



Stockholm Archipelago by Catherine Hughes, Sweden Yacht Rally 2019

By The Mariner Creative Team | 23 Aug 2019



Before we arrived in Stockholm my knowledge of Sweden was largely based on literature: children's stories, Viking sagas, fairy tales and Nordic noir. That and the YouTube videos we'd watched before we left, which promised saunas on remote islands and warned of navigation hazards and strange anchoring styles. We found all of that, along with the warmest of welcomes everywhere we went, stunning scenery, excellent food, sidesplitting laughter and lasting friendships.

Setting out

But back to the beginning. We meet in Saltsjöbaden just outside Stockholm. By 5.00pm, after storming the local supermarkets and settling ourselves, we still have a good four or five hours of daylight left. It seems a pity not to take advantage of the beautiful evening, and we all agree to head out for our first night.

Immediately it becomes clear how important local knowledge will be on this trip. Not only because our skipper Magnus knows a perfect natural harbour nearby, and he briefs us on the route, and all the hazards to avoid on our way. We're a bit nervous about attempting our first Swedish mooring - which seems to involve a stern anchor and some leaping onto rocks to fix bowlines to a tree. As we progress around the archipelago we become increasingly proficient at a wide variety of mooring styles, but on that first night we are very glad that Sarah proves adept at the leaping onto rocks part. I clearly hadn't understood the Swedish culture either, because instead of cursing the new arrivals

invading their space, people on neighbouring boats hop up to help take our lines and we are soon settled and enjoying an evening swim off the back.

We are too far south for the actual midnight sun, but it's well after 9.00 pm when the sky starts to redden. The colours move through the spectrum to deepest blue once the sun finally dips below the horizon. It will rise again by 4.00am and the sky never goes truly black.

On our previous rally we'd travelled with a group of friends, this time we'd be sharing the committee boat with four new acquaintances. As we are packing away the two coffee pots and selection of coffee into our stocked-by-IKEA galley, I am pretty sure we'll get on well. Next day, as we head north into the archipelago, Magnus introduces us to the Swedish ritual of 'fika' - complete with cinnamon buns. It soon becomes a very important part of our day, starting with the early morning visit to the bakery to discover the local specialty buns. (The bakery in Utö is a particular highlight.)

Some lessons in sailing

Pretty early in our trip we become used to watching the AIS for the location of larger boats - from the yellow car ferries slicing across the channels like hazards in a video game, the huge roll-on-roll-off ferries plying the archipelago, to the old steamboats with tree trunks as fenders. We quickly agree we do not want to meet one of these in a narrow passage, and there are some very narrow passages. We do have a rather dramatic encounter when one of the yachts calls that they've lost steering mid-channel with one of the largest ferries bearing down. Our next lesson to Swedish culture: 'it's not a problem'. Magnus radios the ferry and explains the difficulty, they respond they have us in view and can pass to port. The other crews watch anxiously as the yacht disappears from view behind the ferry - then emerges again unscathed, and once the small disagreement with the auto-pilot has been settled we are back to racing.

Our crew, with a distinct lack of racing experience, isn't expecting to shine in the first race. Still I think even Magnus thinks we've taken the fika concept a bit too far when we put the coffee pot on halfway through. "But we're racing," he says, before conceding to the inevitable and accepting a cup. The convention is that the local skipper doesn't assist with races, but at dinner that night the other crews unanimously agree that we should let him help us in future!

By the fourth race our crew has developed a race plan - including some motivational music to help us along. Unfortunately there is not much wind. We're poling out the headsail when we have an unplanned man overboard drill under sail to rescue our boathook. Mission accomplished and back on course, but we've lost a bit of time. Magnus convinces us that the other yachts have made a mistake with the navigation and are heading to the wrong finish line. Both of them? Still, he set the course, so we follow his directions and cross the line with not another boat in sight. Have we won? Surely not. The other crews are not convinced and Magnus's face is a picture when we re-check the charts. Oops - seems as if we're the ones that found the wrong finish line. Perhaps when the others agreed to let him help us they knew something we didn't?

By the time we are getting set to race to Jungfruskär we have finally nailed the start and we've rigged a lanyard for the boathook to avoid any more man overboard drills. We manage to finish on the same line and in sight of the other yachts - much to everyone's surprise.

