

# SWEDEN & SWEDES

A presentation of Sweden in 20 images

## Geography

Small nation, big country

With nine million inhabitants, Sweden is a small nation – smaller than Belgium and only half the size of the Netherlands. But in terms of surface area, Sweden is a big country – the third largest in Western Europe – almost the same size as Spain and France and bigger than California. If you could rotate Sweden like the hand of a clock 180 degrees, with the southern tip of the country at the base of the hand, then the northern tip would wind up on the same latitude as Naples in southern Italy.

Sweden's coastline is over 2,700 kilometers (or almost 1,700 miles) long – a distance equivalent to that between Montreal and Miami on the east coast of North America.

The large surface area and limited number of inhabitants make Sweden a sparsely populated country. Almost 90 percent of the population live in the southern half of the country.

## Nature

From bare mountains to lush groves

Because Sweden is a long country that stretches from north to south, the contrasts between the various parts of the country are dramatic. Far up north are the mighty Lapland fells, with their bald mountains, ice-blue glaciers and remote swamplands. The vast majority of land in northern and central Sweden is covered in dense coniferous forests, interspersed with thousands of lakes and rushing rivers that run from the mountains in the west toward the Baltic Sea in the east. Along the extensive coastline are a large number of unique archipelagos, made up of tens of thousands of islands and rocks of various sizes, most of them uninhabited. Farthest south lies the province of Skåne, with the most fertile farmland in Sweden, complete with undulating fields, lush deciduous forests and rolling hills.

## Climate

Midnight sun and northern lights

Sweden's northern location gives the country a cold climate which is tempered, however, by the warm Gulf Stream running through the northern Atlantic Ocean. It is the Gulf Stream that makes it possible for people to live in Sweden. Areas at similar latitudes, like Canada, Alaska and Siberia, consist largely of barren, uninhabited land.

The changes in the seasons are dramatic: a warm, light and pleasant summer, a colorful autumn and a long, dark winter followed by a bright, refreshing and vivid spring. It is these changes in light that are so characteristic of Sweden and also give rise to the phenomenon of the midnight sun, when the sun shines in the northern parts of the country around the clock during the summer. The counterpart to this is the intense darkness of winter, which is only broken by a few short hours of daylight, and by the famous northern lights, which dance across the arctic sky during the winter months.

## People

### A dramatic change

Over the last fifty years, the population of Sweden has experienced a dramatic transformation, as hundreds of thousands of people from different parts of the world have migrated to Sweden. A large percentage of the inhabitants in Sweden today have a foreign background. Almost one fifth of the nine million inhabitants in the country were born abroad or have two parents who were born abroad. The largest groups of immigrants come from the other Nordic countries, from the former Yugoslavia, from Iraq, Iran and Africa. Many of these immigrants came to Sweden as refugees in the past twenty years. Immigration has also meant a dramatic change over a short period of time and transformed Sweden into a multicultural, international country. Roughly one hundred years ago, when Sweden was still a country of poor peasants, the country was, in contrast, a nation of emigrants. From the end of the 19th century to 1930, no fewer than 1.5 million Swedes – a fourth of the population – emigrated, with most going to North America.

## History

### War and poverty, peace and welfare

Sweden's ancient history is violent and dramatic, filled with war and conquests. It began with the Viking plunderings in about the 11th century and continued as time went by with the endless military campaigns under warrior kings like Gustav II Adolf and Karl XII. In the 17th century, Sweden was a great power in Europe, its territories stretching over large parts of the Baltic Sea region. By the 18th century, Sweden had become so impoverished by all its fighting that peace had to be achieved if the country was to survive. Sweden has lived in peace since 1814, which has been one of the most important factors in the development and well-being of the country. Sweden was one of the few European countries not involved in the two world wars of the 20th century. In the post-war period, Sweden has been renowned for its role in working for international peace.

## Development

### An economic miracle

As late as the end of the 19th century, Sweden was one of the poorest countries in Europe. Record economic development began only when the railroads were built and allowed access to the enormous assets of forests, iron ore and hydropower in northern Sweden. In just fifty years, Sweden was transformed into one of the richest countries in the world. Most of the country's major international export companies were founded during this period, many of them on the basis of a large number of ingenious inventions – the ball bearing, the milk separator, the unmanned lighthouse, dynamite, the ship propeller, the steam turbine and the refrigerator, just to name a few. In more modern times, the Swedish tradition of inventions has continued with the development of such innovations as the pacemaker, the AXE telephone exchange, the computer mouse, GPS for navigation and Bluetooth for Internet mobility.

