

Gothenburg (Goteborg), Sweden, Travel Story, July 10-17, 2010

Gothenburg (the English spelling of Goteborg, which the Swedish pronounce as "yortebor") is the 2nd largest city of Sweden and a beautiful



seaport. We traveled to this city of almost 2 million people, not so much for seeing sights as because it hosted the International Sociological Association (ISA) meetings this year. About 5,000 from all over the world attended 6 days of meetings and they meet every four years.

We arrived in Goteborg from Budapest, but are flying directly home with a plane change in Amsterdam. Nancy returned home to work after two days and I stayed for 6 more days to attend sessions and keep on learning, especially on things related to my website.

Founded in the early 1700s by the King of Sweden, Goteborg is a young city for Europe. Its buildings are a mixture of 200-year old neo-classical, made of stone, and 100-year old brick structures. Goteborg compensates for its youth by building the largest edifices in the "Nordic countries," a term that has come to replace Scandinavia. Goteborg boasts about having the first and largest Volvo plant, the largest hotel, the largest amusement park, the largest outdoor sports stadium, the largest shopping center, the largest film festival, the largest maritime museum, the largest tram network, and the busiest port in the entire Nordic region. And they have Sweden's largest university. They must want to prove that the second born can outperform the first born (Stockholm).



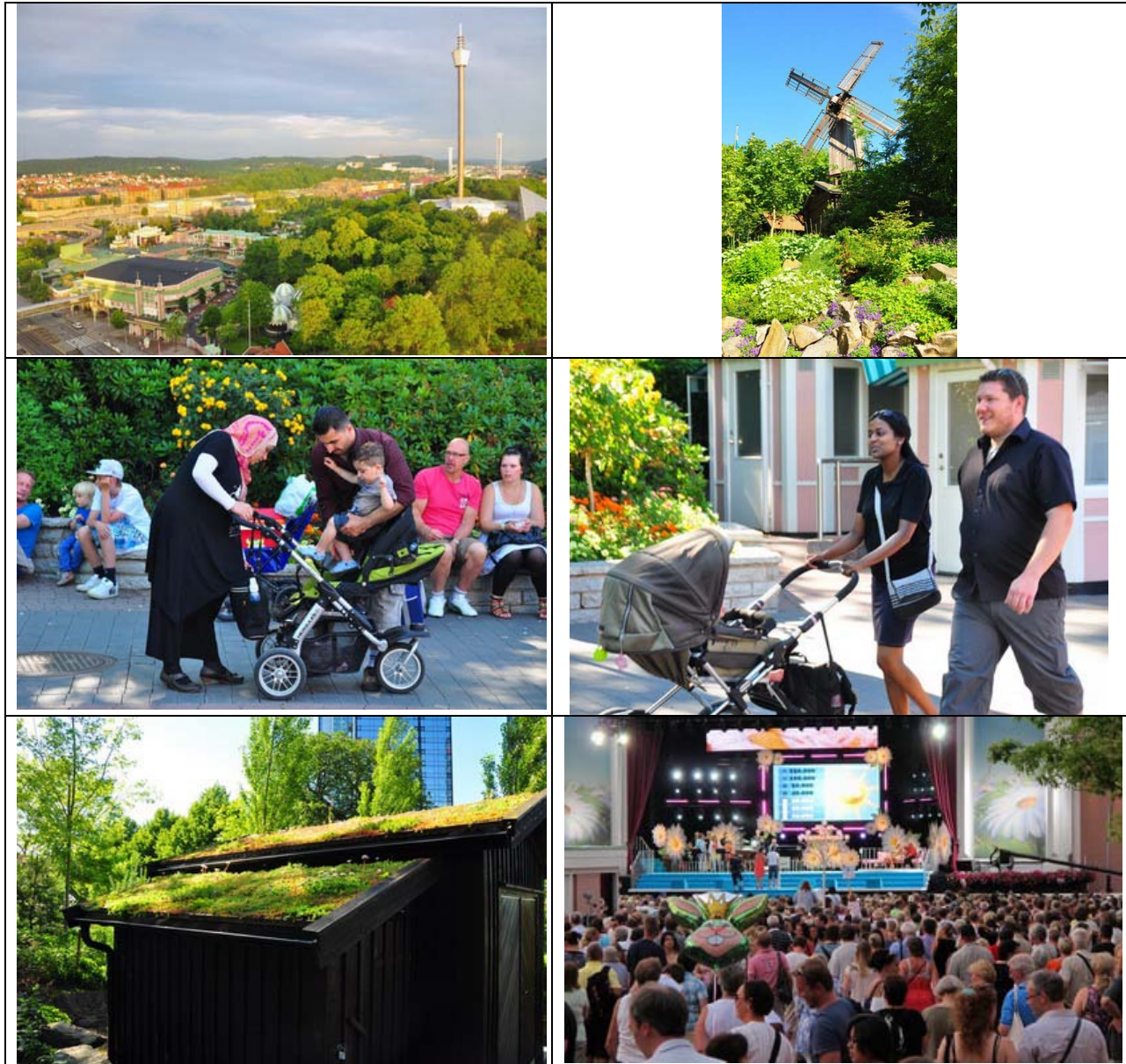
I forgot to mention that Goteborg claims to have the best transport system in all of Europe. Anywhere in the downtown area, you can always see one to five trams and several buses. I used the tram to get around to different locations for meetings and to go to the harbor a mile or so from the hotel. I especially like the fact that each tram stop had a waiting shelter within which was a monitor giving the route number of each tram and bus soon to come by, with an estimated number of minutes until it would arrive. On the left is a typical intersection.

