

## VOYAGE



# Scandinavia

Scandinavia - No Risk, Great Reward!

Twelve hundred years ago, the Vikings were known as a bloodthirsty bunch renowned for being far flung travellers in search of various possessions that they could bring back home. Whether it was storming into Russia, invading Europe or pillaging the Scottish and British coastlines, most people knew they'd better duck or pay the consequences.

Today's Vikings are a little more socially responsible, though they still do retain that hardy spirit of survival, hard work and enjoying life to its fullest.

Scandinavia is a sprawling collection of three similar, yet distinctive countries that are fused together in the far north of Europe. Norway on the western shore is the brother with the wanderlust, ships exploring the horizons, staunchly defending its independence from the European Union. Sweden is the middle brother... the industrious one who discovered how to utilize iron and who urbanized early. Finland is the

wild child, kind of the hippie of the bunch, who just happens to have the Russian bear sleeping right next door.

Situated where it is, Scandinavia hugs the Arctic Circle, meaning that there is a constant twilight in the wintertime and endless sunshine in the summer. Naturally, it means that cabin fever being what it is, the people of all three countries go a little nuts when the constant light approaches. Hence, Scandinavia's "Midsummer" festivals are not to be missed.

All three countries are blessed with an amazing array of lakes, parks and natural wonders. If one pictured a forested Yukon with maybe not-quite-so-tall mountains, it would be a decent analogy. The result is that many people use that great resource to their fullest potential. Hiking and outdoor activities - whether on a lake or on a wilderness trail - is part of the Scandinavian way of life.

## SWEDEN

You may remember the old ParticipAction ads about the 30 year old flabby Canadian and the 60 year old buff Swede? Ok...long time ago, but the image fits... at least for the Swedes.

Sweden's ancient history is not as well documented as Finland and Norway's, whose etchings go back 10,000 years. The steel industry of the 1800's was the catalyst for an accelerated maturity, though and its cities have an air of sophistication and urban progressiveness. For example, there are probably more golf fiends in Sweden than anywhere else. Malmö to the south is right across the bridge from Copenhagen, Denmark and has morphed from a shipbuilding port into this cosmopolitan bi-national gateway. Ribbersborg Beach, Scandinavia's 2.5 kilometer long "Copacabana", is also located here and has won numerous awards for its clean water.

Up the northwestern coast lies Gothenburg, Scandinavia's largest sea port. Situated at the mouth of the Göta Älv River, the city is a picturesque seascape that is home to over 100 languages. This multi-cultural influence makes for lively festive moments of artistic significance, not to mention a wide swathing brush for anyone's gastronomic palate.

Stockholm is the country's sophisticated-cool city and was built on 14 islands, all connected through an elaborate bridge system. Because Sweden is a kingdom, the cultural and historic attractions of this city are many, particularly in the Old Town, Gamla Stan. Those who stay here are recommended to go to the Grand Hotel, a stately castle of a place located right on the water. Luxury seeps from every pore and Nobel Prize winners are found here yearly, laying pillow to head after the big awards banquet.



## NORWAY

Norway is the vast coastal land of fjords, which are magnificent juts of sea and cliff that were created when retreating glaciers did the carving. The largest of these, probes 200 kilometres inland. The result is a 21,000 long craggy coastline that provide myriad choices for anyone who likes to explore by boat. National Geographic has ranked these phenomenae as the most popular of all the World Heritage sites and they have worn the badge with great distinction. Like the rest of Scandinavia, the sights and sounds of nature are front and center. Sørlandet is a vast southern frontier of outdoor fun and is an area that screams for hikers, bikers and kayaks. The small fishing villages and coastal hospitality is well worth your time. We might also mention here that with Nordic or cross country skiing having been engrained in Norwegian DNA for the last 4,000 years (much like hockey is in Canadians), most Norwegians are programmed to explode if snow is delayed once summer is done. Lillehammer, just north of Oslo hosted arguably, the most charming Winter Olympic in history, so the reputation is on the button.

The hub of the country is Oslo, also a former Olympic host in '52, which is located, naturally, in the belly of a fjord. A city of 500,000, there is a sensational music culture here and festivals abound. Whether it's something classic, jazz oriented or the mind-crunching heavy metal that many Scandinavians adore, there is ample choice.



## FINLAND

Finland, as stated, is the wild child of the family and its reputation for oddball pastimes is renowned. Activities like the World Sauna Championships, Wife Carrying or Unikeon Päivä (Sleepyhead Day), where they toss the supposed laziest person in the house into the sea, are commonplace. The Finns like to have a lot of fun and if there isn't something structured to go to, they make something up and run with it. As Russia's neighbour, perhaps this has caused undue mental stress over the centuries, however, the result is a vibrant country that uses all of its natural wonders to the best of its ability.

When in Finland...one must indulge in a traditional sauna. The sauna has been engrained in the Finnish soul and much like connoisseurs of fine scotch, the Finns look for the quality of the steam, or 'löyly', rather than skin peeling heat. Having said that, two thirds of the country is pristine forest, meaning that like its brothers, Finland is flush with outdoor activity. With 187,888 lakes need we say more...

Helsinki is described as a "cool zone of design and fashion" and this former Olympic City has it in spades. A city of fortresses and cathedrals, museums and art galleries, it hosts many events, like the

fabulous multi-faceted Helsinki Festival in mid-August. The Hotel Kamp in Helsinki provides the best luxury in the city and a painstakingly beautiful makeover has turned this 120 year old historical icon into a work of genius.

The days of Scandinavian pillaging and plundering are long gone, but what remains is a vibrant people, who have taken their long history and turned it into an unparalleled quality of life. When the United Nations does its ranking of best places to live, Norway is number one, Sweden... five and Finland is 11.

Given a world which is sometimes uncertain, the choice to visit any one of these hip places is a great one. No risk... great reward!

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