



**Your On the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**The Baltic Sea Tour:
Stockholm, Sweden**

The Baltic Sea Tour

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Chapter 9: Stockholm, Sweden



August 11, 2008

Today, we paid our final port-of-call on Baltic Sea ports, with a stop in Stockholm, Sweden. I was eager for Reporterette to see this city. I wanted to share memories of my trips here when I was doing lectures to Swedes about the Internet. (In turn, they educated me about Scandinavian saunas, socialism, and Swedish food.)

As magnificent as Sweden's lands, rivers, and fiords are---and the word magnificent is not hype---my fondest memory of Sweden is a bartender. Not a Swedish monarch; not a tennis phenomenon; nor those famous inlets and islands; a bartender.

But in keeping with travel tales, let's first explore activities that burn calories. Later, we'll replenish the calories at my bartender's bar.

Swedes: Blond, Blue-eyed, and Endowed

For most of our lives, we've been conditioned to think Swedes to be citizens of an exotic nation. They supposedly reside in the land of blond, blue-eyed people, a place of socialism and social freedom. Social freedom, as in open sex. Their pop culture icons are Ingmar Bergman, Max von Sydow, Greta Garbo, and thousands of attractive blondes---such as Ursula Andress. When I thought of a Swede, I thought of the woman (a 10 on a scale of 10) playing opposite Sean Connery in a James Bond film.

Remember? It was the movie *Dr. No*. To add to the sexual titillation, Ms. Andress played the role of a vamp named Honey Ryder. While watching the movie, I thought the name Honey Ryder had a certain Freudian panache to it. Later, the James Bond films were less oblique about the heroines' monikers. One of James' later playmates was named Pussy Galore. No obliqueness in that name.

Anyway, in *Dr. No*, the voluptuous Swedish Ursula comes out of the sea in an abbreviated bathing suit. To complete the attire, a dagger was sheathed on her hip. She was carrying something in one of her hands, but who was watching her hands?

Tall, blond, blue-eyed, fair-skinned, and endowed. That's my stereotype of a Swede. Trouble is, while researching for this report, I learned this 10 of our species is not a Swede. Ursula Address is Swiss.

How can any testosterone-laden male become excited with the notion of cuddling up to a Swiss maid? Picture this Swiss stereotype: Julie Andrews singing, "The Hills Are Alive with The Sound of Music."

Not convinced? Just compare Ursula to Julie, as seen in Figure 1. Unless you are into yodeling, who would you prefer for your sauna mate?



Figure 1. Swiss Misses.¹

Stereotypes

The aforementioned slurs are incorrect. If you watch the movie "10", Julie comes across as at least a 9. As for Ursula? She won awards for her acting ability, even a citation at the Cannes Film Festival. So, to my male readers: gentlemen, sheath your daggers.

Abba

In addition to the sexy Swedes...uh Swisses...who can ignore the music of the Swedish band Abba? As we toured this city, we learned an Abba museum was being constructed near the main ship harbor. During the 1970s Abba was one of the most successful pop music groups in the world and their influence still holds. The musical *Mama Mia* is based on Abba's songs.

Until lately, I had not been a fan of Abba. I did not know very much about their music or their origins. But on this day, for the first time I listened to their songs. I was impressed. They have

¹ Both photos courtesy of Microsoft Encarta.

created interesting melodies and intelligent lyrics. Granted, they suffer from being too upbeat about life. As a consequence of their outlook, they have received poor reviews from the press. The pundits are unimpressed with their lack of angst. No matter. They are talented, they produce pleasant music, and they contribute to the Sweden's GDP.

Coming into Stockholm from the Baltic Sea

When viewed from a large-scale map, Stockholm appears to be next to the Baltic Sea. It isn't. Our ship navigated about 40 miles of narrow channels, interspersed with hundreds of islands and peninsulas to reach the city. To capture the beauty of this part of the world, you have to make the trip. A picture or a video shot will not capture the charm of this part of Sweden's geography. It is not so much an individual scene as it is forty miles of scenic beauty. If you chose not to make a Baltic Sea trek, consider renting a boat in Stockholm and taking a day-trip through the channel. Figure 2 shows one scene we took-in as the ship made its way up the channel.



Figure 2. The channel approaching Stockholm.

Facts from the Tour Guide

I had forgotten how lovely Stockholm is. In addition, it is one of the most “walkable” cities I know. The downtown area can be toured by foot in a day. And what sights await the tourist!



Figure 3. Central Stockholm.

Take a look at Figure 3.² It shows only a small area of the central part of the city. Start your visit in Old Town (Gamla Stan), shown in the top left of Figure 3. It is located on an island and is the oldest part of Stockholm. It has many narrow cobblestone streets that are surrounded by hundreds of beautiful buildings dating as far back as the 14th century.