## Trade

### Traditional manufacturing and high tech

Even today, Swedish basic industry, steel and paper production, accounts for more than one fifth of the country's export income. But by far the largest share of exports, about 60 percent, consists of what falls under the broader category of mechanical engineering industries, which includes the automotive industry, electrical industry, chemical industry and telecom industry. Swedish industry is research-intensive and is characterized by a high level of technological development. IT, biotechnology and environmental technology are often mentioned as some of the most important Swedish future-oriented industries, but what have come to be called "creative industries," such as design, fashion and music, are also considered important for the future. Given the size of its population, Sweden has a surprisingly large number of multinational export companies and brands – Volvo, AstraZeneca, ABB, IKEA, Ericsson, Electrolux, H&M, Saab and Absolut, just to name a few.

## Nobel

The most noble prize

The Nobel Prize was established at the end of the 19th century under the will of Alfred Nobel, one of Sweden's many great inventors and industrialists of the era and, among other things, the inventor of dynamite. Early on, the prize acquired a status as the most prestigious in the world in any category. The Nobel Prize is awarded by the Swedish monarch in four categories – literature, medicine, physics and chemistry (and, since 1968, there is a Prize in economics as well, in memory of Nobel) – in an annual ceremony in Stockholm on Nobel Day, December 10. The fifth Nobel Prize, the Peace Prize, is awarded the same day in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, the location being explained by the fact that Norway and Sweden were politically unified when Nobel was alive.

## Society

Security and well-being for everyone

The prosperity that accumulated with Sweden's economic advancement in the 20th century was distributed among the population in a way that was unique in the Western world. High taxes paid for a large public sector and financed what are known as general welfare systems, including publicly financed healthcare, childcare, schools, senior care and many other systems to provide security. The principle was, and remains, that every citizen, regardless of background, income or other conditions, would be guaranteed basic security in every phase of life. This is "the Swedish welfare policy," based on a market economy with strong elements of redistributive policy, which came to be known internationally as "the third way," various aspects of which have served as an example in many other countries.

## Equality

A belief that everyone is of equal worth

Even though Sweden is far from being a society where everyone is equal, the belief that everyone is of equal worth and has the same rights has prevailed in the development of the modern Swedish welfare state. Compared internationally, Sweden has come a long way in its efforts to guarantee the rights of once vulnerable groups, like women, children, people with functional disabilities, sexual and religious minorities, and others. Swedish laws and customs include a system of rules and regulations that prohibit discrimination against people on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, physical, mental or intellectual disabilities, sexual orientation and political and religious conviction.

## Form of government

A representative democracy

Universal suffrage for men and women was introduced in Sweden in 1921. Sweden has a one-chamber parliament, the *Riksdag*, with 349 members elected from all parts of the country. The Swedish parliament is one of the world's most gender-equitable. Almost 50 percent of its members have been women during the past three four-year terms. There are currently seven parties represented in the Riksdag, divided into two blocs – the Alliance (the Moderate Party, Liberal Party, Center Party and Christian Democrats) on one side and the Social Democrats, Left Party and Green Party on the other. In the latest election in September 2006, with a voter turnout of 82 percent, the Alliance of four non-socialist parties received a majority. The country's current prime minister is the Moderate Party leader, Fredrik Reinfeldt, who leads a four-party government. The dominant party since the early 20th century has been the Social Democrats, who have governed the country most of the time since the 1920s with a few brief periods out of office. There was a major change in the country's domestic and foreign policy in 1995 when Sweden became a member of the European Union (EU). In 2003, however, the Swedish people voted against giving up the Swedish krona and joining the EU's euro zone.

## Education

### Free education for everyone

Sweden has nine years of compulsory schooling, which begins at the age of six or seven. Almost every student then continues on to upper secondary education for three years, in some 20 different programs. Roughly a quarter of students then go on to study at a university or college. Higher education is also government-funded to a large extent and also features a system of student loans financed by the government.

Sweden is one of the countries that invests the largest percentage of GDP in education – an important policy priority given that education is considered the most important investment in the future in a knowledge-intensive society like Sweden's. The Swedish education system has also become more international now that the European Union is making it easier to study abroad and Swedish educational institutions have become increasingly attractive to students and teachers from around the world.

## Monarchy

### A ceremonial head of state

Sweden is a constitutional monarchy in which the king is head of state, without political power, and with only representative and ceremonial functions. The current king of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf, has been on the throne since 1973. His wife, Queen Silvia, grew up in Brazil and has a German father and a Brazilian mother. The successor to the throne is Crown Princess Victoria (born in 1977), the oldest of three children in the royal family and big sister of Prince Carl Philip and Princess Madeleine.

## Religion

The role of the church has declined

Sweden broke with the Catholic Church in the 16th century and has been a decidedly Lutheran country since then. In modern times, the importance of religion has declined and Sweden has become one of the most secular countries in the world, even though roughly 80 percent of its inhabitants formally belong to the Church of Sweden. For most Swedes, the church today provides largely ceremonial functions, such as baptisms, confirmations, graduation ceremonies, weddings and funerals. With the considerable migration to Sweden of recent decades, the country has become multicultural in a religious sense as well. After Christianity, Islam is now the second largest religion in Sweden.

