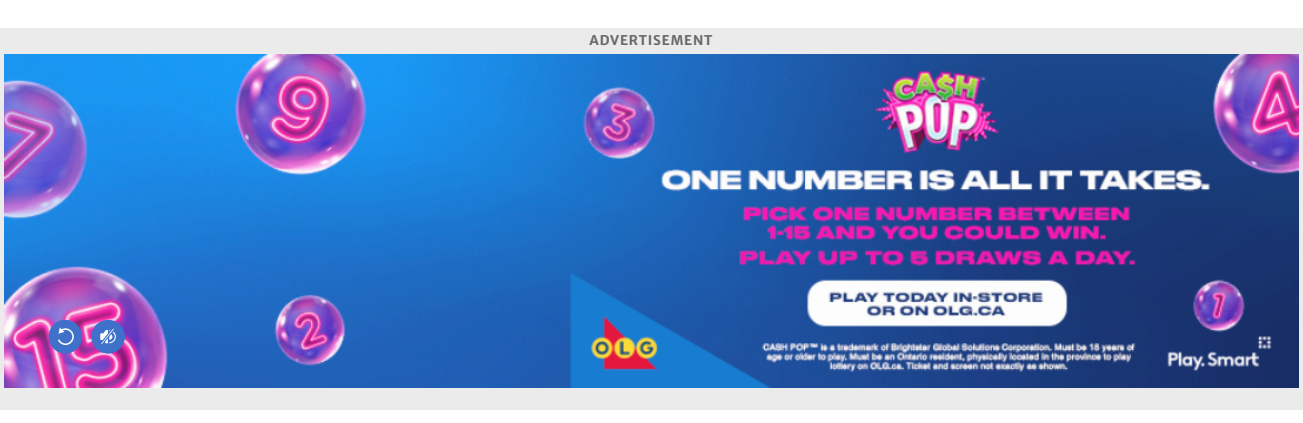
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TRAVEL

Copenhagen and Stockholm's vintage stores sell beautiful design objects at surprisingly low prices

A Toronto traveller finds that skipping modern retail for second-hand shops yields the best Scandinavian souvenirs.

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Vintage ashtrays at Copenhagen's Israels Plads Flea Market (a.k.a. Kobenhavns Loppetorv). Bottom left is the one that got away.

Shawna Cohen

By Shawna Cohen Special to the Star

The first thing that got me was an ashtray: vintage Johnnie Walker in a glorious shade of turquoise, punchier than Tiffany blue, with its red-coated gentleman striding across the centre. I wasn't looking for an ashtray. In fact, I wasn't looking for anything vintage at all.

I'd arrived in Copenhagen expecting to spend my money on the sleek ceramics and glassware flooding my Instagram feed, much of which I'd already mentally placed around my house. But on my first morning, after coffee and the first of many cinnamon buns, I stumbled upon a flea market en route to Torvehallerne, Copenhagen's popular food market filled with cheese counters and colourful produce stands.



Some of the writer's finds, displayed at home. The 1956 issue of Fick magazine was found at Söders Retro & Design in Stockholm. The marble pear was from an antique store in the city's old town.

Shawna Cohen

The tables at the Israels Plads Flea Market, also known as Kobenhavns Loppetorv, were piled with glassware and ceramics, silver serving pieces and little knick-knacks (pocket knives, bottle openers, vintage tins). Much to the dismay of my husband and older son, I stopped to browse, with no intention of buying anything. Then I spotted the ashtray. I picked it up to admire it, then put it back on the rickety table. I'd been in Copenhagen for less than 24 hours — did I really need to start filling my suitcase with other people's junk? Still, I kept looking.

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Bjorn Wiinblad ceramic cups at the Israels Plads Flea Market in Copenhagen.

Shawna Cohen

Before leaving the market, I'd bought two small Bjorn Wiinblad vases that reminded me of the dishes we had growing up, a pair of sleek Holmegaard candlesticks and a tiny mustard-yellow Holmegaard vinegar jar that I immediately decided would make a perfect bud vase. The ashtray, meanwhile, stayed on my mind. So much so that I returned the next morning to buy it. The vendor wasn't there.

A day later, in Stockholm, it happened again. I was wandering through Gamla Stan, the postcard-pretty old town with colourful centuries-old buildings and narrow passageways, when the windows of a few antique shops caught my eye. The glass and ceramic pieces looked so current, they could have been lining the shelves of the contemporary design stores I had planned to visit.

In a shop called Antikaffären PHM, I found a stunning mid-century porcelain bowl designed by Friedl Holzer-Kjellberg for Arabia of Finland, a name I recognized from pieces my parents owned back home in Toronto. Nearby were blue art-glass pieces by Boda, speckled glass eggs and charming floral-patterned teacups.



Wares at Antikaffären PHM in Stockholm, including the mid-century porcelain bowl designed by Friedl Holzer-Kjellberg for Arabia of Finland.

Shawna Cohen

The prices surprised me. In Toronto, pieces by many of these same makers are sold by antique dealers for considerably more. In Copenhagen and Stockholm, they seemed to be everywhere. The Arabia bowl was around $100 ("a joke," wrote my mother when I texted her a photo of the price), the Wiinblad vases around $45 each. These were beautiful, well-made objects I could actually use, and afford. None of it felt particularly vintage. In fact, I could picture almost every piece in my uber-modern house.

What struck me, too, was how little effort it took to find any of it. I'd researched the must-visit museums and the best bakeries for fika, but I hadn't looked up any vintage stores before the trip. I just kept stumbling upon them.

Inside a vintage/antique store in Stockholm's Gamla Stan.

Shawna Cohen

In Gamla Stan, they seemed to pop up every couple of blocks along the cobblestone streets. Later, wandering through hipster Södermalm, past bustling cafés, indie boutiques and a skateboard shop, I kept spotting windows filled with decades-old glassware and ceramics.

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Naturally, I kept buying. The Arabia bowl came home with me, as did a glass mushroom, a heavy marble apple and a beautiful pink glass bowl with swirls of green, which I could already imagine filling with nuts or candy when friends came over.

Back home, I lined up my haul — the vintage pieces alongside the few new things I'd bought — and snapped a photo. I texted a friend with impeccable taste. "Guess which items are vintage," I wrote. He couldn't.

Souvenirs, pictured at home: a mustard-yellow Holmegaard Palet vinegar bottle and a black-and-white Bjorn Wiinblad vase, both from the Israels Plads Flea Market.

Shawna Cohen

Maybe that's what I love most about what I brought home. None of it screams Scandinavia. There are no city names or little Swedish flags or even the obvious teak and clean lines of mid-century design. But every time I put a flower in the mustard-yellow Holmegaard jar or admire the glass mushroom that now lives in my powder room, I'll remember exactly where I found them.

They're souvenirs without looking like souvenirs, which might be my favourite kind. Though I'm still thinking about that ashtray.

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