

Understand Sweden

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Sweden Today

A generally prosperous and peaceful country, Sweden seems able to weather its storms rather easily. Of course there are always internal tensions and occasional threats to smooth sailing, whether they're economic challenges or political battles. But, overall, a visitor to Sweden gets the sense that the system works quite well. The Swedish word *lagom* means not too much and not too little but just right. Sweden strives to embody this concept. It's not perfect, but it's reassuringly consistent.

Best on Film

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

Let the Right One In (2008) Tomas Alfredson's icy, preteen take on the vampire romance is palpably set in Norrland.

Together (2000) Lukas Moodysson aims his lens at a Swedish commune in 1975.

I Am Curious (Yellow) (1967) Vilgot Sjöman's hugely influential political satire took swings at the young king.

Songs from the Second Floor (2000) Roy Andersson's bleak meditation on modern humanity.

Best in Print

Gösta Berling's Saga (1891) Nobel Prize winner Selma Lagerlöf's debut novel.

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

Tomas Tranströmer The Swedish poet won the 2011 Nobel Prize for literature.

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

Change in the Weather

Despite its middle-way steadiness over the long term, recently Sweden has seen changes in the economy and the political mood that have led some people to question their assumptions. For decades the country was viewed by left-leaning outsiders as an almost utopian model of a socialist state, a successful experiment that gave hope to progressives everywhere. This is still more or less true. Inevitably, though, as the country has grown, it has had to adjust to modern realities – both economic and sociopolitical – and some cracks have begun to appear in the facade.

The Social Democrats, who held a majority of the government (and therefore shaped national policy, most notably the famous 'cradle to grave' welfare state) for most of the past 85 years, have begun to see their influence wane. The first big blow came in 2006, when the long-entrenched party lost its leadership position in the Swedish parliament. The centre-right Alliance Party (made up of four centre-right parties – the Moderates, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats and the Centre Party) won the election, with Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt campaigning on a 'work first' platform. Reinfeldt's government lowered tax rates and trimmed certain benefits, hoping to jump-start the economy and reduce unemployment.

The 2010 election saw the Social Democrats' worst result since 1921: they won just over 30% of the seats in parliament. The Alliance Party won again (173 of the 349 seats), meaning Reinfeldt continued as prime minister. Unemployment remained high, though, and by 2012 the Social Democrats had regained some favour. In the September 2014 general election, Reinfeldt failed to secure a third term as prime minister; instead, Social Democrat leader Stefan Löfven will lead in a coalition government with the Green party. In the election's most startling