

THE OFF DUTY SPRING 50 ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

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Sneak Away To a Swedish Island

As spring returns to Stockholm, so do the ferries that carry those who relish adventure to the city’s archipelago

BY STEPHEN WHITLOCK

MOST NORTHERN EUROPEAN cities struggle through long winters, but Stockholm’s is so endless and light-starved that it makes “The Seventh Seal” look like a Judd Apatow movie.

When the sunshine does return, the contrast is extraordinary: At the first hint of spring, little street-sweeper vehicles zip up and down the sidewalks clearing away the winter grit, cherry trees burst into bloom on Kungsträdgården, the grand allée by the Royal Opera House, and people sit outdoors at restaurants and cafes, wrapped in blankets and soaking up the sun.

The surest sign that spring has arrived, though, is the return of ferry service to the archipelago of some 24,000 islands off the city’s eastern edge.

One of my favorites is **Utö**—whose name rhymes with “pewter” (at least when said with an English accent). At roughly 18 square miles, it’s big enough to have good restaurants and a shop that sells trendy clothes and housewares but small enough that its uncrowded swimming beaches are within easy walking distance of the ferry dock. There’s even a bit of history, with a windmill from 1791 that affords great views over the island.

To get there, buy a combined train-and-bus ticket at Stockholm’s Central Station (\$7) for the train ride to Årsta Brygga, a town 20 miles south. From there it’s a 50-minute ferry ride (\$8) to the island. The ferry stops at several harbors on Utö. Get off at Gruvbryggan, where you’ll find an assortment of wooden buildings painted a cheerful red. Everything is close by and easy to spot. There are only a handful of streets, and few clearly visible street signs, so addresses don’t count for much.

Start your visit at **Utö Bakgård** (*utobakgard.se*), a small bakery that opened in 2011 but feels like it’s been

here forever. It’s run by Tobias Bergstrand, one of Sweden’s top bakers, and sells traditional breads, sandwiches and pastries including the beloved *bulle*—a bun spiced with cinnamon and cardamom or filled with vanilla cream. Enjoy one at an outside table as you plan your day.

If you’re feeling energetic and want to explore the rest of the island or search out a particularly isolated place for a swim, **Cykleboden** rents bikes for around \$15 a day. But it’s an easy stroll from the harbor to **Rävvstavik**, a bathing spot on a natural bay with smooth granite rocks that slope right down into the gin-clear waters of the Baltic. To get there, just follow the steady stream of people taking the footpath through the pine forest with beach towels tucked under their arms.

The walk to and from **Rävvstavik** takes you past the grandest place to eat or stay on the island, the **Utö Vårdshus**, a classic, 19th-century Swedish country inn that counts Greta

The 19th-century country inn counts Greta Garbo among its former guests.

Garbo among its former guests. The restaurant has plenty of outdoor seating and is the perfect place to stop for a meal of Gotland lamb or buttered trout on your way back from a bracing dip. If you decide to stay the night, the Vårdshus has rooms in several historic buildings and offers a dinner-bed-and-breakfast package (*from about \$185 per person per night, utovardshus.se*).

Before you leave the island, allow time to pop into **Hammumagasinet**, a clothing and housewares shop with surprisingly fashionable finds. A polo shirt or hoodie from the Utö Collection, a line of Swedish sports clothes bearing the island’s name, makes a perfect souvenir. It’s also a worthy spot to pick up an extra change of clothes if, like a lot of people, you decide to stay another day.



NORDIC TACK
A network of ferries links Stockholm to the many islands in its archipelago.

HAVE A BALTIC BALL
Clockwise from above left: Something sweet from island bakery Utö Bakgård; Tobias Bergstrand, one of Sweden’s top bakers; clothing and housewares shop Hammumagasinet is a magnet even for locals—as souvenirs, the pillows and apparel from its Utö Collection (emblazoned with the island’s name) could hardly be more appropriate; the Utö Vårdshus is a classic, 19th-century Swedish inn and restaurant and the poshest place to stay and eat on the island.

THE LOWDOWN // TWO OTHER ISLANDS WORTH A VISIT

Finnhamn
Finnhamn, about two hours from Stockholm, is a year-round destination with an authentic *krog* (country inn) that serves traditional Swedish country food.
Getting There: The quaintly named **Cinderella** (*stromma.se*) and **Waxholmsbolaget** (*waxholmsbolaget.com*) ferry companies have service to Finnhamn.
Staying There: Cabins on the island can be rented by the

night. Be warned, though, that these are authentically rustic: They have electricity but no running water; showers are communal (*two-bed cabins from about \$75 a night, finnhamn.se*).
Eating There: **Finnhamn Krog** serves hearty fare and has a surprisingly good wine list (+46-8-542-46404).
Sandhamn
Sandhamn, a favorite island of serious yachtsmen, is a

delightful spot year-round. It has a lively party scene in high summer, popular with the offspring of the more affluent residents of the capital.
Getting There: The scenic ride from central Stockholm on the Cinderella ferry line (*stromma.se*) takes just a little more than two hours.
Staying There: The 79-room **Sandhamn Yacht Hotel** is one of the more opulent places to stay (*from*

about \$275 a night, sandhamn.com). For something more boutique, try the 19-room **Sands Hotell** (*from \$220 a night including breakfast, sands hotell.se/en*).
Eating There: **Sandhamns Vårdshus** is open year-round and is the best spot on the island for a glass of Swedish beer and a plate of fresh seafood in a setting that has heaps of charm (*sandhamns-varldshus.se*).

