

North Sea

Set sail among the countless islands, craggy sounds and fishing villages of Sweden's western coast to uncover one of Europe's proudest culinary traditions

WORDS OLIVER SMITH • PHOTOGRAPHY MATT MUNRO

Weather Islands,
ten miles off Sweden's
Luslan Coast, were
home to the
oldest of seafarers

Built in 1952, the *Tuffa* (on the left) is moored near the natural oyster beds just outside the town of Grebbestad



FROM LEFT Per and his brother Lars out on the deck of the *Tuffa*; shucking an oyster shell; the interior of the Karlssons' 19th-century boathouse

The King's own oysters

PER KARLSSON STANDS ON THE DECK OF HIS sailing boat, the *Tuffa*, a look of immense concentration on his face: the look of a man trying to remember where he might have left a set of keys. His lips are tightly pursed; in his left hand is a freshly shucked oyster shell and in his right hand a razor-sharp knife. The sea around is calm – little waves sparkle and glint as they catch the Swedish summer sunshine, and the water swishes musically against the boat's mahogany hull.

After a minute, Per takes a gulp and a broad smile extends across his face. 'Eating an oyster is like a kiss from the sea,' he announces, chucking the shell overboard. 'You have to let it linger in your mouth for a long time so you can taste all of the flavours.'

Per's business is wild oysters – dredging them from their beds on the shores of Sweden's shellfish capital Grebbestad, and running a conservation group dedicated to his molluscy mates. His brother Lars is the third-fastest oyster shucker in the world (30 in two minutes 45 seconds), and together they run 'safaris' like this – sailing the coastal shallows, teaching their guests the art of savouring fresh oysters.

They are part of a proud fishing tradition along Sweden's Bohuslän Coast. Because of the cold water temperatures, seafood here grows more slowly, absorbing more minerals and becoming more delicious in the process. Here, the passage of the year is still marked by the changing menu of the oceans. Locals talk fondly of fishing for mackerel on midsummer nights, when the sun barely dips below the horizon. And then there are short winter days, waiting for a catch by a hole in the sea ice with the blinking lamps of lighthouses for company. The comings and goings in the sea are a source of limitless fascination: local newspapers carry

headlines like 'World's biggest halibut found (not edible)' or 'Herring price rise shock'.

Lars throttles the engine, and we sail past tiny islets – chunks of rock visited only by sunbathing seals. From the city of Gothenburg in the south to the Norwegian border in the north, the Bohuslän Coast is dotted with thousands of islands like these. Seen on a map it looks as if Sweden were quietly disintegrating into the sea; nautical charts are full of big red marks showing where doomed ships met their end.

