

TELFORD'S *Swedish delight*

*It looks like a bigger version of a British canal – but it's in beautiful Sweden.
Paul Miles cruises the Göta Canal*



ABOVE: A spectator watches the ship pass through one of the 66 locks on the journey, this one on the Göta Canal itself. ABOVE RIGHT: One of the ship's crew takes time out to practice on his unicycle along the towpath.

By the beam of the ship's headlamp, we stare while water gushes spectacularly through open sluices, casting us all in a mist, like tourists under Niagara. It's ridiculously early in the morning and we're just beginning our passage through the first of 58 locks on Sweden's 120-mile Göta Canal. Gravity is winning in this battle of the difference in water levels (even though that's only three metres) and the resulting strong currents jostle our ship in the tight-fitting lock chamber until there is the worrying sound of wood groaning painfully, then splintering. "We're going to sink!" I think. "How unfair. We've only just started."

Thankfully, it's not the 100-year old *M/S Wilhelm Tham* that's making a sound like an ogre crunching trees, but, well, trees – or to be precise, birch poles – hanging over the sides of the ship. Captain Kenneth Larsson stands at the controls, wincing, while fenders are crushed between steel hull and brickwork. There are no bow-thrusters to help position us 'just so'.

This former steamer, with many period features, is one of three that takes tourists on journeys of over 300 miles. The four or six day voyage between Stockholm and Gothenburg traverses canals, rivers, lakes and a sheltered seaway. (Although the Göta Canal proper constitutes less than half the distance, the whole route is often referred to as such.)

The locks, that together raise ships to a height of 300ft above sea level, look like the big brothers of those



LEFT & FAR LEFT: *M/S Wilhelm Tham* moored in Stockholm near the Old Town, Gamla Stan.



ABOVE: Original brass controls (now unused) on the ship's bridge deck.

on a British canal. This is because the canal was laid out by the Scottish civil engineer Thomas Telford. In the honesty bar on board *Wilhelm Tham*, you will find a bottled beer "with a hint of whisky" that bears his whisky image on the label.

Telford put the canal on the map for 19th century Britons. In the 1870s, the Göta (pronounced Yerta) Canal Steamship Company signed a contract with pioneering holiday firm Thomas Cook & Co. A promotional poster from the swinging 1920s, describes it as "the most picturesque trip in Sweden". There is an illustration of a flapper resting from the Charleston on a wicker chair on deck; behind the watercolour boat, another "first class steamer" is making its way down through a staircase of locks into a lake.

'First class' passengers in those days did not expect an en-suite cabin with jacuzzi, private balcony and all the latest mod cons, and nor should they today. There are no phones, televisions or Internet. Cabins are tiny, even those on the quieter top deck, where shared toilet and shower facilities mean a dash into the open air. However, the likes of Henrik Ibsen and Hans Christian Andersen didn't complain and I doubt they were treated to champagne and strawberries as the ship set sail, as our 21st century passengers are.

Meals are served in a panelled saloon that can't have changed much in a hundred years. There is white starched linen, fresh flowers and two waiting staff in pinafores. When pickled herring is served with an optional £5 shot of aniseed Aquavit, a Swedish passenger announces: "In Sweden we never drink schnapps without a song." His table then sings a hearty verse. A Swedish-American woman translates it for me. It is all about a herring swimming in the sea with her friends but "she is happy as she can drink any time she wants".

One day, during lunch, the ship veers onto a mud-bank and lists to one side, wine bottles on the mirrored dresser start sliding and have to be rescued by one of the waitresses. A portrait of the King and Queen tilts and is swiftly straightened.

In 1832, at the grand opening of the canal, the then royal couple, King Karl Johan and Queen Desideria, were towed through the final lock of the canal at Mem in their yacht, *Esplendian*, while a military band played. Their endorsement wasn't exactly wholehearted. They had travelled by horse and carriage for most of the way, concerned that journeying the full distance by yacht would take too long.

If you want speed, the journey by train between the two cities takes less than four hours. The ships, which were converted to diesel in the 1960s, travel at walking pace. Sometimes, to work off a calorie or two, we walk or cycle along the towpath ahead of *Wilhelm Tham*, passing meadows and ancient oaks. Otherwise, we stand at the bow in autumn sunshine watching lift and swing bridges (some of which carry railway tracks).

Only two of the locks are still hand-operated, the heavy gates opened and closed by the keeper walking in circles, pushing a bar, like an ox in a threshing chamber. Lock-keepers are responsible for operating a succession of locks, travelling between them by car. The hydraulically operated ones involve nothing more interesting than a bit of button-pushing.

The landscape unfolds gently, from low, whale-humped islands in the Baltic to grassy meadows and deciduous forests, ochre painted wooden farmhouses and fields. We spot herons and divers and a songbird serenades us from a chestnut tree. The waterscape continually changes: sea, river, narrow, rock-blasted channels, lily covered watergardens and expansive silvery calm reflecting the sky.

At Sjötorp Canal Museum, which we reach after dark, there is a map of the inland sea of Lake Vänern, four times the size of Greater London, dotted with pins, like a case of bad acne on a teenager. "They mark the site of all the wrecks in the lake," says the curator, with a grin. We have come to the end of our passage through the Göta Canal and it is across Lake Vänern, in the black of night, that we are headed next.

For more information visit www.gotakanal.se or www.westsweden.com

BELOW: *M/S Wilhelm Tham* descending one of the hydraulically operated locks of the Göta Canal.



M/S Wilhelm Tham moored at Trosa. Launched in 1912, the ship is the second oldest continuously cruising passenger ship in the world, after sister ship in the fleet of three, *M/S Juno*, built in 1874.