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Just Back From: Discovering Scandinavian Style—and Spirit—in Stockholm and Helsinki



Spring arrives in Stockholm at Hotel Skeppsholmen, a historic property with contemporary design, tucked away on its own island just a short walk from the city center. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey

The sky was bright and clear as I walked over the wooden deck of the Löyly spa to peer into the Baltic Sea. The smooth planks creaked at the weight of my solitary footsteps and the cold **Helsinki** wind made my eyes smart—even though we were just days away from May Day, the Scandinavian celebration of the arrival of springtime. I was bundled in a turtleneck, wool overcoat, scarf and gloves (layers I had just bid farewell to at home in **New York**), and as I looked back over the deck, to the entrance to the saunas, I struggled to envision myself stripping down, bounding across and jumping into the frigid blue-grey waters. Which is what most people do when they come to Löyly, one of the city's must-visit attractions. Finns and tourists alike take the icy plunge for health benefits, no matter the season, usually after a hot steam. And often lunch. I couldn't imagine it—but perhaps my imagination was spent in that moment; after all, I could barely believe that I had made it to Helsinki in the first place.

As this week's [Indagare newsletter](#) showcases, [our team is constantly on the road](#), around the world, scouting for the latest intel and best experiences to share with our members and readers. My trip to Helsinki, which was part of a larger itinerary grandly dubbed "The Splendors of the North" that also included [Stockholm](#), [St. Petersburg](#) and [Moscow](#), was originally planned for April 2020. It would be rescheduled a total of six times before it was finally realized two years later, almost to the day. And in that time, two of the cities on the itinerary became impassable. In those two years, we had learned—and were still learning—just how quickly things could change, and be taken away. We had become both more serious and more spontaneous travelers, considering our chances to explore with a deeper sense of gravity, and gratitude, but also opening ourselves to the unexpected opportunities of the present moment. And in fact, this shift made me better equipped to understand and embrace the true magic of Scandinavia, a part of the world that is wild, harsh and unforgiving—and also a paragon of grace, beauty and charm. Over my ten long-awaited days in Stockholm and Helsinki, I discovered three words that illuminate this dichotomous essence—and, I think, hold the secret as to why these countries are such enchanting places to visit.

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Jantelagen



Architecture in Stockholm. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey

The Swedish concept of “Jantelagen”—which is also present throughout the Nordic countries—is a deep cultural code that states that no one should believe or act like they are better than anyone else. This translates to a normalized aversion to bragging and avoidance of discussing professional achievements, wealth, success—and generally talking about yourself too much (a foreign concept for Americans, I know). This national trait is ironic, because the Swedes are really good at pretty much everything (although our local host did advise me that I should never date a Swedish man). Stockholm is home to the Nobel Prize, and it’s the perfect city for the job, as a place that itself excels across multiple disciplines, including urban planning and sustainability, music and fashion, cuisine, arts and technology.

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Swedish *fika* in the library (left) and a fireplace to write home about at Ett Hem

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Scandinavian design creates beautiful spaces, and even the most mundane of corner cafés in Stockholm offer havens of carefully balanced yet effortless elegance (a few *not* mundane locales to add to your list:

Green Rabbit, Café Pascal and **Fabrique**). Picture a smooth white oak table, adorned by a single glass vase holding a perky peony and earthen mugs steaming with coffee—alongside matching plates topped with cinnamon buns or slices of rhubarb and lemon cake. Perfection in simplicity. Scenes like this abound at the Indagare-adored property **Ett Hem**, an intimate concept hotel located in a 1910 residential townhouse, which was transformed by owner Jeanette Mix and designer Ilse Crawford into one of Europe’s most successful passion projects. The hotel celebrates the “at home” feel, and everything from the soft color palette and the signature scent to the help-yourself layout of the kitchen and bar room is artfully orchestrated, but never stiff. This harmony by design makes the property’s 12 rooms quite hard to come by (Ett Hem has developed a bit of a cult following)—but in an eagerly anticipated expansion, the room count will grow by ten, with the addition of a new building expected to be unveiled in July; a third building, which will house three residences for longer stays and a large gym, is in the works.