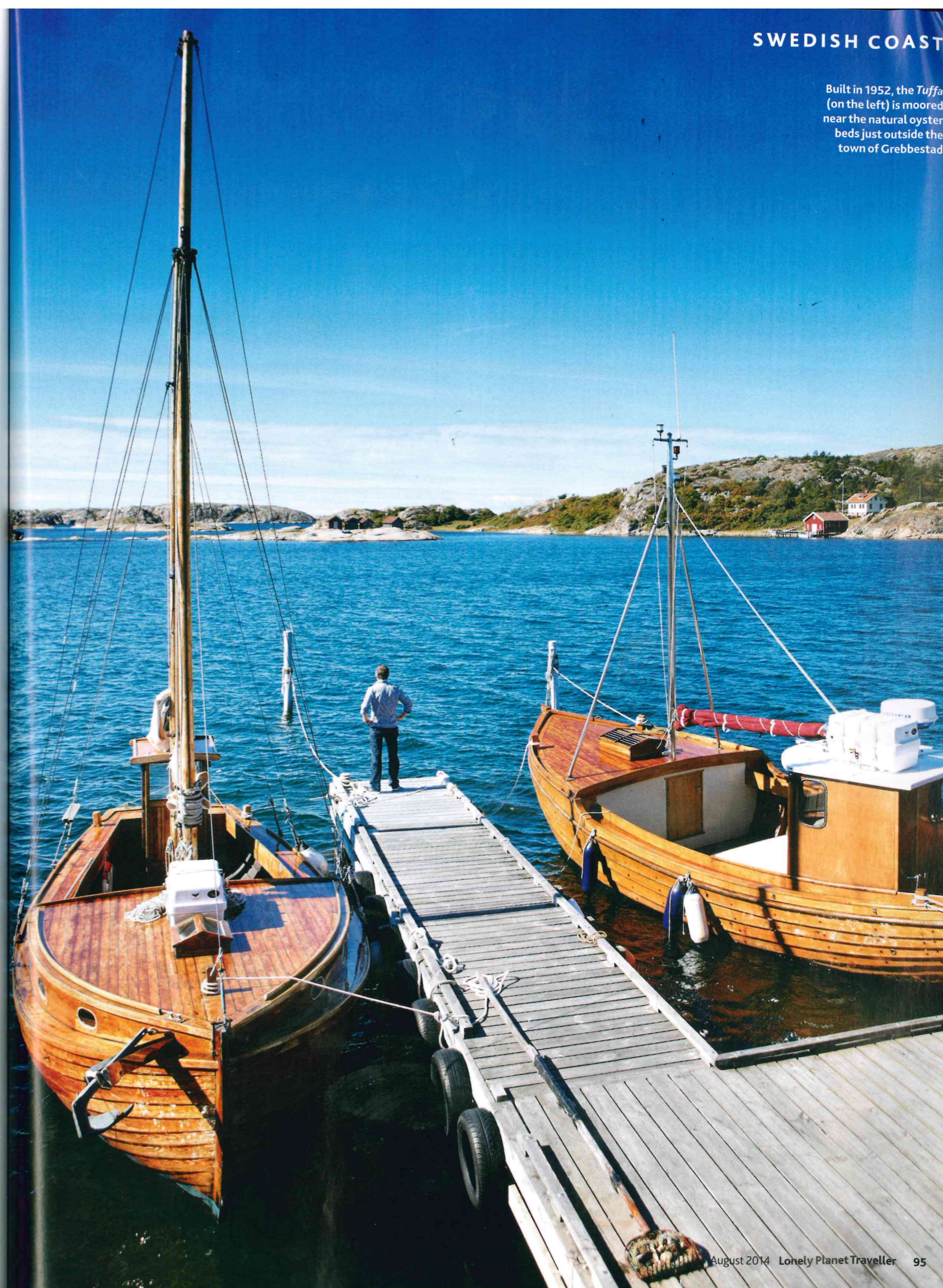
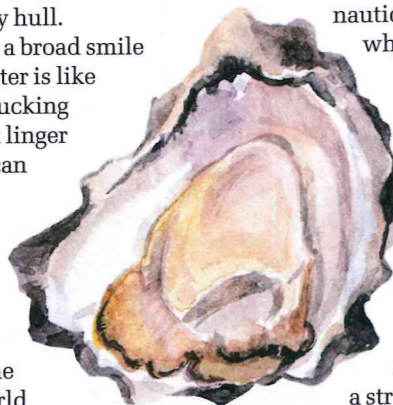
Seen in real life it's a more peaceful proposition: a Nordic Riviera of pebbly beaches and scarlet holiday homes.

Soon we moor up beside Per's own timber boathouse, where he teaches me the craft of oyster shucking – the delicate skill of using a knife to open up an oyster without opening up an artery in the process – and the proper way of consuming them (with a noisy, reverential slurp). Eating a native oyster makes for

a strange sequence of flavours: first the tang of saltwater, then the silky meat of the oyster itself, and finally the aftertaste – a sweet, subtle flavour that lingers around the palate until bedtime.

'Every oyster is different,' explains Per. 'Some are sweet, some are mineral-rich. This is the reason why I never get sick of eating them.'

Per isn't alone in his passion for Swedish oysters. In the 17th century, the Swedish crown proclaimed all oysters were its property, and should henceforth be shipped to Stockholm. Legend goes that someone in the royal court ate a bad oyster and spent a long and rather reflective period on the royal lavatory. They emerged and decreed that oysters were to be the property of the masses once again. And Swedes up and down the land were very relieved. →



over
harbour on
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Herring through a window

ONE DARK AND STORMY NIGHT IN THE LATE 19th century, the keeper at the Torbjørnskjær lighthouse awoke to an almighty crash and a funny smell. After a perfunctory inspection of his home, he deduced a wave had smashed the glass in the light room and – what's more – had deposited some herring through the window.

This was part of a pattern repeated right along the Bohuslän Coast. Quite suddenly, with the mad abundance of an Old Testament plague, the sea erupted with countless millions of herring. Fishermen barely had to dip their nets in the water to pick up a small aquarium's worth of the stuff. After a few years, as suddenly as it had started, this strange phenomenon stopped. And herring levels were back to normal again.

