssjobod.se to book an oyster safari. To catch some art, visit akvarellmuseet.org and pilane.org.
- *The Rough Guide to Sweden* (£13.99, Rough Guides) is useful, or see westsweden.com.

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Photographs by Nigel Tisdall, Peter Adams, Mikael Almse