So many people use public transportation that one sees very few cars on the roads in the central section of the city, even during rush hours. Walking is popular too. The sidewalks on the main boulevard are the width of a two-lane road on both sides of the street. Goteborg probably has more green space in the city center than any city I've seen. Except when it rained, hundreds of people sat on the grass enjoying the canal boats and manicured trees.

Sweden is very family and group oriented. It was rare to see anyone walking or sitting alone. The groups were usually made up of people about the same age, but sometimes children were included and occasionally, a dog. It is hard to imagine a cleaner, nicer city.

During the first two days, here in Goteborg, thousands of teenagers completing in sports like hand ball and soccer filled the streets. Late this month, the City will host the 2010 FINA world competition, which is the 200-county event for swimming, diving, and related water sports.

The Liseberg is Gothenburg's amusement park. Unlike such parks in the States, this park has activities for all ages. In addition to carousels, fast roller-coasters, and there are about 25 other rides for people of all ages. Most impressive are walking trails through gardens, about 10 restaurants, an ice bar, and concerts arenas. Here are some photos of these amenities. The windmill is part of the forest area, which replicates the forests in the area surrounding the City. I took a picture of the shed because it has a dirt and plant roof. Behind it, you can see our hotel.



Nearby were several waterfalls that looked like they belonged right in the middle of the City. Except for the groups of punkers, most people were strolling the Liseberg Park as families. The park was a good way to see the ethnic diversity. Above is a sample: a middle-eastern family and a mixed race couple. Sweden's population is now 25% foreign born with about 10% from Iraq and Iran and 5% from Somalia. They did not seem that noticeable, which is probably a result of Sweden's immigration policy that geographically distributes all refugees and other immigrants.

Many get placed in towns and small cities. It seems like a great way to assimilate races and discourage ghettos of discontent.

About once a week, Liseberg has a Sing a Long. I heard the noise from the hotel and walked over and took the last picture in the block on the preceding page. What it doesn't show is that about 2,000 people of all ages were sitting, watching the show, and singing songs. It was an amazing event. It is hard to imagine such community in the United States.

Near the harbor is a network of canals, in the spirit of Amsterdam. A barge tour boat takes passengers around the canals all day long. We took the tour and first we passed one of the City parks. The first photo below shows 2 of the dozens of groups enjoying the park even in the light rain. Then we passed the "Fish Church" (2nd photo), which has been a fish market for well over a hundred years, despite the fact that it looks much more like a church than a market. Next on the list of sights was the Goteborg Museum (see 3rd photo). The last leg of the tour took us through the harbor with the Lipstick office building. (See 4th picture.) With a bright red color and a peaked roof, it deserves to be called Lipstick.