In Swedish fishing circles, the so-called 'herring period' is a mystery on the magnitude of Roswell and the Bermuda Triangle, an occurrence scientists have yet to definitively explain. Nowhere has mystery caused more sleepless nights than on Klädesholmen – famous as the 'herring island' – a half-mile-long landmass north of Sweden's second city, Gothenburg, connected to the mainline by a small bridge.

Today Klädesholmen is a decidedly sleepy place, full of clapboard second homes, tidy flower boxes and Swedish flags, and lots of moored yachts whose masts rise above the rooftops. It's a place where only the purr of a passing Saab breaks the din of yabbering seabirds, and where you can feasibly walk from one side of the island to the other whilst holding your breath. Hard though it may be to believe, this island was the epicentre of Sweden's herring boom: in the late 19th century, 75 herring pickling factories stood on the island, sending

their produce to every corner of Sweden. Today these traditions are preserved by just one remaining factory, a small museum dedicated to the fish, plus a herring-themed restaurant named Salt & Sill ('salt and herring') perched at the entrance to the island. The restaurant's head chef is Jonas Espefors, Sweden's high priest of pickled-herring-based gastronomy and a man fond of long, philosophical pauses in conversation.

'Herring is part of our national identity in Sweden,' he says, sitting in the Nordically sparse dining room after a busy lunch service. 'Everyone eats it at Christmas here, but in fact it's such a versatile dish, you can eat herring any day of the week.'

Having been pickled, herring presents something of a blank canvas for experimentation.

Jonas fetches a board of his finest concoctions in small china pots – herring flavoured with bacon and mustard;

herring with roasted almonds, lemon and dill – strange but delicious marriages of flavours. Every year during Herring Weekend, Jonas is involved in the Herring of the Year competition: a sort of fishy *X Factor* on Klädesholmen, in which celebrity judges decree which unusual flavour will win the annual gong.

'With herring, you're only limited by your imagination,' Jonas explains. 'I've flavoured herring with kiwi, I've flavoured herring with coconut. I even tried herring with chocolate once, but it didn't work.'

Jonas looks thoughtfully outside the window to the restaurant's moorings, where well-fed guests are casting off in their yachts, the sails ruffled by the wind. One by one the boats sweep out of the bay into the open water – seas that long ago stirred with schools of herring. Jonas dusts off his apron and heads back to the kitchen.

'In fact, the chocolate one was disgusting.' →

Jonas Espefors in the seafront dining room of his restaurant, open since 1999



A herring board at Salt & Sill, with flavours including herring with bacon and mustard



FROM LEFT A traditional sailboat in the harbour at Klädesholmen; a boat pulls out from the quays at Fjällbacka; the dining room at Salt & Sill



FROM LEFT A summer salad of feta, tomatoes and edible flowers at Koster Trädgårdar; Stefan van Bothmer and his wife Helen

What grows on seaweed

BEARING NORTH, THE KOSTER ISLANDS ARE THE grand finale of the Bohuslän Coast before you reach the Norwegian border – a burst of green forests and meadows, set rather incongruously among a landscape of shredding waves, bare rocks and lonesome lighthouses. ‘Koster’ is thought to translate from the Old Norse for ‘feeding place’; millennia ago, hunter-gatherers sailed to these fertile islands from the mainland, returning in boats ballasted by foraged food.

Today, another migration takes place. Thousands of Swedish families disembark passenger ferries to start their summer holidays here, labradors, tandem bikes and blonde children in tow. They spend long August days picnicking in the islands’ forest glades, paddling in lagoons that glow with plankton on summer nights.

One man who visited this paradise and decided not to return to the mainland is Stefan van Bothmer, a biologist and historian who set up a café with his wife on the island of Sydkoster. Armed with a satchel made from moose’s ear, and a trusty bike, he takes me on a tour of the island’s ecology and food history. No cars are allowed on Koster – though golf buggies are driven (rather aggressively) by some of the more elderly residents – so bicycles are the quickest way to get around. We pedal along the coastline, passing copses of maple, beech, aspen and mulberry,

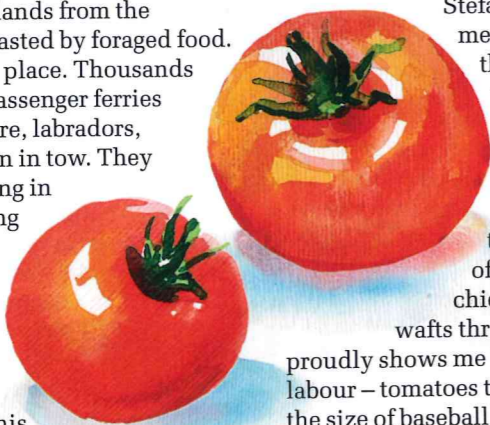
wheeling past empty wharfs where lobster pots sit on the quays, barnacled from years of use.

