

The good life:
Locals partaking
in *fika* and catching
up over coffee in
Stockholm, Sweden



BETTER TOGETHER

COMMUNITY *spirit*

Home to some of the world's
happiest populations, what's the
secret behind Scandinavia's
eternal contentment?
Malmö-based journalist
Derek Robertson
explains...



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ask someone what they most associate with Scandinavia, and the chances are they'll say 'happiness'. Sure, there's breathtaking natural beauty, a generous welfare system, acclaimed education initiatives and a world-class food scene, but the fact that countries such as Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland regularly top polls and surveys measuring life quality has really gathered worldwide attention.

Case in point, according to the UN's 2019 World Happiness Report, six of the 10 happiest cities are found here; Helsinki in Finland has come top, with Aarhus in Denmark second, for the last three years in a row. And while there are many reasons behind Scandinavians' apparent contentment, one plays a bigger role than most: community.

From a local, neighbourhood level all the way up to national policy, fostering a close-knit sense of community and togetherness is key to Scandinavians' deep-felt contentment. Shared responsibility, and the concept of 'all for one, one for all' gives people a sense of safety and belonging and leads to greater emotional investment in their communities and neighbourhoods. Even today, in some parts of major Scandinavian cities, you can still leave your car or house unlocked, or a bike sitting outside a shop, without fear of theft or trespassing.

Spend any amount of time here and you'll notice that such trust plays a vital role in community bonds. So too do various, country-specific concepts and rituals, each designed to spread contentment and bring people together. The Danes famously have *hygge*, which loosely translates as a feeling of cosiness and warmth inside, while the Finns have their saunas, a sacred bonding tradition that dates back thousands of years. Icelanders are also big on bathing together, gathering daily to soak in outdoor, geothermal pools.

The Swedes, meanwhile, have *fika*. Seemingly just a coffee break, in reality it's more a culturally mandated social hour for meaningful interactions. In other words, it's quality time and is something that is often indulged in several times a day. It's such an important part of Swedish culture that entire companies pause for it. Head to one of the country's many parks or beaches during a sunny weekend and you'll see whole families

and neighbourhood groups indulging in *fika*, usually with homemade cakes and buns.

At a national level, respect for public administration is high – people genuinely believe that those who exercise power do so fairly and with society's best interests at heart – and this is repaid with trust, good faith, and a certain level of autonomy. As a result, Scandinavia's great outdoors is open and accessible to all; a legal 'Right to Roam' has been enshrined in law across the Nordics, giving people the right to hike, bike, sleep, and swim in the many fields, forests, parks, mountains and lakes. Even fishing – if done with a single rod – is allowed without a permit.

The Scandinavians love being out in nature, despite the climate – 'There's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing' goes a popular saying here. They revere nature, which is why significant government resources are devoted to keeping it pristine; Scandinavia is one of the most environmentally conscientious regions in the world. Such care extends to a local level as well, with gardens, allotments and local parks a source of pride.

Lagom, the concept of everything in moderation, as well as consensus and equality, might belong to Sweden, but the idea is common across all of Scandinavia – anything detrimental to society is detrimental to every individual. In other words, community comes first, and what a good place to start.

SIX OF THE 10 HAPPIEST CITIES ARE FOUND HERE; HELSINKI HAS BEEN TOP FOR THE LAST THREE YEARS

What community means to me

JOHANNA SEPPÄLÄ,
HEAD OF PARTICIPATION
AND CITIZEN INFORMATION
DEPARTMENT,
HELSINKI, FINLAND



Participatory budgeting – where residents get to suggest and then vote on local initiatives and developments – is not a new idea, but Helsinki has wholeheartedly embraced it. Every year, €4.4 million is set aside for citizen proposals, which, this year, include urban campfires, exercise facilities and swimming piers. 'The scheme has increased residents' interest in developing their own neighbourhoods,' says Johanna Seppälä. 'And it has greatly increased inclusion.' So successful has it been that it's being gradually rolled out across the whole of Finland, ➤



Swedish fika



Serene streets in Helsinki



In some Scandi cities, people leave their bikes outside without fear of theft

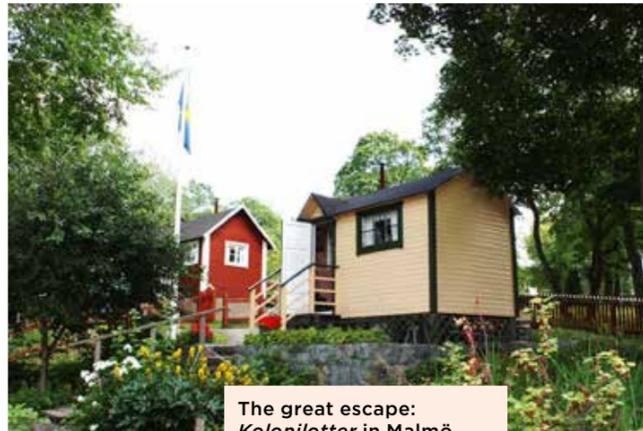


Right to Roam

giving people a degree of autonomy over their own communities, and what's needed to improve them.

