Sweden

HIGHLIGHTS
- **Stockholm** Touring the waterways, exploring top-notch museums and wandering the cobbledstoned 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
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.

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.