‘Koster was special as a place where people were both fishermen and also farmers,’ explains Stefan, leaning his bike on a fence post. ‘Long ago people were isolated out here – you had to do a little bit of everything to get by.’

Stefan explains that while Sydkoster menfolk went on long fishing journeys, their wives and children tended to vegetable gardens planted on fertile soil inland. We pedal along country tracks into the island’s interior, where Stefan shows me his own organic kitchen garden devised in the finest Koster tradition – a plot of land shaded by tall trees, where chickens cluck and the scent of herbs wafts through the air. In the adjoining café, he

proudly shows me the fruits (or rather vegetables) of his labour – tomatoes the size of cannonballs, cucumbers the size of baseball bats – before revealing his secret weapon: seaweed collected from the coast and scattered on the soil to fertilise his produce. Even here, it seems, the sea gives life.

‘We’ve learnt from the tradition of self-sufficiency here,’ he says, gesturing to the garden. ‘When you see things growing every day, when you nurture them, it completes your mental picture of nature. It makes everything else on the islands make sense.’ →



SWEDISH COAST

The pilot’s lookout tower on the Weather Islands – even the small cabin is painted a typically Swedish rusty red





Johny Spindel, a fisherman, reels in pots full of crab and langoustine from the deep straits off the Weather Islands

The snaps-drinker's friend

SAILING WEST INTO THE SKAGERRAK STRAIT, the islands become smaller, scarcer and wilder. Centuries ago, pirates hid among this maze of coves, lighting bonfires on the shore to befuddle navigators, wreck their ships and plunder their cargo. The last crumbs of land are the perfectly named Väderöarna ('Weather Islands') – a few gale-blown granite rocks, where everything grows sideways. Until the 1960s, these islands were home to brave pilots who guided sailors through these treacherous waters. Here, more than anywhere on the coast, islanders relied on the sea to provide.

'No plant you can eat grows on these islands,' says Mikael Hansson. 'In winter they couldn't reach the mainland because of the sea ice. They had to live off fish. Sometimes also stealing eggs from bird's nests.'

Mikael is the owner of the Weather Islands guesthouse, which offers simple accommodation in the restored cabins where the pilots and their families once lived. Mikael also helps fetch the groceries, which means reeling in his lines from the choppy seas. At his feet on the quayside is an afternoon's catch: pots full of mournful, boggly eyes and angry, pinching claws that 10 minutes earlier were quietly minding their business on the seabed. On the Swedish mainland, freshwater crayfish are a national passion. Here, the equivalent is langoustine – called 'ocean crayfish' in Swedish. Mikael tips the creatures into a huge tub of boiling saltwater for a few minutes before pulling out a few select specimens, smashing them up with a big stone.

'This is not the thing to eat in fancy restaurants,' he says through a mouthful of meat, with miscellaneous bits of ex-crustacean on his clothes. 'You see, it is a very messy business.'

Messy though it may be, there is a primeval satisfaction in eating something that looks you in the eye as it disappears into

your mouth. It is food that hasn't seen a kitchen or a freezer or a plate: food that goes straight from sea to mouth without passing go. Smashing up crayfish and their kin is a pastime that unites every Swede with their inner Viking. Every summer, Swedes attend crayfish parties – events involving crayfish consumption, paper hats, ruthless drinking games and savage hangovers (made worse by long hours of sunshine). When politicians threatened to introduce prohibition in Sweden in the 1920s, the humble crayfish was invoked as a symbol of resistance. The crayfish won.

Night descends over the islands – bringing with it a summer storm, and horizontal rain that thwacks against the window panes. In the guesthouse dining room, warming shots of snaps are drunk and guests strike up conversation. Few Swedes are professional fishermen now, but many locals have seafaring in their blood, and the freedom and fraternity of life on the open waves is a popular topic. Among the guests is an office worker from a long, proud dynasty of fishermen – when he passes Gothenburg harbour on his commute, he says he often feels a pang of regret for his vocation. And then there are some Norwegian holidaymakers who sailed here on their yacht. They say that on still nights, when the mood takes them, they sometimes turn off their GPS system and all the electronics, and navigate using only the stars.

