

## Welcome to my secret Swedish wilderness

Forget Stockholm and head for the forgotten southwest for the perfect antidote to urban living, writes Maggie O'Farrell

James Joyce once said that a pier was "a disappointed bridge". He had obviously never seen the one in Malmö. Its planks carry you a long way into the water towards a grand, wooden structure, apparently floating in the middle of the Baltic Sea. This is Ribersborg Kallbadhus, a 100-year-old open-air seawater bathing pool with wood-fired saunas.

Once past the ticket barrier, you find ranks of tiny wooden changing huts and numerous walkways. The ink-blue Baltic gently swells beneath, while naked Swedes sit about, sunning themselves like cats. The saunas have what estate agents might

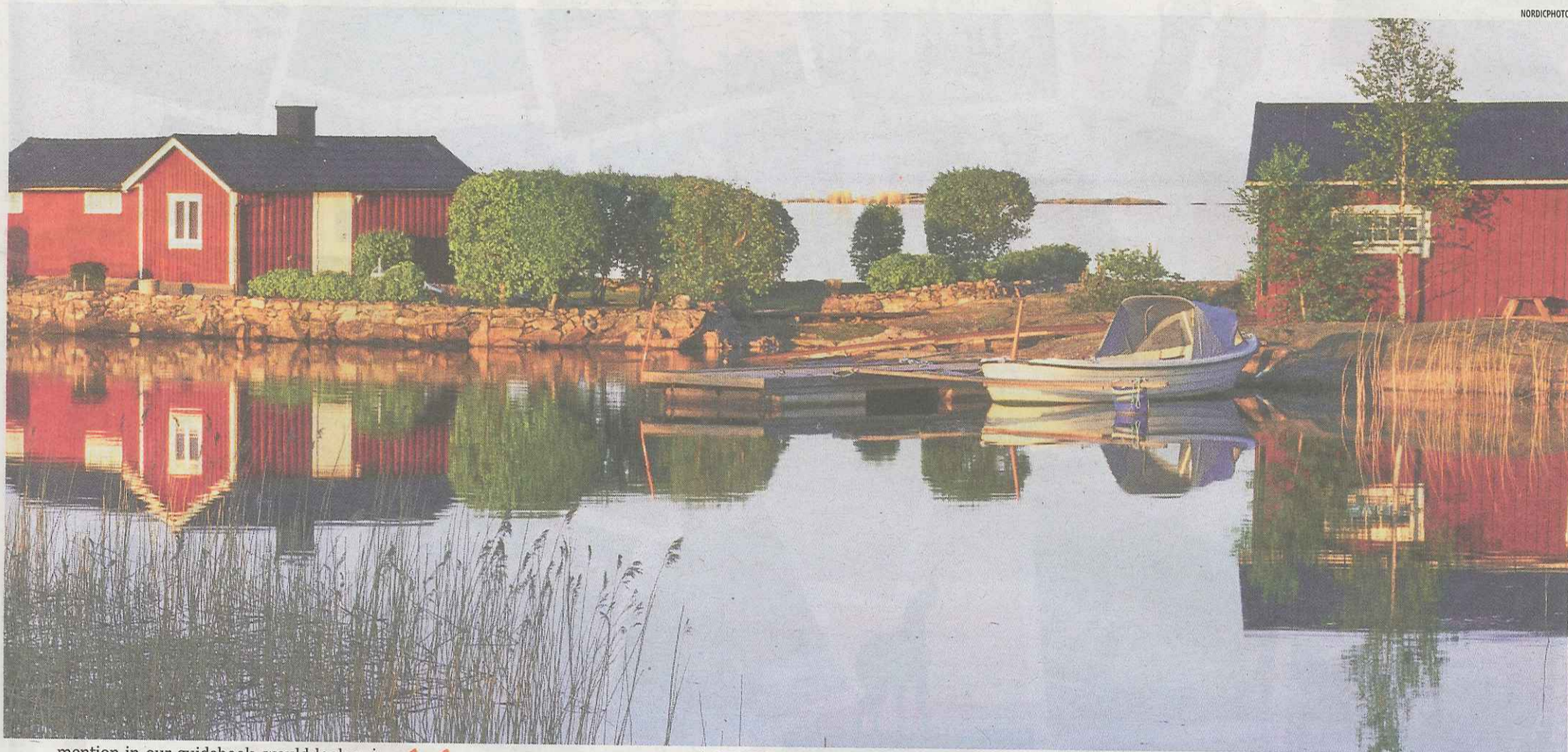
call a "picture window", offering a wide view of the sea. When the heat becomes unbearable, you can run along the walkway and plunge into the cold for a swim. Eider ducks will bob along beside you, unruffled by your presence.