LOVE OF MY LIFE

My Bloom Heaven



19 I WAS FOUR YEARS OLD when my family moved from Wisconsin to Holland. We arrived in the dead of a Lowlands winter, the kind of blizzard-whipped December you only see on Christmas cards and in Bruegel paintings. The canals were glazed with ice and the gabled houses wore a cap of snow. But then the big April thaw came and suddenly everything was splashed with candy colors. The tulip fields south of Amsterdam ran in ribbons of red and yellow, bumping up against the sky, and our Dutch neighbors wheeled out on their bikes, one hand steering, the other holding a bouquet of flowers.

That ripe world was my first vision of pure, seamless beauty. My second was the flower parade—the *Bloemencorso van de Bollenstreek*—that rolls through the Dutch countryside for two days every April (the 24th and 25th, this year). Epic enough to make Pasadena’s Rose Parade look weedy, the procession of flower-heaped floats—titanic peacocks, towering windmills and every sort of fantasia—rumbles 26 miles through the blooming fields, from Noordwijk to Haarlem. My parents, determined to show us everything, carried my sister and me into the crowd of spectators in Haarlem. At first we only heard a rumble filling the central square. But then the floats rounded the corner, an explosion of tulips and hyacinths. After they passed, the cobbled streets

were dusted with petals, so the whole town seemed paved by flowers.

The flower parade started in 1947, not long after the end of World War II, when the Dutch needed proof that things would blossom again. The flowers themselves are part of the Dutch DNA—particularly the tulips. They fueled the 17th-century tulip mania, when burghers swapped whole tracts of land for one prized hybrid. It was the tulip bulb that literally fed the starving Dutch during the last months of the war and it is the tulip that appears like a horticultural pinup in every second old master painting. While other European artists were churning out visions of heaven and hell, the Dutch were painting the sensual beauty of this earthly world. Heaven for them was always the rope of pearls, the ripest melon and the deepest plum-colored, flame-tipped tulip.

From the start, the Bloemencorso wasn’t just an emblem of seasonal renewal but the promise of a national rebirth, a larger, collective spring after a very long winter. My own recent winter was punctuated by the death of my mother, and then my father. I’m planning to return to Holland this month, and to try to find the house where we lived that year. And then, I think, I will go to Haarlem, and wait for the parade to round a corner, trailing blossoms, laying down a carpet of hopeful petals. —Raphael Kadushin

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LUST OBJECT

The Ultimate Frozen Safari

For a safari of a very different stripe, head north—way north—to the floe edge of the Arctic Ocean on Canada’s Baffin Island, where polar bears, seals, bowhead whales and sharp-tusked narwhals (aka “the unicorns of the sea,” pictured right) gather to feed in spring. Arctic Kingdom leads small groups to this remote, mountainous region, where guests can hike, snowmobile, kayak and even snorkel, staying in a yurt-style camp just outside Sirmilik National Park.
Why you may need to love it from afar: At about \$11,000 per person for



seven nights, you’ll have to cough up the cost of a Chevy Malibu for two of you. But hitchhiking is a small price to pay for a week this wild (*arctickingdom.com*).

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LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP

TWITTER’S PERISCOPE APP



Why we hate it: Oh, how we long for the days when a vacation was seen as a do-nothing time and not a chance to bag more Twitter or Instagram followers with our filtered and fussed-over photos of meals, ocean views starring our feet, and bath towels folded into swans. Periscope has just made oversharing even easier by letting us live-stream video straight to our Twitter feed. Now we not only get to see what our friends are eating on their travels, but we get to see—and hear—them eating it. In real time.
Why we love it: Are you kidding? Now that we can broadcast room-to-room tours of our ryokan in Kyoto, our kid’s first encounter with Piccadilly Circus street performers and the parade of bikinis on Ipanema Beach, we can’t download this free app fast enough. Instagram is so Stone Age!

When first we leased Fontana Vecchia—this was in the spring, April—the valley was high with wheat green as the lizards racing among its stalks. It begins in January, the **Sicilian spring**, and accumulates into a kindly bouquet, a wizard’s garden....



Truman Capote
Author, 1924-1994