

CULTURE

SHOCK

WORDS BY CLAIRE CALVEY



Midnight, and I'm standing up at the microphone in a dodgy Swedish karaoke bar, belting out the theme tune to Flashdance. It's not going well to be honest, the crowd are bored and the 50-something peroxide blonde controlling the karaoke machine is openly hostile. "Get closer!" she orders crossly, shoving the microphone towards my face, "LOUDER!"

I'm grateful when the background music fades and I can slope back to the bar where DH (darling husband) greets me with a pitying look and a glass of Jameson. I knock it back enthusiastically, it's been a long day.

I'm finally visiting Sweden where DH is currently working, although my excitement was slightly marred by the six hour flight delay at Heathrow. The long wait lead to mutiny among the other passengers, culminating in a balding cockney punching the airline liaison officer at the information desk. Tragically for him boarding was announced five minutes after he'd been carted off by the Metropolitan police.

By 9pm I'm finally in Stockholm, where DH is wait-

ing anxiously to whisk me west towards Södermanland County, dinner plans regretfully scrapped and replaced with a bag of crisps at the aforementioned bar.

The following morning, keen to make up for lost time, we head out early to a cafe for the first of many fika stops. Fika is Swedish for coffee break but it is more a cultural institution which regularly punctuates the day than just a quick cuppa; the Swedes LOVE coffee.

We sit in the town square, sipping away and flicking bits of kanelbullar (cinnamon buns) at the pigeons, mystified at how locals stride onto zebra crossings without looking left or right. Later a Swedish friend explains – Swedes obey the law; pedestrians cross without risk because drivers are obliged to stop. Who knew?

Later we dine in a restaurant overlooking the River Eskiltunaån, rippling water shimmering in the evening sunshine. Keen to sample husmanskost (local traditional food) but unable to understand the menu, we ask the smiling waitress to bring out whatever is good. Linger over glasses of Akvavit, we mull the idea of the family moving to Sweden for a while; it's certainly tempting – wanderlust is in my bones.

Back in Stockholm we have just 24 hours to spend in the city, so we set off from our hotel on Drottninggatan, keen to pack in as much as possible.

Tripping over cobbles in the beautifully preserved Medieval Quarter of Gamla Stan, we stop for fika at the famous Stortorget, the most recognisable landmark in Stockholm with its brightly coloured buildings and hoards of tourists. According to my guide book this is the location of the Stockholm Blodbad of 1520, when King Kristian II of Denmark, having conquered Stockholm, promised an amnesty to all his enemies and invited them to a decadent banquet. After three days of festivities the doors were locked and 82 of them beheaded. I look around the square with its smart cafes spilling out onto the street, and struggle to imagine such savagery taking place here.

Stockholm is spread over 14 islands and boasts over 100 museums, but we've only time for one so we hop on a ferry to Djurgården and head to the ABBA Museum which promises we'll 'walk in and dance out'. Aside from memorabilia there's lots of interactive stuff to do and we spend an hour making total eejits of ourselves, singing and dancing along with holograms of the band. It's great fun although later I quietly delete the damning video evidence.

As dusk descends we stop at Haymarket Square to wander around the flea market which is packing up for the evening. "I wonder what it would cost to ship this back to Ireland?" I ponder as I stroke a beautiful Gustavian glass chandelier. "Too much!" replies DH quickly, as he guides me away.

We end the day in a simple burger and beer bar and despair at how quickly the weekend has passed. I'm not ready to leave yet. I'm smitten by Sweden with its calm, humble, balanced way of living. I will be back, but just for a visit; my heart is in Galway. At least for now...♥

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