



Aboard the *Tuffa* (opposite), Hanna Thorén Karlsson teaches lesson one of Sweden's Bohuslän Coast: how to shuck an oyster. Extra credit: Wash it down with a local porter.

FORGET NORDIC NOIR. ON THIS SUNNY COAST IT'S ALL ABOUT SOAKING UP THOSE BLUE SWEDE VIEWS



SWEDEN BY THE SEA

BY STEPHANIE PEARSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTIAN ÅSLUND

“OYSTERS ALWAYS TASTE BEST

when you open them yourself,” says Hanna Thorén Karlsson, as she throws a thick blond braid over her shoulder and grabs a bivalve

from a bed of seaweed. With a move that would bloody a lesser shucker, she slices the oyster in half. “The first rule of shucking oysters,” she adds, “is that you need a good glove.”

“Why are oysters aphrodisiacs?” asks the only other guest on this oyster cruise, a foodie I’ve just met from Aspen, Colorado.

“I always eat them, so I don’t know,” Karlsson says, laughing, offering her the opened shell and dodging the question with a bit of Swedish restraint. “But it’s important to really chew it and feel the mineral taste.”

I’m on the Bohuslän Coast, puttering between smooth gray granite islands topped by red cottages. This 112-mile stretch from Gothenburg to the Norwegian border on Sweden’s west coast—or the “best coast,” as some call this playland of villages and 8,000 islands and islets—has always been a summertime magnet for locals. But in recent years international travelers like me have been drawn to Grebbestad’s clean, cold salt water that produces 90 percent of the country’s oysters, 70 percent of its sea crayfish, and almost half of its lobsters.

Karlsson is merely the latest Swede I’ve met with a visceral connection to the sea—an unbroken link forged by the Vikings. It’s a far cry from the prim, Garrison Keillor-style Scandinavia I imagined as a child in Duluth, Minnesota, a few hours from my

great-grandparents’ homestead. In 1883, they emigrated from Tvååker, south of Gothenburg, to the lumber-and-mining boomtown of Tower, Minnesota. Grandma Flossie would drag me to the Lutheran church basement for Swedish Cultural Society meetings, a gathering of white-haired ladies drinking coffee and eating lutefisk (dried cod soaked in lye). On Santa Lucia Day, the Festival of Light, they anointed my blond head with a crown of flaming candles. Luckily, my hair never caught fire.

That naive vision changed the summer I turned 15, when my teenage Swedish cousin visited—and shed her bikini top at our crowded Minnesota beach. If she was an accurate representation, my mother country was a land of free spirits who knew how to be one with the outdoors. Here, many years later on the coast of Sweden, that perception seems to match reality.

I’m fortunate to have hired Karlsson as my oyster guide—as well as her father, Per, a former oyster-opening champion of Grebbestad’s annual competition. (He shucked 20 oysters in three minutes, five seconds.) The Karlssons have brought me out on the *Tuffa*, their restored 1952 wooden cruiser that was built by the famed Swedish boatbuilder Gösta Johansson.

Karlsson passes me the knife, and I butcher a pale green mollusk. The meat inside is raw, like Swedish sushi. We return to the Karlssons’ boathouse, and they invite us upstairs to an airy dining room overlooking the bay. “Are you ready for more seafood?” Hanna asks, placing a heaping platter on a pine table. Per pours Slovenian Sauvignon Blanc, and we raise our glasses to the languorous summer days ahead.



Islands, islets, and rock outcroppings dot Sweden’s west coast, including the wildlife-rich Koster Islands and Smögen, where bright fishing huts (opposite) in the harbor look like a box of crayons.



In coastal Sweden, life revolves around the harbor, ebbing and flowing with the day's haul. The waters around villages such as Kungshamn (above) and Lysekil (below) supply most of Sweden's seafood, especially oysters and lobsters.



MY JOURNEY HAD BEGUN in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, where I rented a Volvo and took the E6 highway north. Tempted as I was to explore the harbor and the city's 17th-century center, the highway proved to be a Scandinavian autobahn. Within minutes I'd passed the suburban Ikea and found myself in the countryside, where immaculate red farmhouses contrast with the deep green pastures, and just as quickly are replaced by cliffs and pine forests. I had allowed two nights to drive 100 miles to Strömstad, 12 miles shy of the Norwegian border, where a ferry could take me to South Koster Island and the Kosterhavet, Sweden's first national marine park.

But first, I keep giving in to detours. Even before the oyster cruise, I couldn't resist the draw of salt water.

"Sea kayaking used to be old men with big beards watching birds," I am told by Torbjörn Söderholm, the thirtysomething co-founder of Nautopp Seakayaking, an admittedly rare pursuit on the west coast. After all, we're only 600 miles south of the Arctic Circle. "But there's no better way than a sea kayak to explore this coastline."

