

# Step back in time to a forgotten Sweden

The Swedish wild west has fishing boats, yachts and a jaunty tune or two, says **Gavin Bell**

I saw it first from the deck of a yacht sailing north from Gothenburg towards the Norwegian border — a craggy coastline of granite islands and skerries fragmented by a labyrinth of treacherous shallows.

Even on a day of mist and rain there is something compelling about the Bohuslän, the wild west of Sweden where forests and farmland meet the sea at a string of old fishing hamlets clinging to bare rocks. It seems a hidden land, calling out to be explored.

Then I heard about an island where a troubadour composed songs in the 1940s that captured the hazy idyll of long summer days in the Swedish countryside. There were bicycles for hire, and kayaks, and walking trails through woods and meadows, they told me. And there was a wooden-clad hotel that staged dinner concerts of the folk songs written in a store next door. The Bohuslän was calling again.

Flatön island is barely an hour's drive from Gothenburg City Airport, via a bridge and a short ferry ride, but it is a world apart. Its main road is a single track, and after a while it reaches the Handelsman Flink hotel, which has a dozen rooms by a tranquil inlet, a modest spa and a fishing boat that provides lobsters for its guests.

Thousands of Swedes flock to the spot every summer because it is an old haunt of Evert Traube, the late troubadour who is only marginally less renowned in his homeland than Abba.

It is easy to understand why. On my first evening the restaurant was full of people linking arms and singing along to jaunty tunes that sounded like George Formby having fun with Gilbert and Sullivan. Even without understanding the lyrics, it is music that makes you smile.

The landscapes that inspired the songs are best explored at a leisurely pace, so I began with a bike ride. Cycling on country roads through woods and past brightly-painted farmhouses is good for the soul, and waiting for a cable ferry to rattle over to the neighbouring island of Skatflo

“We go ashore, where a local shows me how to shoot a bow and arrow, and I watch a man dive naked into the water”

is part of an enviably unhurried pace of life. I was heading for a fairytale village of ancient wooden villas built for sea captains a century ago, when the Bohuslän boasted the biggest merchant fleet in Sweden. The master mariners of fiskehäcksfil are long gone, but the tang of the sea still pervades cobbled lanes winding among their quaint houses, and rust-red fishing sheds converted into holiday homes.

Climbing to a windmill above the village, past windows adorned with model boats and wooden seagulls, there is a sense of stepping back in time to when the harbour was crowded with schooners and barges bound for Baltic ports with cargoes of wood, grain and coal. Now it is a playground of yachts and motor boats, a little armada of pleasure craft eager to be off and sailing around the archipelago.

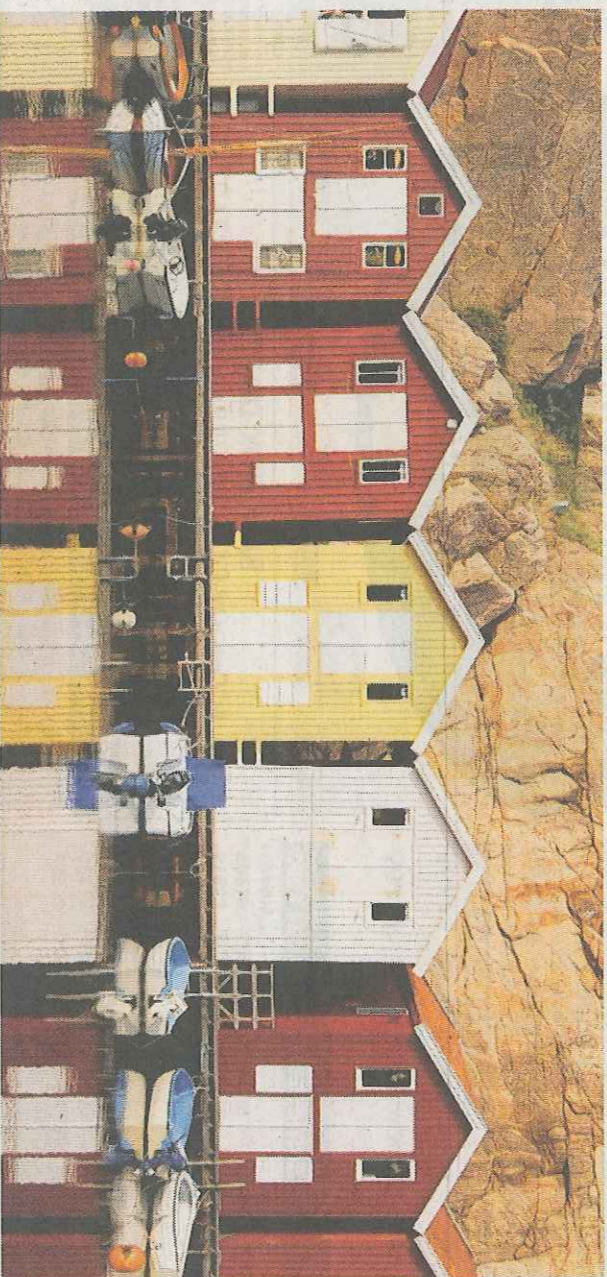
Swedes like to be beside the seaside, and a fine place for watching them messing about in boats is a rocky headland near the village of Grundsund. I found it thanks to a guide who led the way on a footpath through sun-dappled woods of oak, birch and rowan, to a cahn of white painted stones high above the sea. In summer the water seems busier than the land, dotted with white seals heeling gracefully among a scattered mosaic of islands. So we sat on the rocks for a couple of hours, gazing dreamily at the sea and tucking in to a picnic of marinated herring, which is a prized local speciality.