The storm passes, the clouds clear and the bar shuts. One by one, guests stumble off to locate their cabins amid the honeysuckle and the nettles in the gloom outside. Waves foam against the rocks, invisible in the darkness, and a rich, salty tang hangs in the night air: a smell that murmurs of adventures on the high seas, and whose taste speaks of the bounty their fathoms contain. 19



OLIVER SMITH is the staff writer at *Lonely Planet Traveller* magazine. He ate his first ever oyster in Sweden. Swiftly followed by his second, third, fourth, fifth, etc...

SWEDISH COAST

Langoustine, like crayfish on the mainland, are traditionally accompanied by snaps – a shot of a spirit such as akvavit



Make it Happen

PLAN YOUR ITINERARY



1 Just an hour's drive from Gothenburg, Klädesholmen is a tiny island accessed from the mainland via another much bigger island called Tjörn. Salt & Sill offers herring dinners (tasting platter from £14) as well as simple and stark accommodation on a curious floating

platform anchored in the harbour (from £180; saltosill.se). The hotel also leases bikes to guests – from the front porch it's an easy 10-minute pedal through streets of clapboard holiday homes to the western side of Klädesholmen, a fine spot for watching the sun sink into the sea.

2 Despite its remoteness, getting to the Väderöarnas Vårdshus (Weather Islands Guesthouse) is a straightforward affair: call in advance to arrange a lift, and a boat will pick you up from the town of Fjällbacka. From here it's a dramatic half-hour sailing trip: once you're ashore, grab a map and explore the island's cliffs, meadows and lighthouse. Guests sleep in atmospheric rooms divided between the main house and historic outbuildings (package including crayfish fishing experience £240 pp with full-board accommodation, including transfers; vaderoarna.com).



GETTING THERE

Gothenburg (Göteborg in Swedish) is served by two airports. Landvetter is the bigger, with flights on BA, BMI Regional, Norwegian and SAS from Birmingham, Gatwick, Heathrow and Manchester (from £110; ba.com). Ryanair flies from Edinburgh and Stansted to Gothenburg City airport (from £90; ryanair.com) which offers quicker access to the Bohuslän Coast.

GETTING AROUND

Trains leave Gothenburg for various towns along the Bohuslän Coast, including Strömstad, as well as Grebbestad and Fjällbacka, linked by bus to the closest station (from £32; sj.se). It's worth hiring a car at either airport to reach some out-of-the-way places like Klädesholmen (from £40 per day; hertz.com).

FURTHER READING

For more on the Bohuslän Coast pick up Lonely Planet's *Sweden* (£15.99), or check the tourist board website westsweden.com. In addition, try the novels of crime writer Camilla Läckberg, set in and around Fjällbacka.



3 An hour north of Fjällbacka, Grebbestad is Sweden's shellfish centre. Everts Sjöbod offers seasonal lobster safaris, mackerel-fishing excursions and oyster safaris while guests quaff on chocolatey Swedish stout. Sailings cast off from Per and Lars Karlsson's 19th-century boathouse, decorated with seafaring trinkets (seafood experiences from £60 per person; evertssjodod.se).

4 The Koster Islands National Park is Sweden's newest – created to preserve the rich sea life in the surrounding waters. No cars are permitted on the islands; however you can park your car at Strömstad – a half-hour north of Grebbestad – and catch the passenger ferry (£12 return; kostermarin.se). Hotel Koster (below) has rooms overlooking a natural

harbour (from £125; hotelkoster.se) and is helpfully sited next to a bike-hire company (from £9 per day; kostercykeln.com) and a small visitor centre for the park (swedishepa.se). It's a 10-minute bike ride north to Stefan van Bothmer's café and vegetable garden Koster Trädgårdar (buffet dinners from £48, island tours from £18; kosterstradgardar.se).



PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBERT MATTON AB/ALAMY, MATT MUNRO



MAP KEY: SWEDEN

SIGHTS

- 1 Fjällbacka
- 2 Gothenburg

SIGHTS

- 3 Grebbestad
- 4 Koster Islands
- 5 Weather Islands



TOUR OPERATORS

Scandinavian specialist **Discover the World** offers a seven-night 'Discover West Sweden' self-drive tour. Starting in Gothenburg, visitors drive north, stopping at Carlsten – an imposing fortress – before spending three nights in Fjällbacka, with an optional trip to the Weather Islands (from £968 incl accommodation, car hire and flights; discover-the-world.co.uk).

Nature Travels explores Bohuslän from the water in its three-day sea-kayaking tours. Available in the Koster Islands, the Weather Islands and around Fjällbacka, guided tours are suitable for both novices and salty old sea kayakers. In Koster and Fjällbacka, kayakers round off a hard day's paddling with some wild camping – it's very possible to pitch a tent on your own individual island (from £390; naturetravels.co.uk).

Discover Sweden

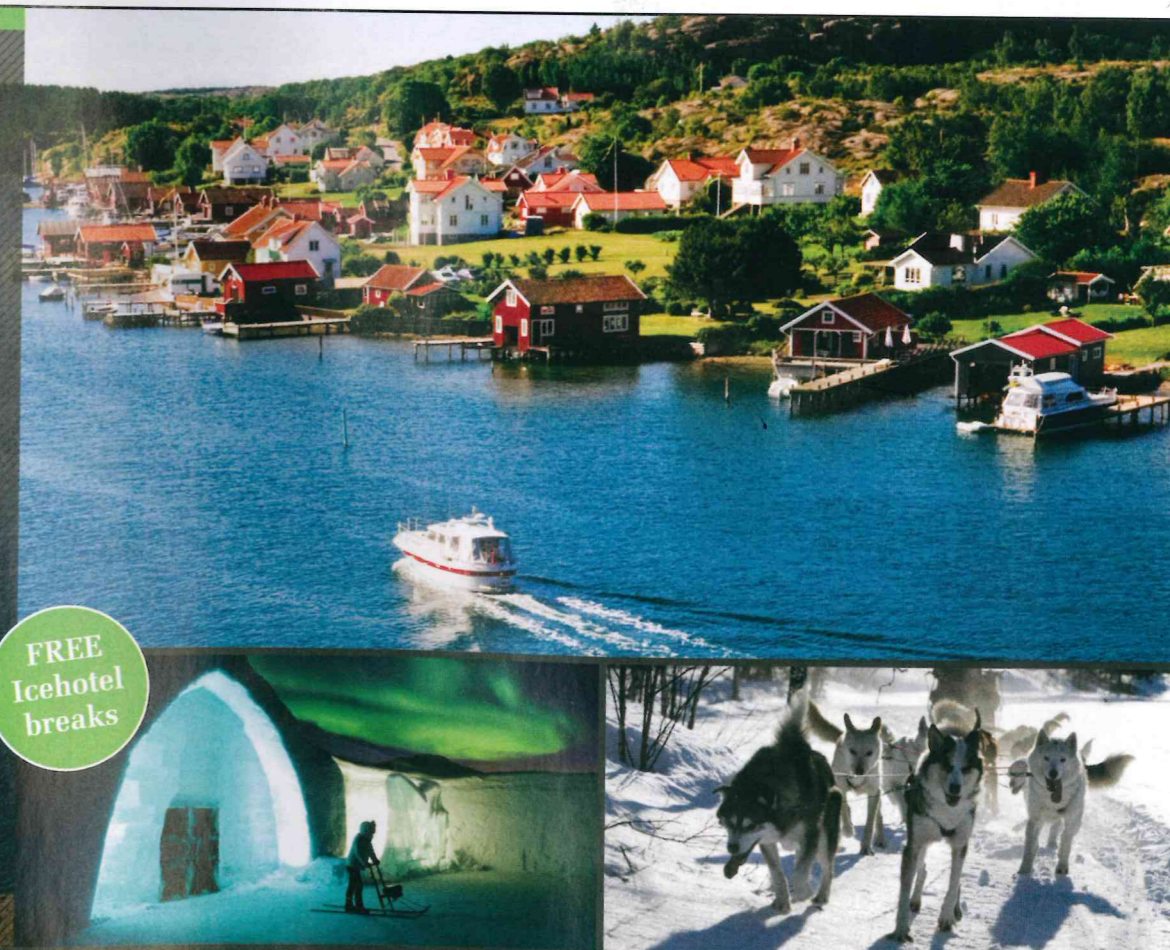
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