

In person: Stockholm

Gimme, gimme, gimme!

Sweden's capital takes enormous pride in being one of the world's most open cities, fully welcoming LGBT+ visitors. Here's how luxury agents can position the destination as a fantastic, fun city break for their clients

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My, my! It's eight o'clock on a Friday evening, and I'm "performing" on stage alongside one of the biggest bands in the world, who are also one of Sweden's most famous exports: ABBA. I have a glass of champagne in one hand, and a microphone in the other, attempting (badly, but enthusiastically) to sing along to *Waterloo*, while flanked by Benny, Bjorn, Agnetha and Anni-Frid – or, at least, their avatars.

My only audience is the small group of luxury travel agents who are here with me on a very special fam trip to Stockholm arranged by Stockholm LGBT, a membership-based, exclusive network of hotels, restaurants, attractions and other partners who are committed to upholding its reputation as one of the most diverse and inclusive cities in the world. Instead of having to rub shoulder-pads with the thousands of visitors who flock here every day, we have the whole place to ourselves, the result of a private, after-hours tour at ABBA: The Museum (abbathemuseum.com/en).

It's just one of many incredible experiences that can be arranged for clients who may not have visited the city before, or who are keen to up the VIP factor during their trip. We are all dressed to impress. I'm channelling the spirit of *Mamma Mia!*, the movie, in a Greek-style blue-and-white cheesecloth dress paired with Birkenstock sandals and retro bunches, while Jimmy Sorensen, an account director at the Signature Travel Network in the US, dazzles in a silky black shirt patterned with silver threads. Bobby Huebner, director of operations at Skylark, a high-tech travel platform, is resplendent in a black leather jacket and smart dress trousers, while Robby Altheim, owner of 1 Power Travel, works slimline jeans and designer trainers.

All about ABBA

None of us have been to the museum before, and we're as giddy as kids in a sweet shop, marvelling at the flamboyant seventies costumes, the displays of gold discs and the fascinating exhibits which detail how the four first met and went on to become one of the biggest selling musical acts of all time. The interactive activities are great fun, too, such as taking part in the aforementioned on-stage performance, testing your ABBA knowledge in a quiz or even the chance to record your own audition.



Photography: Jenny Feijing





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Eventually, and reluctantly, we have to tear ourselves away, as we're being whisked off to another exciting location: the Vasa Museum (vasamuseet.se/en). Last time I was in Stockholm the building was closed for renovations, so I've always been keen to return.

Contained inside a modernist structure, complete with masts and angled roofs, is one of Sweden's most phenomenal pieces of history: the remains of Vasa, a 17th-century warship, which sank on its maiden voyage in Stockholm's harbour in 1628, and was salvaged over three centuries later in 1961.

It's one of the best-preserved ships of its era ever recovered, with over 98% of its original structure intact, and its scale and beauty – as we enter the museum for another private, after-hours tour – are staggering. Decorated with hundreds of elaborate carvings and dozens of iron cannon (the latter being the reason the ship's top-heavy weight caused it to capsize), it's magnificent to observe up close. As we sip yet more champagne, our guide, Catrin, showers us with fascinating facts, such as that only the king of Sweden and Nobel Prize winners have permission to set foot onboard and – more spookily – that at least 17 skeletons were found

during the salvage operation.

But the icing on this nautical cake is that after our tour, we're treated to a sumptuous, three-course dinner at a long, tastefully-decorated table situated, jaw-droppingly, right under the ship's bow. This may sound like a "money-can't-buy" experience, but it's also something that can be booked for luxury clients.

The pride of Sweden

So why here, and why now? Last year (2024) marked an impressive 80 years since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Sweden (as Christina Guggenberger, co-founder of Stockholm LGBT puts it, "we've been queer since 1944"), and 15 years since the legalisation of same-sex marriage.

And in summer 2025, the city celebrated the 27th annual Stockholm Pride, the biggest Pride celebration in Scandinavia. "Our core mission," emphasises Christina, "is to showcase the city as a truly open and inclusive holiday destination for the LGBTQ+ community, and for friends and family who may not be part of the community themselves."