Finally, we cruised by the old sailing ship named the Gothenburg, which you can see on the right, which is a replica of one of the ships of the 1700s when Swedish trade with the Far East was really big. Recently, a crew, complete with sheep, chickens, and cows aboard for food sailed the vessel across the oceans just as people did 250 years ago.



Here is a picture of the Masthugget Church built in 1914. It represents the newer, national romantic style in Nordic architecture. The Church sits near the water right behind a huge ferry terminal.



The highlight of our Gothenburg experience was a dinner cruise through the Southern Gothenburg Archipelago, which is a cluster of several dozen islands of various sizes. The group of islands lies to the south of Gothenburg about 15 to 25 miles. The next two pages show pictures taken of the islands. The islands have about 5,000 year-around residents and over twice that number during the summer. Some of the ferry boats can break up the ice and get to the islands, but the winters are not kind.

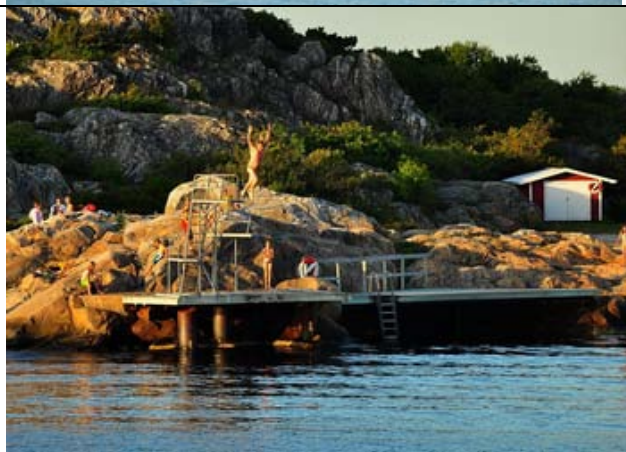
The first picture below is the boat we took to the islands. The round building behind it across the harbor is the new, modern opera house. The next photo shows a large hotel on the water just south of the harbor. One of the larger villages in the islands is shown in the 3rd picture, followed by one of the high-speed ferry boats about to dock there.



A unique policy of the islands is to prohibit fuel powered vehicles. A few have electric cars, but most make do with bicycles and carts. Some of the islands are big enough for a school, cafes, and shops. The islands are too rocky for much farming. The residents live off of the fish they catch, and many come out during the summer for recreational fishing. There are bird sanctuaries and walking trails.



In addition to photos of typical houses and villages, note the kids on the right enjoying water sports in 60 degree weather and the island wind-blown trees below. The picture below at the bottom confirms that Swedes are relatively uninhibited. The last picture is representative of how energy conscious they are as well.



Besides sea gulls, we saw a lot of cormorants and large, wild white swans. I think it would be fun to spend a few weeks on the islands.

Note in the picture on the right how people flock to the rocky beaches in groups to enjoy nature while the sun does not set until 10 at night.

Perhaps you wondered what I learned about the culture of the Nordic States during the visit: here is a summary. First, while from a broad outsiders' view the Nordic countries are similar and often idealized, the countries are in some ways quite unique. While most of the Nordic countries have accepted and integrated quite a few refugees and other immigrants, Finland has not. Denmark youth consume a huge amount of alcohol. Norway did not join the EU, but all the others did. (Iceland is still just a candidate.) All have some version of the welfare state, but Sweden is the leading example. Iceland, because of its financial problems has had to cut back most on expenditures. There is a lot of pressure, both inside and outside of the countries to reduce taxes and reduce welfare payments, but still the majorities of the people are happy with it and want to keep the system. What was so amazing to me, after observing a little of the culture and listening to 15 or 20 lectures on the Nordic system, is that the majority of the Nordic people put up with the sacrifice of enormous taxes and big government, not because they feel trapped, but because they believe that the people in their society should help each other. In many societies, family members feel an obligation to help each other. The Nordic people extend this practice to their community and society, even though their society is filled with non-Nordic immigrants. Ironically, some of the most secular societies in the world are the most Christian in that they truly play the role of the "Good Samaritan."



Here is a picture of Nancy on the boat cruise through the islands. She looks like one of the nice Nordic folk even though she is German. We found that not all Swedish are super-tall and blonde, so we fit right in.