A delightful bread arrangement at Rutabaga (left) and a living room in the Flag Suite at Grand Hôtel Stockholm. Photos by Elizabeth Harvey

Also on our radar is the city icon **Grand Hôtel Stockholm**, which just completed an ambitious full-property renovation that included updating the interiors of many of the guest rooms and adding a Champagne and oyster bar to its already robust food and beverage program; the ground-floor restaurant **Rutabaga**, a vegetarian creation from

celebri-chef Mathias Dahlgren, is a can't-miss thanks to its delicious, inventive plates, fabulous cocktails and wine list, contemporary atmosphere and stellar service.



The wine bar (left) and a lemon dessert at Villa Dagmar. Photos by Elizabeth Harvey

The newest arrival to know is [Villa Dagmar](#), a chic boutique darling with a prime location, buzzy glass-roofed atrium for lounging and very well-curated wine bar—while for repeat Stockholm visitors, or for in-the-know travelers who prefer to stay slightly off the beaten path, the [Hotel Skeppsholmen](#) offers an idyllic hideaway on its very own island (just a 10-minute walk from the hustle and bustle of town). Although the property is housed within two protected buildings dating back to 1699 (which were originally designed for King Charles XII), the design of the rooms and the atmosphere are fresh and contemporary. In addition to providing practically private access to the greenest and smallest island in the Stockholm archipelago, Hotel Skeppsholmen also has Sweden's first outdoor tennis court and a lovely garden for breakfast or cocktails. Whichever property piques your fancy, you'll be sure to find pieces from [Svenskt Tenn](#)—the female-founded design institution that doesn't shy away from color or whimsy—in every one. (Note: Our host shared that every stylish Swede has at least one piece from Svenskt Tenn in their home—and it's the ultimate place to find a souvenir. I opted for an orange-and-pink glass carafe from a new collection designed by Frida Fjellman, who is known for her bold and organic approach to form.)

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The Stockholm archipelago. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey

Most of us are familiar with Sweden’s aesthetic prowess, but we are perhaps less aware of another major area of excellence for the nation—which we are also surrounded by every day. Sweden’s contributions to the world of popular music go far, far beyond ABBA and the late DJ Avicii (both of whom are now represented in Stockholm by interactive museum experiences). With **Max Martin** at the forefront, Swedish producers are in fact responsible for a sizeable majority of the world’s greatest hitmakers, including the Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears, Usher, Adele, Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, Coldplay and The Weekend—to name just a few. In a recent episode—titled “Stockholm Syndrome”—of the Netflix docuseries exploring pop music phenomena, ***This Is Pop***, writer Jay McCarrol seeks to uncover the reason behind this dominance. He arrives back at the notion of Jantelagen. When McCarrol asks **Ludwig Göransson**—who was profiled in this month’s issue of *Vogue Scandinavia* and has won Grammy Awards for his work with Childish Gambino, and *Black Panther*—why he thinks the Swedes make great music, Göransson responds: “In Sweden, you’re not really supposed to talk about your success. We more like to listen to what other people have to say. So, good luck.” When posed with the same question, Swedish-Iranian singer and producer **Laleh** (whose roster of collaborations includes Demi Lovato, Shawn Mendes and Ellie Goulding) put it a slightly different way: “We just kind of want to show what

we're good at, not talk about what we're good at."

In music or design, and everything else, Sweden doesn't demand the spotlight—and maybe that's the secret to its overwhelming success.

