

# Stockholm archipelago: Sailing Sweden's pocket wilderness

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**After just a couple of days cruising in the extensive Stockholm archipelago, Chris Beeson discovers why Swedish sailors rarely make it out of the Baltic**



The 30,000 islands that make up Stockholm's Skärgård offer a lifetime of exploration – all within a daysail of the city centre Credit: Stefan Almers/Studio Tranan

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I've been lucky enough to sail in many places around the world and it has occurred to me that, among the many nations represented afloat, Sweden is seldom present. How can this be? Historically they are bold seafarers and fearless adventurers. Can the North Sea be such an insuperable barrier for these marauding mariners? The answer is no. It is simply that Sweden's coastal waters, and their super-abundant islands, are so endlessly beguiling that there is simply no need for the Swede to sail anywhere else. Everything the adventurous cruiser could possibly want is scattered just a few miles off the Swedish coast.



Our three-day route around Stockholms Skärgård

The Stockholms Skärgård, or Stockholm archipelago, for instance, is a delicious chocolate box of 30,000 alluring granite islands, each with its own character, history and wildlife. It forms the central section of a larger archipelago of over 100,000 islands – the world's largest. Summer temperatures can hit the mid-to-high 20s Celsius and the weather is familiar, being dictated, like our own, by the Azores High. In summer there's a 25 per cent chance of winds reaching Force 5 but the water stays invitingly flat and you're never far from a lee. Tides are all but non-existent due to the Baltic's narrow entrance. What flow there is runs outward and is brackish, due to meltwater run-off further north. At greater depths, salt water flows in from the North Sea.

It's no surprise in a granite archipelago that rocks abound and their location was once privy only to fishermen and ferry captains. Indeed it has taken the introduction of GPS to open up the Skärgård to the great majority of Swedes. Most rocks are well charted, so stay zoomed in on your plotter and you should be fine. Don't take any risks, though, as sea level can vary by as much as a metre between atmospheric pressure extremes. Storm surges can double that.



Decent breezes, flat water and pleasant temperatures make for a sailor's paradise

The islands of the inner Skärgård, those closest to the mainland, are much bigger, higher, fertile enough to sustain thick forest and often ringed by Stockholmers' summerhouses. The outer Skärgård has a more exposed, rugged feel. Islands are smaller and lower lying. The scalping of ice ages has left a mere skim of soil, allowing only the hardiest of perennials to take root. Some sport the odd red summerhouse or communal sauna but many appear to be virgin territory.

The Skärgård is usually entered via Sandhamn in the east, Söderarm in the north or Dalarö in the south, but its limits are the lighthouse on Svenska Högar, at the archipelago's eastern edge, which is a mere 45 miles from the centre of Stockholm, and Arholma in the north, around 80 miles from Landsort in the south. It's an enchanting pocket wilderness, less than a daysail wide, but you could cruise here all your life – as many do – and never land on the same island twice.

We joined our boat, an Arcona 380, at Arcona HQ in Gustavsberg on the island of Värmdö, about 12 miles east of Stockholm city centre. After Torgny and Ewa Jansson, our hosts and guides, had stowed the victuals, we motored west out of Gustavsberg's narrow entrance into the wider Baggensfjärden.

Gusts eddied as we hoisted the mainsail. Low-lying, portentous 'pancakes' of granite slipped by to port as we unfurled the jib and ran south before an unseasonal squall. The Swedes had a pretty duff mid-summer in 2014: stiff northerlies dropped the temperature by half to 11°C. We could just make out the Royal Swedish Yacht Club's (KSSS) opulent clubhouse in Saltsjöbaden as we glided by.



Reaching southeast into Ingarö Fjärden, Stockholmers' summerhouses draped the steep coast of the island of Ingarö to port, peeping out from the dense woodland. These vary from masterpieces of modern architecture, each with a steep staircase running down to a small dock, complete with bobbing boat and sauna, to characteristic white-gabled, clapboard bothies, stained a rusty red by traditional falu paint made from copper and iron oxide from mine spoils.



Arcona boss, and our guide to the archipelago, Torgny Jansson helms down Ingarö Fjärden

In Nämdöfjärden, we tucked in two reefs and beat north-east into Force 5 winds, gusting Force 8 between the islands on our port-hand side. We bore off between Hasselö and Skarprunmaren through a narrowing channel towards the well-sheltered gästhamn (guest harbour) of Sandhamn on the island of Sandön, where we moored bows-to the quay.