In spite of the Helsinki guide's claim, our tour guide for Stockholm was not named Helga. She called herself Anni. As we began our tour, Anni informed us:

- “Stockholm is 1/3 water, 1/3 parks, and 1/3 buildings and streets. The city is on 14 islands.”

² “Guide to Stockholm,” CINDOR, Box 1103, 18311 Taby, Sweden, pp 10-11.

- “Sweden has 95,000 navigable lakes...more lakes than Norway or Finland.” (Bragging rights!)
- “The city is built on pure granite bedrock.”
- “Abba is a treasure in our country. The museum will be our tribute to them...By the way, have you heard about the Norwegian who rented an Abba DVD video and was charged extra by the Norwegian video store because he forgot to rewind it?” The Scandinavians have the same jokes about each other. We heard them repeated in Norway, Finland, and Sweden. They simply substitute nationalities in the punch lines.
- “Do you know about our Swedish Herding Call? We use it to gather gazing cows or to send messages in the air...up to 5 kilometers! It sounds like this: ♪ ♪...*tones and pitches came forth from her falsetto voice that would have driven the cows to a local fiord to drown themselves. The Swedish Lemming Effect...*”Not exactly Abba! But I’m still learning to sing our herding melodies.”

Pen Pal. As I was making notes of the tour guide’s jokes, one of the men in our group asked me, “Is your pen writing German?” Clever dude. He was with me during the Berlin tour and, at that time, had commented on my taking a lot of notes about the Berlin Wall. Later, over a drink at the ship, I told him I wrote reports about my travels, all in English.

To his question about my pen, I replied, “Of course not. It’s writing in Swedish.” Later, after returning to the states, I gave my niece a present of a Russian pencil. I told her to start writing and the pen would jot down Russian words. She didn’t bite.

Swedish Moderateness

Kidding aside about Ursula, Julie, and cattle love songs, some think the Swedes to be glamorous. Perhaps this notion is because of certain peoples’ dispositions toward fair skinned races. Whatever one’s tastes in complexions may be, I discovered the Swedes to be a reserved, no nonsense people; an efficient culture that does not waste time on ostentatious amenities.

Their homes and furnishings are sparse; no unnecessary gargoyles sitting on roofs; no ornate St. Petersburg-like palaces. Their sofas and chairs are so bereft of stuffing, they are almost uncomfortable. The line from Ralph Waldo Emerson comes to mind when I think about Sweden, its citizens, and its society, “The line of beauty is the line of perfect economy.”³



A fitting example is the Royal Palace, the royal residence for the titular monarchy, and shown in Figure 4 (front and side view). The palace is similar to America’s White House in that it is used to host national occasions, state visits of foreign dignitaries, and official receptions. Parts of it are open to the public.

Figure 4. The Royal Palace.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Beauty,” *The Conduct of Life*, 1860. Secondary source: Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary*, Random House, New York, 2001, p. 179.



We toured the palace and were taken by its unadorned décor and furnishings. Granted, we were a bit jaded by the opulence of Peter the Great's palaces, and as seen in Figure 5, the place is not exactly neo-stark.⁴ But it is not all that fancy because the supposed elaborate collages of marble and granite are fake. The guide told us past kings had to keep the palace constructions "within budget," and they, "were not allowed to rob their people."

I thought about how many thousands of Russians died to give Peter the Great his fantasy in St. Petersburg. What a contrast to the Swedes.

Figure 5. What you see is not what you see.

We walked around the palace, admiring examples of crowns, uniforms, gowns, and medals. We stopped-off at a display booth showing King Gustov III's uniform. The left side of the jacket had several rows of medals pinned on it. Anni informed us, "Those medals were for doing nothing except being born. Kings were carried down an entitled birth canal."

We passed by a huge dining room. She informed us, "The king often had public meals in this room. The public was not invited eat with him. They were invited to watch him eat!"

Unlike the French royalty and Marie-Antoinette---who upon being told her people had no bread to eat, replied, "Let them eat cake."---the Swedish despots let their people *watch* them eat both bread and cake.

("How was the dinner at the palace dear?"... "OK, but I'm still hungry.")

Marie-Antionette was guillotined in Paris in 1793 and King Gustov III was murdered in Stockholm in 1792. After Europe's peasants began to compare their eating habits with those of their nobles, legend has it the old saying, "Please pass the bread." took on a new and more consequential meaning.

We concluded the visit to the Royal Palace by going outside to watch a parade of royal cavalry men and the changing of the royal guard, as seen in Figure 6.

As you may have noticed, I have little regard for Europe's kings and queens---both past and present. Anni put it well: They've no more merit to their wealth and influence than being fortunate enough to swim down that entitled birth canal she had mentioned Yet they are still venerated as if they actually gained entry to their position because of their worth and abilities.⁵

⁴ "The Royal Palace," Kungl. Husgeradskammaren, 1.