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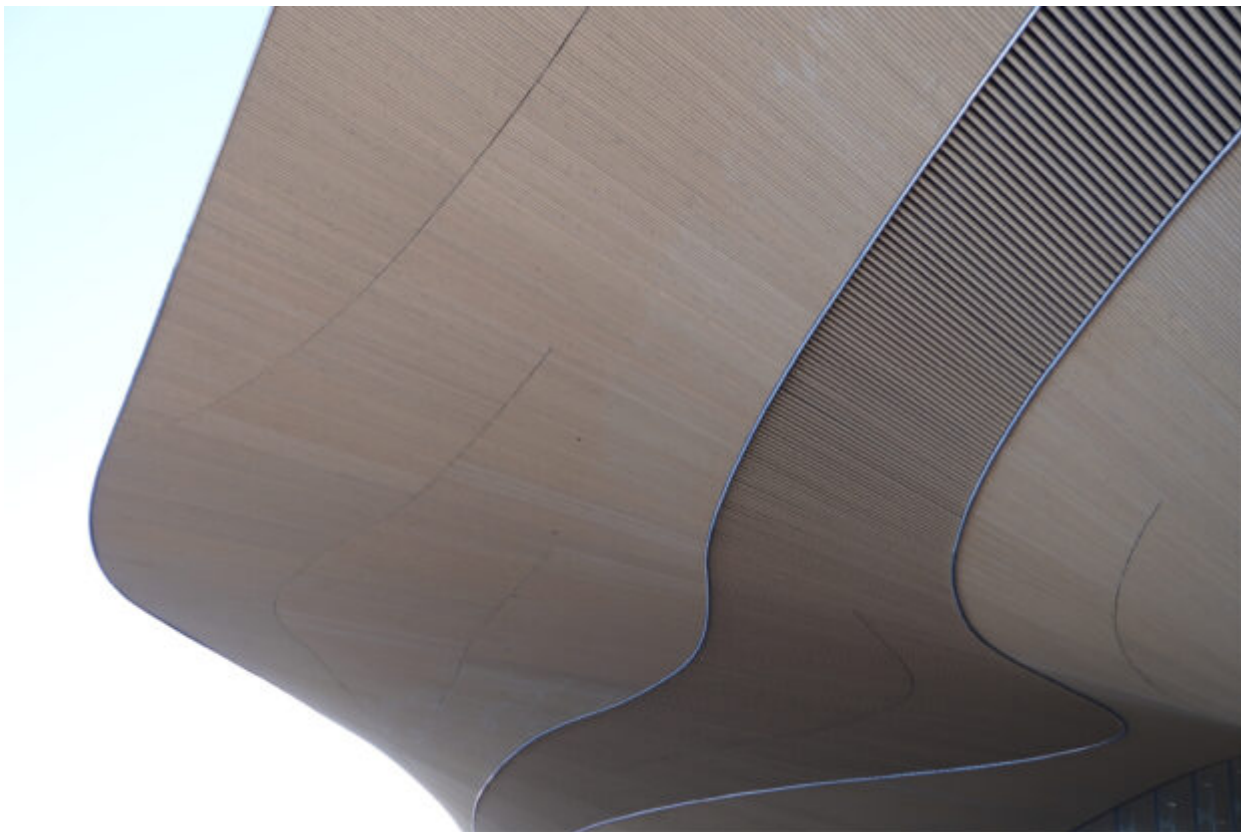
Kalsarikännit



Views from the Hotel Kämp (left); a taste of the north at Lapland Hotels Bulevardi. Photos by Elizabeth Harvey

A sort of dark twin (or ugly stepsister) to the **Danish** notion of “Hygge,” which means contented coziness, “Kalsarikännit” is a Finnish term that captures the experience of being at home, alone, in your underwear, getting drunk, with no intention of going out. (Each element of this definition is essential and cannot be removed or replaced.) It's a cultural concept that, post-lockdown, we are all perhaps a bit too familiar with—but in Finland, and throughout the Nordic countries, it has evolved over time as a social response to the isolation of the winter season. Winter is the longest season in Finland, lasting up to 200 days in the northernmost regions, and it brings harsh weather and extended hours of darkness (with daylight lasting for just six hours in the south and a

period of “polar night,” when the sun does not rise at all, in the north). In such a climate, it’s no surprise that the Finns and their environment are fundamentally intertwined. The importance of connecting to nature is a theme that is present in all of Scandinavia, but the forces of the natural world—the sun, the snow, the sea, the wind—continue to play an active role in shaping Finnish culture and behavior. Nature is omnipresent in daily conversation, and it’s a focal point for trend-setting brands like **Kyrö**, an award-winning, new-age gin and whisky distillery (which is said to have been dreamed up in a sauna) located in the south of Finland, in Isokyrö. Self-proclaimed as “Brutally Finnish,” Kyrö markets one of its darker productions as “Gin For When the Weather Sucks.” And when it’s below freezing outside, and it’s been dark since 3 p.m., and none of your friends will meet you out because there’s a foot of snow on the ground, sometimes, there’s nothing else to do but have a drink in your underwear. (Note: The Finns are also **making headlines** with a new generation of winemakers—like the biodynamically-driven **Ainoa** winery in the south—who are putting traditional berry wines on the global map.)