The Royal Swedish Yacht Club's impressive offshore clubhouse dominates Sandhamn's boardwalked harbour

Sandhamn is the Cowes of the Baltic. We were there in late June, one of perhaps 30 visiting boats. By July, when Sweden closes for its 'industrial holiday', Sandhamn would be one big party with revelers tumbling off the ferries that service the islands like water taxis. Its tree-lined arc embraces 240 berths with faded grey timber boardwalks, dominated by the imposing offshore clubhouse of the KSSS, which was built in 1897. Electricity and water are available, fuel too. There's a bakery, several restaurants, a general store and a bar on the waterfront. Dinky summerhouses abound but most of the locals live a little way inland among the winding, narrow, picket-fenced lanes.



Sandhamn's Världshus, the archipelago's foremost eatery, has fed seafarers since 1672

The rain and wind faded with the evening light and we awoke to a much brighter prospect. After a quick explore ashore we had breakfast on board and slipped the bow lines as Torgny hauled us out gently on the dropline. Clear of Sandön, we headed south-southwest and had a glorious 8-9 knot reach between bare pillows of granite that provide both shelter from the open sea and a reminder of their keel-crippling cousins beneath the surface. The 10-mile passage southwest to the island of Bullerö was soon clipped off and, after threading a course through the narrow fairway, we flipped on the engine and dropped sail in the lee of the island.

While Ewa readied the lines and fitted the boarding ladder, Torgny explored the anchorage under engine and noted anchor points in the rock. Having decided where to moor, he motored 3-4 boatlengths off, hauled the 10kg Bruce out of the starboard quarter locker and threw it over the side onto the muddy bottom. The rope paid out round the mainsheet winch as we slowly closed the rocks, Torgny handed the helm to Ewa and went forward to jump ashore.





Moored bow-to the magical island of Bullerö, a jewel of the outer Skärgård

made fast the windward line first, then they both adjusted kedge and bow lines to a distance off that was safe for both the crew and the plumb-bowed boat's knuckle. To thwart gusts on the beam Torgny fished out a 50-metre webbing line, of the type usually kept on reels, wandered across to a rock off the windward beam, threaded the webbing through another anchor point and secured both ends to the port midships cleat. With four-point security, we felt able to explore the island.

Bullerö is 'marine deciduous forest', a designation unique to this and the Åland archipelago. It was permanently settled by 1653 by crofting families who grew tubers and root crops, hauled wooden ploughs themselves as they couldn't feed horses over winter, caught fish and shot seals and sea birds. However, mainland industries offered an easier existence and by the early 20th Century the islands were abandoned.



Tucked up in the lee of Bullerö with two bow lines, a breast line and a stern anchor

In 1908, the renowned Swedish wildlife painter Bruno Liljefors bought Bullerö Island and 300 around it, and built a hunting lodge and several studios. In 1923, Liljefors sold the archipelago to his friend, newspaper magnate and keen sailor Torsten Krüger, who added a further 600 islands to the estate. He was an impresario and Hollywood stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Errol Flynn and Mary Pickford stayed on Bullerö. Krüger's story is a rags-and-riches rollercoaster, but too spectacular to explore here.





The port of Hemviken on Bullerö is 'downtown' with five buildings, including a youth hostel

Krüger's son Björn, an ardent naturalist, railed against the plundering of birds' eggs, then still a common source of food. He bred rare sea eagles and eagle owls, protected indigenous species and essentially turned the island into a nature reserve. When, in 1967, Krüger decided to sell, Shell offered him SEK80m (£5.5m) but instead he sold all 900 islands to the Swedish state for SEK3.8m (£260k) on condition that the islands were protected. In 1976 the reserve was established and parts of the archipelago are out of bounds between February and August to protect breeding bird colonies.



After exploring this tiny speck of heaven on foot, we sat down to lunch

Author and artist Albert Engström, one of Liljefors's cultural clique, mused on 'a concentration of happiness in the untouched and sacred natural landscape' of Bullerö and I know what he means. Perhaps that sense of protection explains the innocence I felt there. It's a kingdom fit for a child, only a mile and a half from end to end, where small, rounded mountains overlook miniature meadows and Lilliputian forests fringe tiny bays, all ripe for exploration. I couldn't stop smiling.



We followed the 150 Square Metre Skerry Cruiser Beatrice Aurore into the natural harbour of Koxviken on Biskopsön

Back aboard, we continued our way south-west towards the natural harbour of Koxviken on Biskopsön until we spotted a rare and wonderful sight: Beatrice Aurore. She's a Skerry Cruiser built in 1920 to the 150 Square Metre Rule devised in Stockholm in 1908. A few years ago, a crane crushed her during a botched launch. A syndicate of ten enthusiasts restored the 22-metre classic and she entertains her owners throughout the summer, each taking a week in turn.





