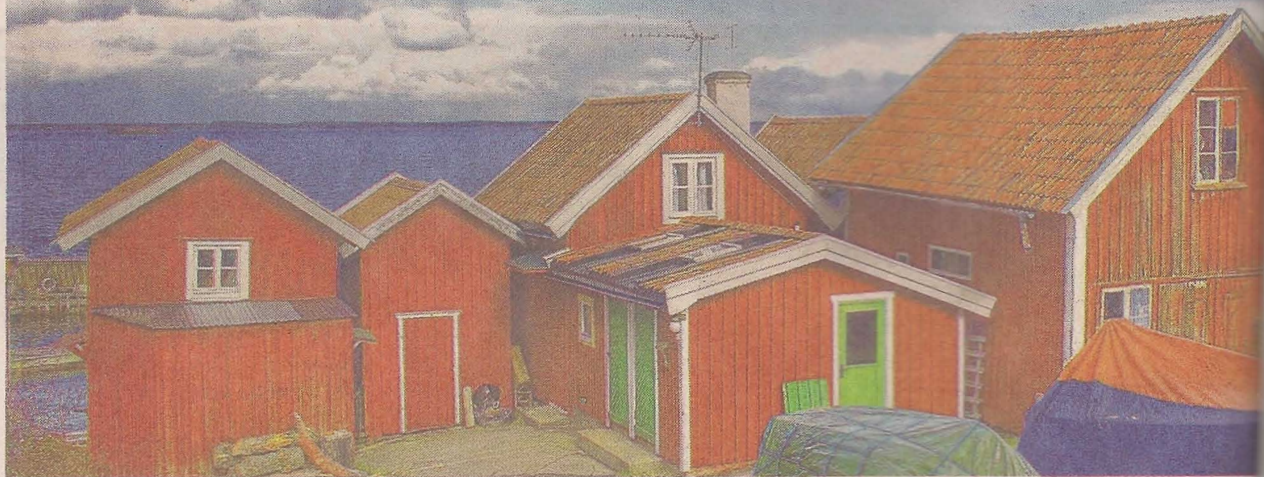


SCANDINAVIA

A 30,000-Island Smörgåsbord

Sweden's winter landscape of spas, evergreens, peace and ABBA



By J.S. MARCUS
Sandhamn, Sweden

ANDERS ANDERSON is in a good position to judge when to visit the Stockholm Archipelago: The economist bought his own small island in 2004. "I think winter is the best time," he says, invoking the iridescent sea and reflective snow cover. "You have light everywhere."

Others might prefer the summer and the 12 extra hours of daylight, but Stockholmers and a growing number of foreign visitors are finding the chain of 30,000 islands just as intriguing in winter, when outdoor saunas, ideal ice-skating, hiking and pervasive quiet more than make up for the unavoidable darkness.

With some islands just big enough to stand on and others nearly as large as the center of Stockholm, the archipelago was once a rough and remote home to farmers and fishermen. Long an inspiration to Swedish artists and writers, the area changed in the middle of the last century, when tens of thousands of ordinary Swedes began to summer here. Now, as expensive year-round homes replace seasonal shacks, Stockholmers are discovering the area's off-season pleasures and property values are skyrocketing.

For Mr. Anderson, a 43-year-old Stockholmer, the archipelago is full of ABBA memories. He's the son of Stig Anderson, the Swedish rock impresario and the music group's lyricist in its crucial early years, and he spent his childhood summers on



Top, houses in Sandhamn; below, skaters at the Söderarm lighthouse on the island of Torskär, on the archipelago's northern edges.

Viggsö, a small island where many ABBA songs were composed. In cold winters like this one, he says, he takes a ferry to a nearby island called Grinda, and enjoys making the rest of the journey on foot.

ABBA fans closely associate the archipelago with Viggsö, where all four members of the group summured in the 1970s. "The first version of 'Dancing Queen,' " recalls Mr. Anderson, "was performed on a few pots" in the kitchen of his family's summer house.

There are no significant tides in the Stockholm Archipelago, and only the barren outer islands are exposed to rough sea winds. During a visit this January, the wooded hills above Sandhamn, a village harbor on the island of Sandön, shimmered white; days' worth of snowfall enveloped

towering evergreen trees. With hardly a boat to disturb them, the calm waters between the nearby islands were like mirrors, and, once you left the village behind, you could hear only your own footsteps.