⁵ Recent observation: Ms. Obama was chastened for touching Queen Elizabeth during their meeting. But the queen, being a good sport, did not take offence.

Anyway, regardless of one's opinion of Europe's history of kings and queens, try to stay a while at the Royal Palace and see the cavalry parade. Unless you're a dyed-in-the-wool Bolshevik, you'll enjoy the experience.



Figure 6. Guarding royalty.

Laid-back Swedes?

For my tennis fan readers, you likely remember the Swedes Stephen Edberg, Mats Wilander, and Bjorn Borg. For a while, they were elite professional tennis players (in the late 70s through the early 90s). They were noted for their cool demeanors. I cannot recall ever seeing them smile or frown.

Nor did they sully their skills with boorish gestures on the court. In contrast, the trademark of John McEnroe was to routinely slander and bully voluntary linesmen. Presently, he makes money in TV advertisements by exploiting his chicken-shit tennis court persona. And his comrade in banality was Jimmy Connors (who erased his opponents' ball marks on clay courts). Edberg, Wilander, and Borg appeared uncompetitive yet they collectively won 24 grand slams---and did it with grace.

Same with the Swedes in general. We know of their ancient Viking ways. But their modern stereotypes of being beautiful and socialistic also include their being laid-back, often neutral in foreign affairs; even pacifist.

Once again, the stereotypes are just that: stereotypes. For a while, when Sweden had a big hammer, it hammered the countries around it. Swedish armies conquered Finland, much of Norway, even parts of Russia and Germany. They would have continued hammering but they ran into Peter the Great, who had a bigger hammer.

Sour Grapes and Poor Losers

Which leads to Anon's definition of poor losers: "Those who have the hammer, constantly do the hammering. Those who don't have the hammer, constantly complain about the hammering."

Freud called this malady, "Hammer Envy."

Examples are:

- Present day France, who squandered its hammer with its imperialistic overreach, resulting in the squandering of Louisiana.
- Present day England, who squandered its hammer with its imperialistic overreach, resulting in the squandering of most of North America, Africa, India, Pakistan, the Middle East, etc.
- Present day Russia, who squandered its hammer with its imperialistic overreach, resulting in the squandering of Alaska---and later Eastern Europe.
- Many present day citizens of the Muslim world, who squandered (and continue to squander) their hammer by sequestering half of their population in feudal segregation.

Send in your candidates for countries who have squandered their hammer, or are in the process of doing so. Winners will receive a ticket to listen to the Rush Limbaugh's next speech, a man who thinks America's squandering of its legacy started on January 20, 2009, the day Barak Obama became President of the United States.

Boating around Stockholm

Another idea for your visit is to take an evening water tour of Stockholm's shores. Try walking through the city in the day, and then boat around the city at night. We signed-on for an "Evening Cocktail Cruise", one advertising fancy drinks and hors d'oeuvres. The drinks were choices of red or white wine. The hors d'oeuvres were choices of potato chips or potato chips. No matter. We were satiated with two weeks of fine food from the cruise ship.

The guide talked about the sights, as well as Sweden's social nets. She said her taxes were 33% of her income and were about average. The highest tax rate was 50%. (I had heard higher.) She offered, "Is that high to you? It gives us free university...fantastic maternity leave, even for foreigners."

Yes, fifty percent seems high to me. But I come from a different culture. Still, during this trek around the Baltic's welfare states, I had to face the fact that all ratings I have read have the Nordic countries in the list of the top 15 nations in relation to GDP per person (the United States typically is positioned around the ninth to eleventh slot.) But the GDP does not reflect net income *after* taxes. It's called gross for a good reason.

Anyway, Anni showed us the Stockholm harbor sights. During the cruise, she told several jokes and mentioned that tinned fermented Herrings were a popular food in Sweden, "After my story, you'll be happy with your potato chips. I tried fermented Herrings twice and I don't understand why I did it a second time. They are rotten, and stink incredibly bad. If you eat them, open the tin can underwater. Put anything on the fish to hide the taste. Disgusting! Give them to your enemy."

I suspected Anni was familiar with George Orwell's suggestion that "tinned food" was a deadlier weapon than a machine gun.

Bartending and Friendtending

Let's wrap up this report with the story about the bartender I introduced earlier. After finishing the tour of the castle, we left our group and headed into a part of Stockholm where I had once stayed. Against all odds---my visits here were over 20 years ago---I wanted to visit with a bartender at the Grand Hotel. The chances of re-uniting with this man were remote. The bartending profession is not celebrated for its job longevity.

I offered to Holly, "Let's have lunch at the Grand. I'd like to check it out. Maybe my bartender friend is still working there."