ELIN RAPP,
RESIDENT OF
MALMÖ, SWEDEN

Wander through any Swedish suburb and it's very likely you'll spot large areas of allotments, or *kolonilotter*. And one reason they're so popular is the close-knit community bonds they foster. 'It's like a quaint little village in the middle of a city,' says Malmö resident Elin Rapp. 'Everyone says hello and is happy to stop for a chat or help with the gardening.' Most people use their *kolonilotter* for growing fruit and vegetables, but some simply see them as an escape, a green oasis of calm away from normal life. 'There's a different pace here, people become more open and friendly,' adds Rapp. 'Being part of that gives a huge sense of belonging.'



The great escape: *Kolonilotter* in Malmö (above); coming together at Oslo Hygge (left)



EINAR TØNNESEN,
FOUNDER OF OSLO
HYGGE, NORWAY

'Being in nature is good for body, soul and mind in every way,' says Einar Tønnessen. 'The goal [at Oslo Hygge] is to help people establish themselves in their community and become useful citizens.' Tønnessen's organisation runs various walks, hikes and trips in Norway's pristine nature, as well as courses in subjects like job interviews and CV writing. Everything is completely free and open to all, from struggling teenagers and the unemployed, to asylum seekers and retired OAPs. 'Dealing with life can be difficult,' says Tønnessen, 'but everything is easier in nature. It helps people find balance.'



ROBERT JOHANSEN,
FOUNDER OF
SVALBARD BREWERY,
SVALBARD, NORWAY

It took nearly six years for Robert Johansen and his wife to change the law in Svalbard, which had deemed the production of alcohol on the Norwegian archipelago illegal since 1928. But after an enduring, successful campaign, Johansen established Svalbard Brewery in 2011, which sold its first beer in 2015. 'The strong community here helped me to build my brewery,' says Johansen. 'There are only around 2,000 people living here, so they become your second family. When you're in the bar, if you're sat alone, someone will come and approach you.' The world's most northern craft beer brewery, Johansen's beer is made with 2,000-year-old glacial water from Bogerbreen, which visitors can sample at the brewery tasting sessions. 'Without the community we wouldn't be as successful as we are – around 60% of the beer we sell is bought here in Svalbard.'



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Join the locals

As you explore Scandinavia's capital cities, visit one of these community-boosting venues for fun, food and a big dose of the feel-good factor



ARK BOOKS
Copenhagen, Denmark

This dainty bookshop, run by literature-loving volunteers, sells works from all around the globe. Profits from the shop go towards hosting events, which bring the city together over classic books. Most copies stocked here are in English, so if you finish your holiday reading early, this is the place to come.



GRILLSKA HUSET
Stockholm, Sweden

Run by the charity Stockholms Stadsmission, this chic café in the Old Town is the spot for a morning latté or some fresh pastries at lunch. Behind the counter, the venue offers residents work experience, training them from scratch or helping them return to work. A coffee here goes to a good cause.



VINTERVIKENS TRÄDGÅRD
Stockholm, Sweden

This beautiful garden is run by a not-for-profit organisation. For locals, it hosts day centres for the elderly and those with disabilities, while visitors can fuel up in the garden café, browse the regular food market and see live music on one of its two outdoor stages.



SOMPASAUNA
Helsinki, Finland

In Finland, visiting the sauna is basically religion. Fitting then that Helsinki is home to Sompasauuna, touted as 'The World's Most Public Sauna'. Built by volunteers from scrap material and donations, Sompasauuna is a unique place for everyone to experience this most Nordic of traditions.



LOSÆTER URBAN FARM
Oslo, Norway

Run by a dedicated community of volunteers, this garden in the heart of Oslo is home to a colony of bees, a public baking house as well as fields of vegetables and flowers. Events take place here all year round, which include food festivals, art exhibitions and weekly donation-based dinners, which anyone is welcome to join.



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Almost 57% of Oslo is forest, public parks, nature reserves and agricultural areas.



SCANDINAVIA & RUSSIA

Featured ports: Oslo, Helsinki, Stockholm, Copenhagen

Departures in 2021

What we call Danish pastries are actually known as Viennese bread (*wienerbrød*) in Denmark.

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Interviews by Derek Robertson. Join the locals by Erik Robertson and Liz Darke. Photographs: XXXXXXXXXXXX Adias abo. Re. Coracioplet voliens