Sandhamn, about two hours from Stockholm by bus and a year-round ferry, is something like the East Hampton of Sweden, and to many Swedes a symbol of the area's recent makeover. Home to the Seglarhotellet, a 79-room year-round hotel and harborside spa, Sandhamn is also the perfect base to enjoy the islands' winter atmosphere. More cozy than luxurious, the hotel's hodgepodge of charming buildings, constructed around a century-old yacht club, includes a grand upstairs bar with views over the water. The hotel offers winter weekend spa packages

Åsbygd

ABBA memories



island of



GETTING AROUND: Year-round ferries with terminals accessible by bus and commuter train reach most popular islands. Call the tourist office at +46-8-100-222; on the Web, visitskargarden.se

HOTELS: **Seglarhotellet**, above: +46-8-574-504-00; www.sandhamn.com. **Smådalarö Gård**, +46-8-501-551-00; www.sjonaramoten.se/smadalaro

(clockwise from top) WoodyStock/Alamy; Seglarhotellet; Staffan Dahlström

modern drama August Strindberg, infuriated Kymmendö islanders after he “poorly disguised” them in a novel, says Erik Höök, senior curator at Stockholm’s Strindberg Museum. Another Strindberg haunt, the resort of Dalarö, is reachable by commuter train from Stockholm and is a convenient place to get a taste of the archipelago. An excellent 62-room year-round hotel—The Smådalarö Gård, situated around a restored 200-year-old manor house—offers winter weekend packages, with quayside sauna facilities, allowing for rapid cool-downs in the Baltic, as well as an outdoor Jacuzzi. The January-March packages are 2,395 kronor for two people (including some meals).

Stockholm has had an especially cold winter this year, and on weekend winter mornings, archipelago ferries have been filled with day-tripping ice skaters. Armed with ski poles, used to test the stability of the ice, and with long-distance skates that strap onto hiking boots, the skaters usually plan their trips at the very last minute, says professional guide Ylva Schöldberg. She leads groups out to the archipelago during skating season, which lasts into early March. Conditions change, she says, even hour to hour, due in part to the salt in the water—which can cause the surface to melt. Falling through the ice is quite common, Ms. Schöldberg says, and her backpack, always filled with an entire change of clothes, also acts as a flotation device. (On the Web, friluftsframjandet.se offers information in Swedish on archipelago day-trips from Stockholm for experienced skaters.)

The cold will long outlast the darkness, as the winter daylight grows by around 30 minutes every week. In April comes the reopening of Oaxen Krog (oaxenkrog.se), the innovative restaurant on the small island of Oaxen, near the chain’s southernmost edge. Amphibious plane and \$130 taxi rides are favored ways to reach the eatery, a bastion of seasonal organic cuisine and the first Swedish restaurant to win a regular place on the S. Pellegrino World’s 50 Best Restaurants List, sponsored by the mineral-water concern. A few years ago, Oaxen Krog’s owners, chef Magnus Ek and his wife, Agneta Green, refitted an antique Dutch canal boat that now serves as one the archipelago’s best hostels.

After Christmas the restaurant shuts down and the boat, which stays open as an inn, comes into Stockholm, but the pair don’t entirely abandon the archipelago. Winter is one of the best times of the year on the islands, Mr. Ek said on a sunny January day in Stockholm’s inner harbor. “The snow, the ice, the calmness,” he said.

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starting at 2,245 Swedish kronor (\$310) per person, per night (meals and spa treatments included), and some rooms have saunas. There are also suites and apartments.

Sandhamn, like so many towns in the archipelago, has a literary connection—this one to the frequent summer visitor Stieg Larsson, the late author of the “Millennium” crime trilogy, which begins with “The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo.” Mr. Larsson gave Mikael Blomkvist, one of the trilogy’s main characters, a summer house in the village. A colleague, Stockholm-based journalist Kurdo Baksi, recalls that Mr. Larsson, who suffered from insomnia, would stay up all night in Sandhamn, working on all three books at once.

The writer most closely associated with the archipelago, the pioneer of