We find out more about Sweden's LGBT+ history during a queer-themed tour of the King's official residence, Stockholm's magnificent Royal Palace (a 45-minute guided tour is subject to a fixed fee of around £95, plus an entrance fee of

around £12.70 per person, kungligaslotten.se).

As our well-informed guide shows us around the opulent public spaces, she tells us about various royal figures who can be viewed through a queer lens, such as Queen Kristina of Sweden. Taking to the throne in 1632 at the tender age of six after her father, King Gustavus II Adolphus, died, Kristina was raised and educated like a prince, and even officially crowned "King" as the official title at her coronation.

Often considered a queer icon due to her rejection of traditional gender roles, including refusing to marry, having close relationships with women, and her interests in hunting and fencing, Kristina's sexual identity has long been speculated upon. We also see the room where the important legislation which decriminalised homosexuality was signed in 1944; although it was subsequently classified as a "disease", instead. This finally changed in 1979 after people started calling into work "gay" (rather than calling in sick), which had quite a negative effect on the country's productivity.

Rainbow welcome

Afterwards, we head to Chokladkoppen (chokladkoppen.se), a cafe in Gamla Stan, Stockholm's elegant Old Town, which was the first business in the city to proudly fly the rainbow flag publicly back in 1997. We're here for "fika", the Swedish tradition of a coffee break with a cinnamon bun, though as it's Jimmy's



■ birthday today, slices of lurid green iced Princess cake are also on the menu.

As with everywhere we visit, we're made to feel incredibly welcome. And during the trip we stay at two different LGBT+ friendly luxury hotels; the first, Ett Hemm (which literally means "at home"), a fashionable boutique property with only 25 rooms. Composed of two elegant former family homes, both are impeccably designed – think jewel-coloured velvet sofas and tub chairs, richly-striped carpets, crystal chandeliers and shelves full of artistic objects (rooms from £572 per night including breakfast, etthem.se).

There are a number of comfortable public spaces for lounging, several with honesty bars, and the staff couldn't be kinder, packaging up takeaway coffees and sandwiches when a bleary-eyed morning meant we didn't have time to linger over breakfast. Located in the quieter, more residential and upscale Ostermalm district, it's a little haven from the buzz of the city centre.

We experience a contrast, however, at stylish Villa Dagmar, situated on bustling Nybrogatan, not far from Gamla Stan. All its employees are given diversity training, and are friendly and efficient. The hotel's 70 rooms are housed in a mix of buildings, including a former sweet factory, connected by an airy, glass-covered courtyard. Interiors are slick and contemporary, featuring glossy black headboards, marble bathrooms and pearl grey walls (rooms from £220 per night, hotelvilladagmar.com).

In terms of nightlife, Stockholm has a plethora of see-and-be-seen bars, restaurants and clubs for those who like to make a sartorial effort (I refer you back to Jimmy, Bobby and Robby...). We absolutely loved dinner at Teatergrillen (teatergrillen.se), one of the city's oldest and most renowned restaurants. We scoff skagen, a traditional dish of fresh prawns mixed with mayo and dill and piled high onto hot buttered

toast, and tuck into other delicious dishes such as arctic char and flambeed beef, followed by several martinis at Gondolen (gondolen.se), a fabulous bar and restaurant suspended over the city. Another evening sees us sip cocktails at Watson's Bar in the ridiculously stylish Hotel Rival (rival.se) in Södermalm, which just happens to be owned by a certain Benny Andersson.

After glow

Another thing Stockholm is very good at is helping (hungover) people blow the cobwebs away. A lot of what enjoying the city is about is spending time amid nature, ideally on one of the 30,000 islands that make up its archipelago.

One afternoon, we head by private boat to

Vaxholm, a picture-perfect islet an hour from the mainland, peppered with charming, clapboard houses. One of these is Vaxholms Bed and Breakfast (vaxholmsbedandbreakfast.se), who offer a cinnamon bun making workshop, which we throw ourselves into with gusto. The guesthouse is decorated in that effortlessly tasteful Swedish way (head to Svensk Tenn homeware store on Strandvagen for this kind of inspiration), and after our labours, we're served a freshly prepared lunch in a chic glasshouse outside while we wait for our buns to bake.