The undulating roof of the Oodi Library in Helsinki. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey

Despite the importance of Kalsarikännit, the Finns do manage to put their pants on and leave their apartments—and accomplish quite a lot (it’s also said that Finns consume the greatest amount of coffee per capita in the world). Helsinki alone offers thriving design, restaurant and art scenes, with highlights including colorful Art Nouveau

architecture (with the city boasting more Jugend-style buildings than Brussels or Barcelona); a shopper's paradise in the **Design District** (where stops should include **Iittala**, for ceramics, housewares and iconic Finnish designs like Alvar Aalto's undulating vases; **Lokal**, a concept store known for its ceramics, jewelry and furniture; and **Common**, which explores the connections between Japanese and Nordic design); and a fine collection of museums and galleries to explore—like the **Kiasma** museum of contemporary art, the **Designmuseo** and the **Amos Rex Art Museum**. The new public library, **Oodi**, which opened in 2018 and was designed by ALA Architects (the firm that is behind the new Helsinki airport, which is still underway), is also worth a visit—and it puts the facilities at many of the States' top universities to shame, with amenities including free access to a sewing and 3D printing space, a music room and recording studio, gaming stations and, of course, a sauna.



Suites at the Hotel St. George in Helsinki. Photos by Elizabeth Harvey

Between touring and dining at top spots—which range from *Michelin*-starred standouts like **Olo**, **Grön**, **Natura** and **Savoy** to more casual and cozy haunts like **Shelter**, **Holiday** and the restaurant at **Löyly**—travelers can recharge at design-forward hotels like the **St. George**, whose delicately stylish spaces feel like a (dream) home-away-from-home, or the historic **Hotel Kämp**, which first opened in 1887 and was a favored meeting place for politicians, artists and writers of the Finnish Golden Age (and remains the top choice for celebrities and business travelers). For adventures further afield, a

quick drive or ferry can take you into the archipelago to discover treasures like the charming old town of **Porvoo** (known for its wooden homes, antique shops, local handicrafts and chocolate), the forests of **Nuuxio National Park** and the lovely islands of **Lonna** and **Suomenlinna**.



A view of Helsinki Harbor, the cathedral and the ferris wheel. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey

And no trip to Helsinki is complete without a stop at the flagship of **Marimekko**, the iconic fashion and furniture brand founded by Viljo and Armi Ratia in Helsinki in 1951. The house's signature chunky poppies can be spotted all around the city, on postcards and on locals—and it's this unabashed playfulness that makes Helsinki so cool. In the capital of the happiest country in the world (which has held **the title** now for five years running), there's an openness to experimentation and fun that's seldom found elsewhere. (The city even has a scenic ferris wheel that's equipped with both a sauna carriage and a Veuve Clicquot carriage.) In short—Helsinki's not afraid to get a little bit weird, and the results are delightful. It's an often-overlooked city that should be experienced, thanks in large part to its creatives, whose talents are so striking because they are uniquely unrestrained. They're left alone to flourish—perhaps without pants, and maybe a little drunk.

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Sisu



The Helsinki Cathedral. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey

To conclude our lexical exploration, I arrive at the Finnish concept of “Sisu”—the word which is the shortest on this list but is the most important. I encountered the term on my first day in Helsinki, at our first touring stop: **Senate Square**, the city’s most famous monument. The square is a symbol for Finland’s history and development, as the place where national religion, politics and knowledge converge; here, the Helsinki Cathedral, the Government Palace and the main building of the University of Helsinki come together and are joined across the cobblestones. As we stood blinking up in the sun at the glimmering gilded domes of the mid-19th-century church, our guide explained that its resemblance to the famous cathedrals of St. Petersburg—like Saint Isaac’s and Kazan—was no coincidence: Finland was under Russian rule from 1809 (when Russia conquered the country from Sweden) until 1917, when Finland gained independence. (The Soviet army would again attempt to conquer the nation during World War II, in a brutal offensive known as the Winter War, which destroyed much of Helsinki but was ultimately unsuccessful.) Recounting the timeline, our Finnish guide’s voice grew tight, and she said: “By the way, it hurts a bit to talk about these things at this time...But what we’ve learned from history is, a small country can manage.” This is Sisu: A Finnish concept that cannot be directly translated but encompasses resilience,

grit, guts, fortitude, bravery, defiance against the odds. It's the determination to survive, when things are at their worst. And Sisu has its roots, deeper than any lines drawn on a map, in the land—this region at the edge of the world where forests, mountains, islets and fjords become blanketed in frost and night, daring the people who live there to hold on through the winter until the dawn of spring. And when spring comes, the days get longer, and warmer, until summer lights up Scandinavia with a midnight sun that never sets—proof that some things are worth waiting for.

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- Elizabeth Harvey on May 20, 2022

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