Don't miss the luncheon smorgasbord at the Grand Hotel. Walk the city but make sure you are in the vicinity of the Grand for lunch. It is not cheap: \$70.00 US per person for its treats---not including drinks. But it is worth the experience to taste some fermented Herrings, as well as fresh sprat, cod, and whiting from the Baltic Sea.

Flashback. During my earlier tours in Europe, after seven hours of standup lectures about subjects subtitled, "Instant Sleeping Pills," I was usually ready for diversion. Upon ending the first day at the Stockholm gig, several of my clients and I headed for the hotel bar. We had a drink and they headed home. I stayed at the bar and asked for a menu. The bartender brought one over and we struck up a conversation. I paraphrase (and after twenty years, I paraphrase loosely):

- Future Reporter, "Are there any public tennis courts nearby? Or a club that allows visitors?"
- Bartender, "They're all over the city. Tennis is big here."
- "Yeah, I follow Borg."
- "Would you like to play where Borg used to play?"
- "Sure! But that's probably a private club."
- "I'm a member there. You could be my guest. If you wish, we can hit with each other."
- "I'm an average player."
- "Me too. You'd like the club. Or we can play at an old court where our kings and queens once played."

I was impressed. A stranger had invited me to play tennis with him. At historic sites no less. This man hosted me twice on his tennis courts. Once, we played inside an old building---something like a fancy barn. He told me royalty used to play there. We also played in a modern indoor facility, the place where Borg, Wilander, and Edberg honed their skills.

The More I Practice the Luckier I Get. I asked my friend if he had an opinion why the Swedes were so proficient at tennis. At that time, their ratio of world class tennis players to their population was the highest in the world. He told me the Swedes sponsored many programs that started tots learning the game almost as soon as they could walk. He said their tennis greats had an unwritten obligation to devote a lot of their time (unpaid) to actively participating in the youth programs.

I've thought about his comments while I was writing these reports. Time and again, we learn people who *actually work* tend to succeed. Imagine that!

Here are some interesting concepts:

- The ten year rule states it takes approximately a decade of heavy labor to master any field.⁶
- Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans are superior at math because they must laboriously study it for many hours when they are students. (American secondary school students in urban areas rank alongside third world countries in math proficiency. Why? Among other reasons, they do not study very much.)
- The ten thousand hour rule states it takes ten thousand hours of hard practice to master a field.⁷

Of course, executing these ideas will not guarantee success. Try as he did, Jack Lemmon never played golf well. But look at the regimen of Tiger Woods. He is a natural, gifted golfer. But he is as great as he is because he puts in the time.

On a much lesser plane, I did not end up lecturing to Swedes about computer networks because I had absorbed my skills by osmosis or because of my Internet DNA. During the previous two decades, I put in the time.

There's no short cut. I wish our culture could get this point across to our young people.

Fast Forward. OK, off the soap box. We move to the present. After our lunch at the Grand Hotel, I paid a call on the concierge. I left my recorder on:

- "The hotel lobby has changed a lot. Did you have a bar over there?" (As I pointed toward the other side of the lobby.)
- "Yes. We still do, it's just behind that door, but it was redone a few years ago. The old bar was too dark."
- "I was here a couple times in the 1980s. I stuck up a friendship with one of the bartenders. He was a tennis player, and he invited me to play at his clubs. I remember one club well. One of the tennis courts was indoors, but was situated inside an old building. He told me the building once belonged to some nobles who used it for their tennis."
- "Yes. It was used by the King in the old days. ... Would you happen to recall this bartender? Was he Greek or Italian?"
- "I have no idea."
- "Was he good player?"
- "He trounced me easily."
- "That would be Gippi, our Italian. Our Greek bartender also liked tennis, but he couldn't play at all. Gippi was here for a long time. Our guests loved him. So did I! He was like another concierge. That was his nature. He retired a couple years ago and moved to the country."
- "A gracious and kind man. Well, thanks for the memories."
- "And thank you. Come again."

⁶ Philip E. Ross, "The Expert Mind," *Scientific American*, August, 2006, 69.

⁷ Malcom Gladwell, *Outliers*, Little, Brown, and Company, New York, 2008, 41.

As I enter the latter stages of my life---the final sets of an inevitable losing tennis match with mortality---I think about notions I ignored in my youth. In those days, the old-age maladies of diminishing physical and mental prowess and of course death were far into the horizon. Now, they're a near-by prospect.

During my writing this part of the report, I thought about the old saying, "Kindness atones for a multitude of sins."

I've also thought more about Heaven than I did in my twenties. Each of us has our own view of what Heaven may or may not be. Among other things, I am sure one aspect of Heaven is what you leave behind when you depart this earth. If so, Gippi left a fine heavenly legacy.

That's it for our Baltic Sea reports. I'll file one more report shortly about some thoughts on the cruise, and reflections about a great man who died while I was on this trip: the Russian hero Alexandr Solzhenitsyn.