Any cruiser here needs a bag of bergskils, iron pegs that you can hammer into crevices to create mooring points

We followed her into Koxviken on a clear transit. Once we'd chosen our spot, Torgny fished out the trusty Bruce and a bag of bergskils (like pitons, or iron pegs with loops that one hammers into crevices to create mooring points) while Ewa sorted out the bow. With the boat secure we had time to look around at the natural, sheltered beauty of our overnight mooring.



The hungry crew of Beatrice Aurore watch as Chris and photographer Stefan tend the grill

After a brief ramble, during which I spotted none of the 50 fallow deer said to roam the island since their introduction in the 1920s, I returned to the boat for a Swedish grill. Food is prepped in the galley, cooked over charcoal ashore, then eaten on board. Food always tastes better when barbecued, better still in a wilderness. We ate and drank and watched the sun go down, and down, but night never fell. At midnight there was still enough light to read by. It's another rare and wonderful pleasure, the 'white night'.

The following day, we knew, would end back in the UK but we'd seen enough to know that we'd return. After breakfast we re-rigged one bow line while Torgny knocked out the bergskils and we slipped away for a 30-mile passage, at the end of which Torgny said he'd drop us in town.

With the wind still in the north, we beat back towards the inner Skärgård, back up the Ingarö Fjärden and past Saltsjöbaden. I expected we would enter Baggensfjärden and come alongside in Gustavsberg, then jump in the car. How wrong I was.





Motoring through the narrow Baggensstäket, the small boats' shortcut into the centre of Stockholm

We dropped sail and motored, I was concerned to note, straight for land. Soon there opened up a beautiful little inlet called Baggensstäket, lined with little summerhouses with astronomical price tags. Baggensstäket is a historic gateway into Stockholm: for trade; for plague, which arrived on a boat from Estonia in 1710; and for glory, with a famous Swedish victory over the Russians in 1719.





Sailing on the Norrström with Stockholm's medieval centre, Gamla Stan, off the stern

The narrow channel opened up into the Lännerstasundet before turning north up Skurusundet, a steep-sided gorge where chichi properties perched, each with its own dock and boat-lift, to keep the boat out of the ice come winter. That opened up into the waterway used by cruise liners visiting Stockholm and lead east up the Norrström river to Gamla Stan, the medieval heart of Stockholm. Our final mooring was in the temporary marina built to house the fleet of the Round Gotland Race, directly opposite the Royal Palace and the Royal Swedish Opera House. 'I said I'd drop you in town,' said Torgny.

This is why most Swedes see no need to wander far afield. Half a day earlier we were moored in a rock-strewn wilderness, teetering on the edge of civilization. Now we were right in the heart of a vibrant European capital. It occurred to me that the residents of Sweden have a remarkable playground on their doorstep, unmatched anywhere in the world: sheltered, stunning and seemingly endless. What's more, they know it, love it, respect and protect it. I'm delighted that they also share it.

#### **Cruising Stockholm's archipelago: what you need to know**

Graham and Fay Cattell, joint secretaries of the Cruising Association's Baltic Section, have more than 17 years of local knowledge

*NB Correct at time of writing: 2014*

#### **Special equipment**



You'll need a bag of bergskils to hammer into crevices

- Bow ladder (an open pulpit helps, as most boarding is over the bow)
- 50m webbing reel and a stern hook with spring lock
- Stern anchor and 30m warps (secure bow to trees or rocks)
- Bergskils (iron pegs that act as mooring points)
- Fender boards if transiting canals
- Small, portable BBQ (don't light fires on rocks as they may crack)
- A courtesy flag flown from the starboard spreader
- Solar panels and a wind generator will keep batteries charged when you're away from marinas

### **Weather**

Prevailing winds move from the northerly quarter into the southwesterly quarter during the season. English language forecasts are broadcast at 0800 and 2000 LT on VHF. Choose channel by location: Vaddö (ch78), Svenska Högarna (ch84), Nacka (ch26), Södertälje (ch66), Torö (ch24).

**Documentation**

Carry insurance documents, proof of VAT paid and any qualifications documents. Charter skippers need an RYA Yachtmaster or ICC ticket.