Three naked sextagenarians sitting on a bench admonish me for not spending long enough in the water. But it is so cold, I protest. They laugh. "We come here in December and January," one says. "Every week. You have to smash the ice before you swim but," she shrugs, "it's good for you."

I arrive in southwest Sweden just as summer is tipping over into autumn. Swallows are still arrowing from rooftop to rooftop but the trees are laden with ripening apples. The region is often overlooked in favour of its more glamorous sibling, the southeast, which has the draw of cosmopolitan Stockholm and beautiful Gotland.

Carin Falkholts who runs Falkholts, a Dalsland restaurant, tells me that when she was at school she was told that God put "a little bit of everything" into the area, creating a miniature Sweden. And, like most folklore, this has its basis in truth: here you will find rolling, granite coastlines, tiny islands, fertile farmland, lakes, hills and big cities. The lot. And you can drive from Malmö, at the tip of Sweden, into deserted forests, in five hours.

Which is what we do, the day after my Baltic baptism. Dalsland, which inexplicably receives only a single-page



NORDICPHOTOS

mention in our guidebook, would look a little like the Scottish Highlands crossed with the Lake District if you took away the teashops, visitor centres and hordes of people. Winding empty roads cut their way through thick forests; great vistas of water suddenly open out in front of you.

We have trouble finding our accommodation and spend a long time driving in search of an elusive but crucial red post-box. Staffan and Maria, who run Stenebynäs, operate a policy of preserving Dalsland as the isolated wilderness that it is. "We don't believe in leaflets," Staffan says, when we finally reach our destination, "or signposts or advertisements." He throws open the door to our house. "No key. I haven't had a front-door key for years. If I did, I'd probably lose it." His view is that you really have to want to get here.

And it's more than worth the struggle. Stenebynäs is a place so secret, so private, so peaceful, that it produces thrilling acoustic distortions. You can hear an oar splashing across the other side of the lake. I fully realise how silent it is only at breakfast on the terrace on our second morning, when a small motorboat putt-putts by and we all stop eating, outraged by the din.

Stenebynäs occupies a peninsula overlooking the vast Lake Iväg. There are four houses, 200 acres to lose yourself in, boats and kayaks to take out on the water, several horses, two terriers who shoot out of the undergrowth to accompany you on a walk, a tyre swing, apple trees, a huge dusty barn filled with a bike and toys and a ping-pong table, a sauna by the lake... need I go on?

For my city-dwelling children, it is the perfect antidote to the confines of urban life. We are up in the mist-laden dawn to feed crab apples to the horses. My seven-year-old son can't quite believe that he's allowed to wander about unaccompanied, that there are no cars, that he can be swept away by Staffan for a bumpy tractor ride through the forest, that he's allowed to build fires — and to set them alight.

The forest at Stenebynäs is something that I will remember for a long time. We first encounter it on one of those mornings that anyone with a young family will recognise. My aim to entice the children on a mushroom hunt is scuppered by a sudden

“ We are up in the mist-laden dawn to feed crab apples to the horses ”

toddler meltdown, accompanied by a constant groan from her older brother that his legs are tired. So we enter the forest, a recalcitrant child, two frazzled parents and a grief-stricken baby in a backpack. Seconds later, everything is forgotten and we are rapt. It is like something from a Hans Christian Andersen story: moss-covered stones, pine trees and silver birches illuminated by shafts of sun, red-spotted toadstools in among the chanterelles.