I meet Söderholm at Strandflickorna Hotel, a restored inn, after sleeping in an attic suite and eating fresh bread slathered with lingonberry jam for breakfast. Built in 1904, the hotel used to be a retreat for exhausted Stockholm nurses. It's in Lysekil, a village on the tip of a peninsula between the ten-mile-long Gullmar Fjord and a sheltered bay of the Skagerrak Sea.

Söderholm and I drive to a campground on the bay with his Danish wife, Kathrine Olufsen, and start paddling toward Stora Kornö, an island several miles northwest of Lysekil. This area has been inhabited for hundreds of years, but we may as well be miles from civilization, paddling past islands of naked pink granite that slope into water that's, surprisingly, almost as warm as the Mediterranean. A half dozen seals swim between our kayaks, rising lethargically out of the water as if waking from a winter's sleep.

Söderholm tells me about the fishing culture that thrived and died along this coast following the unpredictable herring runs. The largest, between 1780 and 1808, was so massive that herring oil is said to have powered the street lamps in Paris and London. The last giant run dried up around 1900 and is one of the reasons some Swedes, like my great-grandparents, became desperate for a new start in America. Herring, pickled in acetic acid, water, sugar, allspice, red onion, carrot, and salt, remains at the center of every Swedish smorgasbord.

We paddle rolling waves for a few hours and discuss *jantelagen*—a foreign concept to Americans, perhaps the reason there's no direct translation to English.

"It means never wanting to think you're something special," says Söderholm. "We Swedes make fun of it, but we're really like that. You have to encourage us to talk about ourselves." That's one Swedish trait, I think to myself, my family never outgrew.

We land on an isolated pebble beach on the southwest corner of Stora Kornö. The island looks deserted, but we hike about a mile into the hardwood forest to a 17th-century village. Yards sprouting daffodils front a cluster of 50 flawlessly restored

cottages. Most have been handed down from generation to generation. The scene is straight out of a storybook. I'm envious of the Swedes who never left. Söderholm tells me that to buy a cottage here today would cost at least a million dollars.

"In September, everyone comes here for lobster," he explains. "People are crazy about the lobster. They call it black gold."

Back on the beach, Olufsen pulls out a blanket and metal tubes of Swedish lunch staples: *räkost* (cheese with shrimp bits) and *kaviar* (salted cod roe with mashed potatoes), which we spread on "polar" flatbread. Picnicking is by far my favorite tradition to cross the Atlantic: My mom has always claimed food tastes better in fresh air. But our smorgasbord meant smoked Lake Superior trout on white buns, with a side of potato salad.

I STILL NEED TO MAKE MY WAY through dense forests and across placid bays to Strömstad, to catch a high-speed ferry to the Koster Islands. Keeping a schedule seems ludicrous, but my urge to see the new park overrules and my lead foot prevails.

Almost. I arrive in Strömstad just in time to see the ferry pulling out of the harbor. But as I sit at a waterfront café drinking strong black coffee, I realize this historic spa town isn't a bad place to miss a boat. I watch a lithe, tall blond woman and her even taller blond husband stroll among teak rowboats and yachts in the harbor, languishing in the late spring lead-up to the midnight sun. I catch the night's last ferry, which skims over water smooth as glass to arrive on South Koster Island. My home for the night is the sprawling Hotel Koster, built in 1905 and waiting for me a hundred yards up the hill from the dock.

By 6 a.m. the next day, the sun is already high in the sky. I meet Stefan Husar, a ranger for Kosterhavet National Park, which was established a few years ago on the centennial of Europe's first national parks, a set of nine parks all in Sweden. In conjunction with Norway's adjoining Ytre Hvaler National Park, Kosterhavet protects a sprawl of ocean about the size of New York City that's home to some 6,000 marine species.

It's too cold to dive, so Husar leads me on an island tour by bicycle. "The most spectacular scenery is underwater," he says as we pedal through a meadow that will soon bloom with orchids and buttercups. But I'm content with the sights on land—old-timers pass us in motorized carts they use in place of cars, and the leaves on the birch trees are budding.

Next to Sweden's westernmost church, a cream-white rectangle with green trim and a weather vane topping the steeple, we park our bikes at the base of Valfjäll, or "whale mountain," the island's highest point. At the top of the granite monolith we can see a brick red lighthouse on a rock outcropping surrounded by frothing whitecaps. Beyond lies Norway. Husar seems embarrassed that he's run out of "special things" to show me.

"Swedes have a tradition to just be in nature," he says apologetically. "Most people come here to relax and swim and just be." No apology necessary. My ancestors left Sweden more than a century ago, but my ability to "just be" in nature is deeply embedded in my DNA. It's what I intend to do all afternoon.

STEPHANIE PEARSON lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is a contributing editor for *Outside* magazine. Stockholm-based photographer **CHRISTIAN ÅSLUND** grew up on Sweden's west coast. This is the first *Traveler* feature for both.

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