

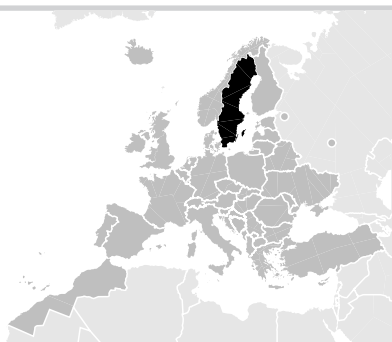
# Sweden

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Stockholm** Touring the waterways, exploring top-notch museums and wandering the cobblestoned backstreets of Gamla Stan (p1123)
- **Göteborg** Explore cutting-edge style and the secrets of the underground in Sweden's 'second city' (p1140)
- **Ice Hotel** Enjoying a frosty beverage and a frozen bed at this ultracool jewel in the far north (p1145)
- **Malmö** Getting as close to the continent as possible without leaving the country in this multicultural city (p1136)
- **Off-the-beaten track** Doing a bicycle loop around the island of Gotland, the best budget destination in Sweden (p1135)

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 449,964 sq km
- **Budget** Skr700 to Skr1000 per day
- **Capital** Stockholm
- **Country code** ☎ 46
- **Famous for** Vikings, Volvos, blondes, ABBA, meatballs, Ikea
- **Languages** Swedish plus five official minority languages
- **Money** Swedish krona (Skr); A\$1 = Skr5.95; C\$1 = Skr6.75; €1 = Skr10.70; ¥100 = Skr8.40; NZ\$1 = Skr4.66; UK£1 = Skr12.06; US\$1 = Skr7.96
- **Phrases** *hej* (hello), *hej då* (goodbye), *ja* (yes), *nej* (no), *tack* (thanks)
- **Population** 9.02 million
- **Visas** not needed for most visitors for stays of up to three months



## TRAVEL HINTS

Eat out at lunchtime, buy your alcohol duty-free, and take advantage of Sweden's excellent hostels and friendliness towards free camping.

## ROAMING SWEDEN

Soak up Stockholm style, dig into Uppsala, Göteborg and Malmö, and explore some islands – big (Gotland) or small (Stockholm archipelago).

At first glance, Sweden might not seem like a terribly outlandish place. But the more time you spend here, the stranger and more wonderfully foreign it becomes. It's tempting to blame the country's out-there position on the map. But there's more at work here than geographical isolation. Sweden's literature and cinema favour a weighty, Gothic sense of drama blended with gallows humour and stark aesthetics – all of which, in some form, at some point, will confront the visitor. Alert travellers will notice a particular tone here that hints at many things: depth of feeling, awareness of doom, absence of sentimentality, strength of principle, avoidance of conflict, a sombre conviction that certain things matter. Of course, such intangibles won't likely

make it into your post-trip slide show. But the mysterious Swedish sensibility enhances every aspect of a traveller's experience.

It's an exciting time to visit, too – the small country with its long history of consistent moderation just happens to be embracing rapid change. Swedish music, fashion, food and art couldn't be more vibrant. Even the usually dull world of politics is shaking things up. Don't miss the chance to get in while it's hot.

## HISTORY

The Viking Age was getting under way by the 9th century; Vikings made their mark in Russia, as well as trading with (and pillaging) Byzantine territories. Along with pagan gods, the aristocrats and their chosen kings (many from Denmark) reigned. A century of Swedish nationalist grumblings erupted in rebellion under the young nobleman Gustaf Vasa, who was crowned Gustaf I in 1523. In 1809 a constitutional amendment divided legislative powers between king and parliament.

By 1900 almost one in four Swedes lived in cities and the level of industry was increasing. In this environment the working class was radicalised. Sweden declared itself neutral at the outbreak of WWI. The Social Democrats, in power since 1932, introduced a welfare state after the war.

The 1950s and '60s saw a rapid rise in the standard of living for ordinary Swedes. But the world recession of the early 1990s led to massive devaluation of the Swedish krona. Their economy and national confidence shaken, Swedes voted to join the EU.

Since 1995 Sweden's welfare state has undergone tough reforms and the economy has improved. A 2003 referendum on whether Sweden should adopt the euro resulted in a 'no' vote. The referendum was overshadowed by the murder just days before of Sweden's popular foreign minister, Anna Lindh.

In recent years Sweden has grown away from its homogeneous past, both culturally and economically. Immigration and a new reliance on the IT industry have corresponded with greater social diversity. Whether because of this new diversity or dissatisfaction with the status quo, in the general election of September 2006, control of Sweden's government shifted from the Social Democrats to the centre-right Alliance for Sweden, who remain in power.

## THE CULTURE

Around nine million people call Sweden home, making it Scandinavia's most populous country. Most of those folks live in the urban centres of Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö – only 12% of

the population lives in Norrland, which takes up two-thirds of the country's geographical area.

There are about 17,000 Sami (the indigenous people of Scandinavia, sometimes called Lapps) in Sweden, largely concentrated in the north. More than 17% of Sweden's population are foreign-born. Most immigrants have come from other European countries, including Russia, the former Yugoslavia, Poland and Greece. The largest non-European ethnic group consists of Assyrian/Syriac people. Chile and Somalia also have a sizeable presence, and there are around 45,000 Roma.

Sweden's overall approach to family life is in line with its socially progressive tendencies. The extensive state-mandated maternity/paternity leave is shared equally between parents – it's as common to see fathers pushing strollers as it is to see mothers. Gay and lesbian couples have the same rights as heterosexual married couples under Swedish law, and have been able to adopt children since 2003.

Some 87% of the Swedish population is Lutheran, although only about 10% regularly attend church services.

## SPORT

More than a million Swedes play football, the country's most popular sport. The most high-profile name in Swedish football is probably England's former national team coach, Sven-Göran Eriksson, famed for his scandalous love life. Eriksson left the job after the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany.

Ice hockey is another big sport in Sweden. There are amateur teams in most communities and 12 professional teams in the premier league. The handsome visage of Swedish hockey star Peter 'Foppa' Forsberg graces advertisements all over the country.

Tennis star Björn Borg has moved on to designing underpants, but the sport he dominated is still a popular one in Sweden. Golf, sailing and *bandy* (similar to ice hockey) are also common.

Alpine skiing competitions are held annually and the huge Nordic race called Vasaloppet takes place each year in March.