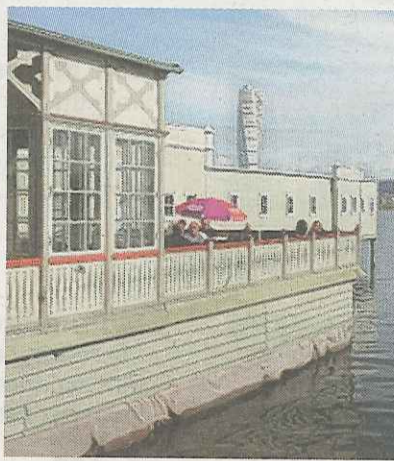
A mushroom hunt, I discover, is a perfect occupation for a toddler obsessed with the minutiae of the ground beneath her feet. We all search for the delicate, orange-headed, frilled and gilled forms. The seven-year-old races ahead to scout for new crops. The toddler is gripped by the act of collection, by putting small things in a basket. We eat them later, fried in butter. They taste of wood and rain and moss.

I think then that nothing in Sweden can possibly equal Stenebynäs. But this is before I see Käringsön Island.

To reach it, we leave our car and catch a ferry; Käringsön is car-free and has only 123 inhabitants, the ferryman tells me. The boat cuts through water so calm that it's almost silken. Käringsön appears like the head of a sleeping monster, a cluster of red fishing huts lining its harbour. I've never seen anywhere like the landscape of Käringsön. If granite conjures up images of craggy, forbidding cliffs, then banish them from your mind. This is undulating, bare to



Main picture: Stenebynäs occupies a peninsula overlooking Lake Iväg; above, there's plenty to discover in Dalsland; below, Malmö's historic open-air bathing pool, Ribersborg Kallbadhus



the sun. Up close, it is striated like the hide of an elephant. Wooden houses, built right on top of these stony dips and peaks, have wheeled handcarts parked outside: transportation, Käringsön-style.

On my second day, I meet Camilla Hofsten, who is descended from a long line of Käringsön fishermen. She is, it seems, determined to carry on the tradition but in a defiantly modern style. She and her father have set up the Karingo Oyster Bar. Would I like to see it?

She takes me down a winding path to a small building on a jetty. "We have no fridge," she says, "and our food is the freshest in the world. You know why?" She stamps on the wooden floor. "It's all under there!" I peer into the midnight depths while, lost in clouds of steam, she hauls a cover off something at the end of the jetty. "Now it's time for you to go in the hot tub."

So my family and I climb into a tub at the end of a jetty on a tiny island in southwest Sweden. Kenth, Camilla's father, brings us champagne and hauls up some oysters, opening the hoary shells with a deft flick of his knife. We wave at passing boats, we take it in turns to leap out of the tub into the freezing sea, we try and fail to come up with a scenario more perfect than this one. I draft an e-mail in my head: "In Sweden. In hot tub. Never coming home."

Maggie O'Farrell's *The Hand That First Held Mine* (Headline, £12.99) won best novel in the Costa Book Awards this week

Need to know

Getting there

Fly with easyJet (easyjet.com) to Copenhagen from £18 one way and back from Gothenburg from £25 one way. The train from Copenhagen airport to Malmö (skanetrafiiken.se) takes 20 minutes, costing about £10. Holiday Autos (holidayautos.co.uk) has one week's car hire from Malmö from about £195.

Staying

Radisson Blu Hotel (radissonblu.com) in Malmö has B&B doubles from about £120. Cabins on Stenebynäs sleeping four to eight are for rent from £84pp per week.

Book at

www.stenebynas.se. The Karingo Loft (www.karingo.com), self-catering cottage sleeping six is from £56pp per night.

Eating

The Terrace (restaurangterrassen.se) and Mölleexpressen (www.molleexpressen.se) in Helsingborg. Falkholts (www.falkholt.com) in Dalsland. Karingo Oyster Bar (www.karingo.com).

Further information

skane.com; visitsweden.com; vastsverige.com.