Another morning we go to Hotel J (hotelj.com), a historic property dating from 1899 with





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recently renovated rooms which sits by the Baltic Sea in Nacka Strand, to the east of the city centre. We enjoy a private sauna ritual in the slick new Panorama sauna, which has floor-to-ceiling views over the water. Our sauna master, Martina, soon clears our foggy heads with the help of essential oils fanned into the atmosphere and soft, rhythmic music before we all either jump into the sea or the cold plunge tub to further wake ourselves up. It's another example of – whether part of the LGBT+ community or not – we've all been made to feel so accepted.

It has certainly also left an impression on my fellow travellers – so, would they now choose Stockholm for their LGBT+ clients? "Absolutely," says Bobby Huebner. "The city impressed me with the genuine warmth of its people; it's

somewhere LGBT+ travellers especially feel celebrated, and luxury clients can discover a seamless blend of authenticity, sophistication and world-class hospitality."

Jimmy Sorensen adds: "Stockholm made me feel instantly at home with its vibrant, welcoming energy and commitment to inclusivity. Every moment, from the friendly and attentive service at top-tier hotels to the dynamic queer nightlife and exceptional culinary scene, felt thoughtfully curated and genuinely affirming. There are countless unforgettable experiences I could share, but sailing on a gorgeous yacht through the archipelago to arrive at the most charming private villa on Vaxholm, where we spent the day baking Swedish cakes and savouring a delectable lunch in the sunshine made a core memory that I'll cherish for ever."

So there you have it: whoever the person, Stockholm will make your clients feel – as the Swedish fab four once sang – *'like you're having the time of your life...'* ■

Pictured

1. Lifelike silicone dolls at ABBA: The Museum
2. The famous gilded crown on Skeppsholmsbron
3. The incredibly intact remains of 17th-century warship Vasa
4. An Attic Suite at boutique property Et Hemm
5. Writer Laura (second from right) with agents and trip hosts
6. The covered courtyard at Villa Dagmar
7. Bun-making workshop at Vaxholms Bed and Breakfast

Need to know

How luxury agents can secure exclusive experiences for their clients in Stockholm

- While agents can liaise directly with many of the organisations and companies that offer private, exclusive experiences for luxury LGBT+ clients, it's recommended to work with a boutique, on-the-ground DMC, such as Travel Exclusive (travelexclusive.se). Founder Sanchia Lambert has in-depth local knowledge and contacts, and can arrange everything from VIP airport pick-ups and local tours to customised experiences, including the after-hours dinner at Vasa we experienced; a tour around City Hall; or a curated shopping trip around Stockholm's most stylish stores. "We work exclusively B2B with luxury travel advisors," she says, "and our aim has always been to combine insider access and authentic encounters with seamless execution and exceptional service."



- One thing agents might want to consider is securing a Key of Honour Experience for clients: this is a coveted, by-invitation-only gesture from the City of Stockholm, which allows complimentary access to most of the museums and galleries and includes free ferry transport. Again, this is where a DMC like Travel Exclusive can help.

"This cannot be bought or sold, and is not generally available to consumers, but for luxury travel advisors visiting to explore and promote Stockholm, we can arrange it in collaboration with the city," says Sanchia. "It's a lovely gesture of the spirit of Swedish hospitality, and perfect for visiting luxury advisors or VIPs."

- Keep an eye out for big events or shows that are coming up which might be of interest to clients; during our visit, we were taken to see Lady Gaga play at the Avicii Arena. Upcoming gigs next year include Raye, Olivia Dean and The Weeknd, while Stockholm Pride returns in the summer, followed by the Stockholm Culture Festival. For more info, head to visitstockholm.com

- Agents can also refer to Stockholm LGBT when it comes to ideas for a package or itinerary; see the relevant section on their website: stockholmlgbt.com/travel-trade