Then I go to sea myself. Not quite the sea, actually, because I am in a kayak and the idea of bouncing around in lively off-shore waters doesn't appeal. Paddling in calm inlets and creeks is more what I have in mind when I sign up for an overnight camping trip, and my guide, Susanna, obligingly leads me into a jumble of wooded islets that could be a Swallows and Amazons adventure park.

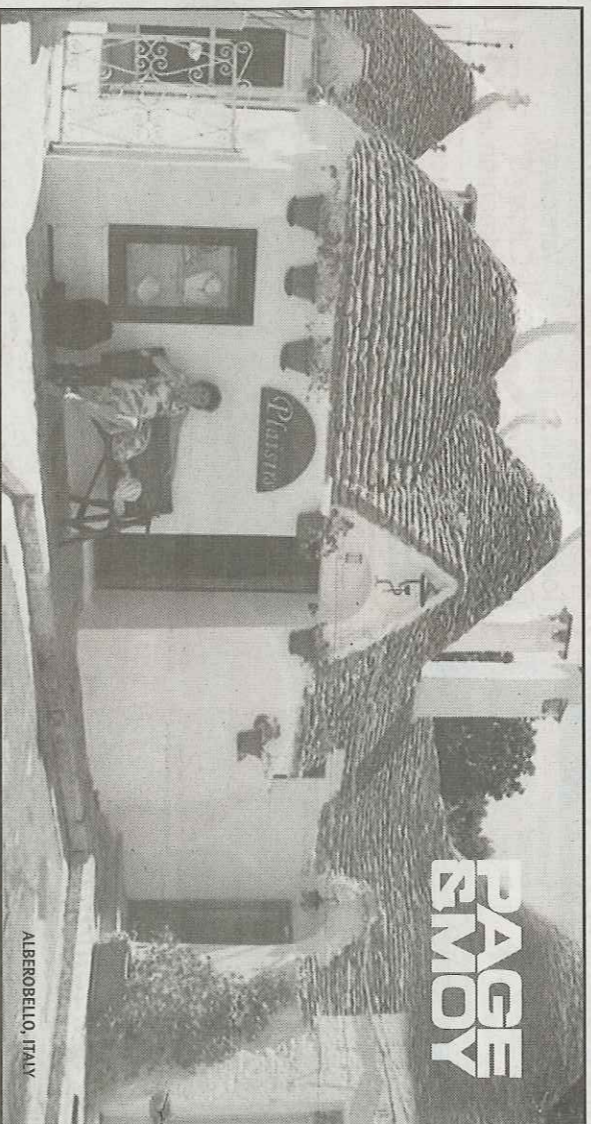
We pitch our tents on one of them known as Birch Island, and head off on a circumnavigation of a larger island. Halfway around we go ashore. A friend of Susanna's shows me how to shoot a bow and arrow, and I watch a man diving naked into the water.

That night we sit by a camp fire and Susanna talks of plans for kayak tours for choirs, so that they can sing as they paddle along.

In the quiet backwaters of this hidden land, shrouded in evening mist and echoing to plaintive bird calls, it seems like a splendid idea.



Boat huts on the Bohuslän coast. The area once boasted the biggest merchant fleet in Sweden



ALBEROBELLO, ITALY



**Getting there**  
Rivarair flies from Stansted and Glasgow to Gothenburg City Airport. Flatön island is about an hour's drive north, with a short, frequent ferry connection.

**Where to stay**  
Handelsman Flink hotel (0046 304 55051, handelsmanflink.se) has doubles with breakfast from about £150.

**Further info**  
westsweden.com

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