



population per sq km



Sweden Today

Change in the Weather

The past few years have been strange ones for Sweden, as changes in the economy and political mood have led people to question long-held assumptions. For decades the country has been viewed by left-leaning types as an almost utopian model of a socialist state, a successful experiment that gave hope to progressives everywhere. But recently that perception has been shifting.

The Social Democrats, who've held a majority of the government (and therefore shaped national policy) for most of the past 80 years, have begun to lose their influence. The first big blow came in 2006: partly as a result of the general sense that Sweden had been relying too heavily on unemployment benefits and had become a nation of 'bystanders', the long-entrenched party lost its leadership position in the Swedish Parliament. The newly formed centre-right Alliance Party (made up of four centre-right parties – the Moderate Party, the Liberal Party, the Christian Democrats and the Centre Party) won the election, with Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt campaigning on a 'work first' platform.

The most recent election, in September 2010, saw the Social Democrats' worst results since 1921: they won just over 30% of the seats in Parliament. The Alliance Party, which Reinfeldt is largely credited with putting together, won 173 of the 349 seats, meaning Reinfeldt continues as prime minister.

This gradual political shift hasn't come out of nowhere. Some trace it back to 1986 and the infamous murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme (1927–86), who was assassinated as he walked home from the cinema. The murder and bungled police inquiry shook ordinary Swedes' confidence in their country, institutions and leaders. Afterwards, the

- » Population: 9.09 million
- » GDP: \$354.7 billion
- » GDP per capita: \$39,100
- » Annual inflation: 1.3% (2010)
- » Unemployment: 8.4%

Top Films

The Seventh Seal (1957) Ingmar Bergman pits man against Death in a cosmic chess game.

Songs from the Second

Floor (2000) Roy Andersson's bleak meditation on modern humanity.

Top Books

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2009) Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy has been a global phenomenon.

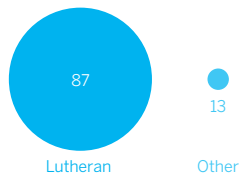
Faceless Killers (1997) Henning Mankell's detective series, with Kurt Wallander, starts here.

Greeting People

In Sweden the catch-all greeting is 'hej'. For someone you know well, say 'tjena' (sheh-na). In Felli Sami, the most common of the Sami languages, the greeting is 'buorre beaiv', to which you reply 'ipmel atti'.

belief systems

(% of population)



if Sweden were 100 people



89 would be Swedish
3 would be Finn & Sami (Lapp)
1 would be Yugoslav
1 would be Iranian
6 would be Other

fortunes of the Social Democrats took a turn for the worse as various scandals came to light.

This was followed by a world recession in 1992, during which the country's budgetary problems culminated in frenzied speculation against the Swedish krona. In November of that year the central bank (Sveriges Riksbank) was forced to abandon fixed exchange rates and let the krona float freely. The currency immediately devalued by 20%, interest rates shot up by a world-record-breaking 500% and unemployment flew to 14%; the government fought back with tax hikes, punishing cuts to the welfare budget and the scrapping of previously relaxed immigration rules.

With both the economy and national confidence severely shaken, Swedes narrowly voted in favour of joining the European Union (EU), effective from 1 January 1995. (Sweden drew the line at adopting the common currency, however, and retains its use of the krona.)

The country's willingness to make hard choices (such as selling off public assets) and a strict fiscal policy may be one reason it has emerged from the 2008 economic crisis in better financial shape than most. Sweden entered the recession with a budget surplus. Which isn't to say it wasn't hit hard: in late 2008, thanks to a drop in demand for exports caused by the global recession, Sweden's GDP fell nearly 5%. But by 2010 the economy had started growing again, and growth was expected to continue. At the time of writing, economic conditions were looking up, and unemployment was gradually dropping.

» Mobile telephones: 11.426 million (2009)

» Internet users: 8.398 million

» Internet domain: .se

People & Immigration

Sweden's population is relatively small given the size of the country – with around nine million people spread over the third-largest country in Western Europe, it has one of the lowest population densities on the

Dos & Don'ts

- » Be prepared to take off your shoes inside the front door when visiting a Swedish home.
- » On formal occasions, wait for the host to welcome you to the table before eating or drinking and don't clink glasses (it's considered vulgar).

Myths

In spite of popular belief, Sweden is not a nation of Björn Borgs and Anita Ekbergs. The country's self-image is changing gradually. As hip-hop artist Timbuktu (himself the Swedish-born son of a mixed-race American couple) once told

the *Washington Post*, 'Sweden still has a very clear picture of what a Swede is. That no longer exists – the blond, blue-eyed physical traits. That's changing. But it still exists in the minds of some people'.