**Berthing**

Most of the mooring is bow-to, so a bow ladder and an open pulpit helps

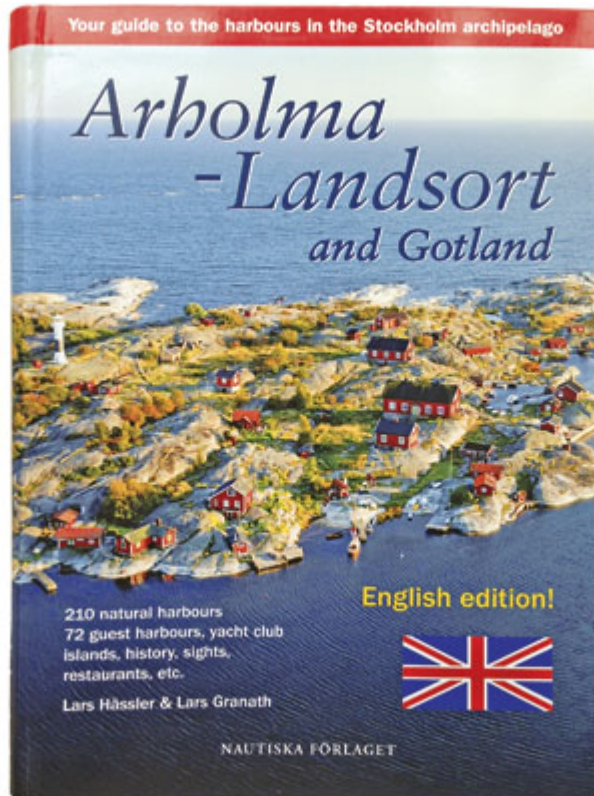
Costs are generally less than the UK's south coast. Yacht club harbours are cheaper and usually have guest berths – look for the Gästhamn signs. Facilities vary but expect water, electricity, toilets, recycling, bins and often a bastu (sauna).

**Anchoring**

Sweden's right of public access (allmansrätt) means you can anchor anywhere, but don't anchor close to houses, to respect their privacy.

**Pilotage**





This is the best pilot book by far, but it's out-of-print with no plans to reprint. Find a second-hand one, or learn Swedish

Buy folio charts locally or order for UK delivery. Follow the routes or 'leads' on the charts, marked with buoys, beacons and lighthouses. Use GPS as a back-up, but eyeball navigation is essential and you must regularly update your position on the chart.

The best pilot guide, the English language version of Arholma-Landsort and Gotland, is out of print with no plans to republish. Look for a second-hand copy.

### **Waste disposal**

Foreign-flagged vessels don't need a holding tank but after April 2015 discharging sewage in Swedish waters will be illegal. Currently, discharge is not permitted in harbours, lakes or canals. More pump-out facilities are being installed, even in anchorages. Many islands have earth closets.

### **Swedish Cruising Association**

For a season in Sweden, membership of the Swedish Cruising Association (S XK, [www.sxk.se](http://www.sxk.se)) can be worthwhile (family membership SEK640, or £55). Members have access to S XK moorings and reduced rates in S XK harbours.

### **Communications**

Telia network has the best cover in the archipelago. If you expect calls from Swedish friends, a local SIM will save them money. If only making calls, new roaming charges (from July 2014) make a local SIM less necessary.

Wi-fi is available in many harbours. The UK 3 SIM works in Sweden for data-roaming and internet access.

### **Fuel**

Diesel from fuel docks contains no biodiesel, unless the station also supplies road users. Camping Gaz bottles can be exchanged in some places but bring a good supply from Germany or Denmark, or invest in a Swedish gas bottle, which can be exchanged anywhere in Sweden only. It's possible to refill a Calor bottle with the right adaptor.

### **Alcohol**

Beer at 3.5% ABV or below is sold in shops. Anything stronger means a visit to the state shops (Systembolaget). Spirits are expensive but good wine is comparable to the cost in UK supermarkets. If you're passing through Germany, it's worth stocking up there.

### **Medical**

Mosquitoes can be a problem, so take your insect repellent or buy locally. If possible fit fly screens to hatches or take netting with you. Ticks may carry TBE (tick-borne encephalitis) or Lyme disease.

### **Routes to the Baltic**

From southern England, cross the North Sea or coast-hop to Brunsbüttel in Germany, then transit the Kiel Canal.

From the northern UK, head for the Skagerrak and Kattegat. Some boats may transit the Limfjord but beware Denmark's shoal, lee shore hazards.

If you're heading directly for the Stockholm archipelago, you can transit the Thomas Telford-engineered Göta canal. There are two canals (Trollhätte and Göta) plus stretches of river and the huge lakes. The transit fee – SEK6,510 (about £560) one way for 9-12m (30-39ft) yachts, with a SEK500 (£43) surcharge for beams over 3.3m (10ft 10in). This includes up to five nights in

21 marinas on the route.

### **Chartering**

Flights take around 2½ hours and return tickets start from £150. There are charter fleets, or companies chartering private owners' boats. Search online for 'bareboat yacht charter Stockholm'.