The full archipelago experience

Most of us hadn't had much experience of Swedish cuisine, so the restaurant at Furusund Vardshus is the first of several delightful surprises. Along the way we get to experience traditional Swedish dishes: herring, gravlax, meatballs and lingonberry sauce, as well as sampling wonderful flavours from young chefs using local produce and international influences.

My literary tour of Sweden had started in Stockholm, where I kept recognising locations familiar from Stieg Larsson. In the islands we move from Pippi Longstocking country (Astrid Lindgren had a summer house on Furusund) to fairytale as we walk through dim fir woods or pick wild berries beside sunlit paths. On Högmarsö we find a crazy steampunk scrapyard where all kinds of craft have

retired to rust in peace: from mini submarines, to floating Chinese restaurants and an art gallery barge with wrought iron dragons. Later at dinner a wild-haired giant looms up to our table, hearing we are Australians, and tells us the stories of Furusund Slip. The Viking Sagas come later, at Jungfruskär, when we spot the sunken remains of a 10th century kobb lying just offshore. In the still morning its long keel and ribs are clearly visible in the shallow water. The mighty Vasa ship on display in Stockholm is undeniably more impressive, but this small unmarked boat is somehow more special as we imagine the group of small ships gathering together to replenish water and supplies before setting out across the ocean.

“Have you sailed all the way from Australia?” is pretty much the first question everyone asks when they see the flags on our yachts. It’s a question one of our crews is asked on Swedish radio, when a local broadcaster sees us anchoring that night across from his summerhouse and rows out to pay a visit. And one we are asked again by the two young blonde heavily armed young women who pull up beside us in the Coastguard boat and take out their notebooks. Fortunately they’re satisfied with our explanation and wish us a pleasant trip.

For our lay day in Utö there is an option of a ride to the other end of the island and everyone is in. There’s very little traffic on the roads and only a few hills, so even those of us who hadn’t been on bikes for years manage the trip. I’m not sure if it’s a change in the weather but the cloudscapes now are incredible, piled high in impossibly blue skies. The photographers in the group are having fun and the many photo opportunities along the way also act as rest stops for anyone who is feeling it, so we all arrive in good order for lunch, which is as lovely as we’ve been promised.

Our overnight stops include a mix of natural harbours and marinas. It’s the last weekend of the summer season when we arrive in Sandhamn marina and the town has a party feel. Dinner is at the Royal Swedish Yacht Club where the Australian flag is flying among the visitor flags. The band is finishing up as we head back to the yachts, but the marina is still buzzing and there’s music coming from all corners. It’s nice to experience this side of the archipelago, but on the whole I prefer the smaller islands. By the end of two weeks though, our skipper assures us we’ve pretty much had the full archipelago experience - including the small sauna hut with wood fires blazing and wooden deck for jumping into the water. Even in summer the water is a shock and I’m not sure I’d ever be up for the full winter experience. The one thing he’s disappointed about is that the fire ban in place has meant we haven’t been able to barbecue on shore. But we’re not that upset by the lack of rain.

However all that changes as we head into Stockholm for our final lunch. Just as we motor in front of the Grand Hotel the heavens open. ‘It’s not a problem’, says Magnus and sure enough within moments the storm passes. As we moor alongside the restaurant for lunch and step off the boats and onto our seats the sun comes out again. And the final race results: no surprise that our crew scores the wooden spoon award (or in this case wooden Swedish butterknife).

Afternoon in Sydney and it’s already growing dark. It’s hard to believe only a few weeks ago we were sitting in the long Swedish twilight on our first night in the Stockholm archipelago. But there’s a scent of cinnamon from the oven. I’ve found a recipe for cinnamon buns and it must be time for fika. I knew that butterknife would come in handy.

- Catherine Hughes, Sweden Yacht Rally 2019

[Images from this rally can be viewed here, and were taken by clients of the Sweden Yacht Rally Annie and Scott Davies.](#)

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1300 131 724

Suite 1A, Level 2, 802 Pacific Highway
Gordon, NSW 2072, Australia

[via our contact form](#)

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