## Culture

Small nation, large cultural country

Sweden has a rich selection to offer people interested in culture, no matter whether their interest is literature, architecture, dance, contemporary fashion and design or whatever it might be. Swedish cultural policy has been successful in spreading cultural amenities to a broad population, with a well-developed infrastructure of museums, libraries, theaters, cinemas and other cultural institutions across the country. Most of Sweden's national institutions, many of them of world renown, are in Stockholm, like the Royal Opera, the Royal Dramatic Theater, Nationalmuseum, Moderna Museet and others. The last decade in particular has also seen an extensive internationalization of Swedish cultural life, especially in popular culture, with Swedish artists, actors and fashion designers attracting worldwide attention in fields such as music, literature, art, design, fashion and media.

## Music, design, fashion and “lifestyle”

### A creative revolution

Especially over the past decade, Sweden has experienced strong growth and attracted international attention in the field known as “commercial culture” or “popular culture” – pop music, design, fashion, architecture, gastronomy, media and advertising, etc. These industries, now known under the collective term “creative industries,” are among Sweden’s most important future-oriented industries.

The Swedish capital, Stockholm, in particular has received a great deal of international coverage in the world press over the past few years as one of the top scenes for an urban lifestyle, fashion and trends, alongside world cities like London, Paris, Milan and New York.

## Food & drink

### World-class gastronomy

Many of the classic Swedish specialties, like gravlax (marinated salmon) and pickled herring, are distinguished by the traditional contrast in flavors of sweet, sour and salty. These typical flavors are also found in traditional Swedish methods of preparing the delicacies that the country’s forests, lakes, rivers and seas provide – game, berries, mushrooms and seafood. Over the past few decades, Swedish food traditions have embraced influences from every corner of the gastronomic world. Swedish chefs have become internationally renowned for their creativity and have triumphed in a great number of prestigious international cooking competitions. There is a large and varied selection of interesting restaurants, not just in the major cities but throughout the country, where people interested in gastronomy can enjoy quality Swedish ingredients prepared and served in the most modern and innovative of ways.

## Sports

### Breadth gives expertise

The Swedish “sports movement” has very broad coverage. Nearly every second Swede between the ages of 7 and 70 belongs to an athletic association of some type, and there is a broad range of sports and activities throughout the country available to people of every age. The biggest sports are soccer and hockey. For girls in particular, horseback riding and gymnastics are also sports with large, broad appeal.

It is indeed this breadth of appeal that explains Sweden’s remarkable success in many fields of athletics given the size of its population. The two greatest modern-day athletes in Sweden have been tennis player Björn Borg and the downhill skier Ingemar Stenmark. Some of today’s stars are hockey player Peter Forsberg, downhill skier Anja Pärson, soccer players Fredrik Ljungberg and Zlatan Ibrahimovic, golfer Annika Sörenstam and the track-and-field athletes Kajsa Bergqvist, Stefan Holm, Carolina Klüft and Christian Olsson.

## Public holidays and traditions

### We celebrate seasonal changes

Many Swedish holidays are characterized by their celebration of nature and seasonal changes. This is true of St. Lucia Day on December 13, when processions of children dressed in white and holding candles light up the intense darkness of winter, led by Lucia herself, a girl chosen to bear the stunning crown of candles on her head. This is also true of Walpurgis Night on April 30, when large bonfires are lit across the country as symbols of the passing of winter and the approach of spring. And it is especially true of Midsummer in late June, when the longest day of the year is celebrated with exuberant parties and dancing around the traditional maypole, festooned in birch leaves and wildflowers.

## Cities

Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö

The three largest cities in Sweden are Stockholm, Göteborg (Gothenburg) and Malmö. Stockholm, the capital, is the largest, with roughly 1.8 million inhabitants in the city and its suburbs, and is generally recognized as one of the most beautiful capital cities in the world, built on thirteen islands where Lake Mälaren flows into the Baltic Sea. Göteborg, on the west coast, is a major center of shipping, industry and a variety of events, with some of Sweden's largest companies, including Volvo and SKF, headquartered there. Malmö, in the southernmost province of Sweden, is part of what may be northern Europe's most dynamic growth region since the city was linked to the nearby Danish capital of Copenhagen in 2000 by the impressive Öresund Link.

## Design

Minimalist extravagance

Purity, simplicity and proximity to nature are a few of the traits that characterize what the world has come to know as Swedish design. These qualities are to be found, albeit in different forms, in historical Swedish designers and architects like Bruno Mathsson and Gunnar Asplund, as well as in many of the big names of today like Thomas Sandell, Björn Dahlström, Pia Wallén and the trio of Claesson Koivisto Rune.