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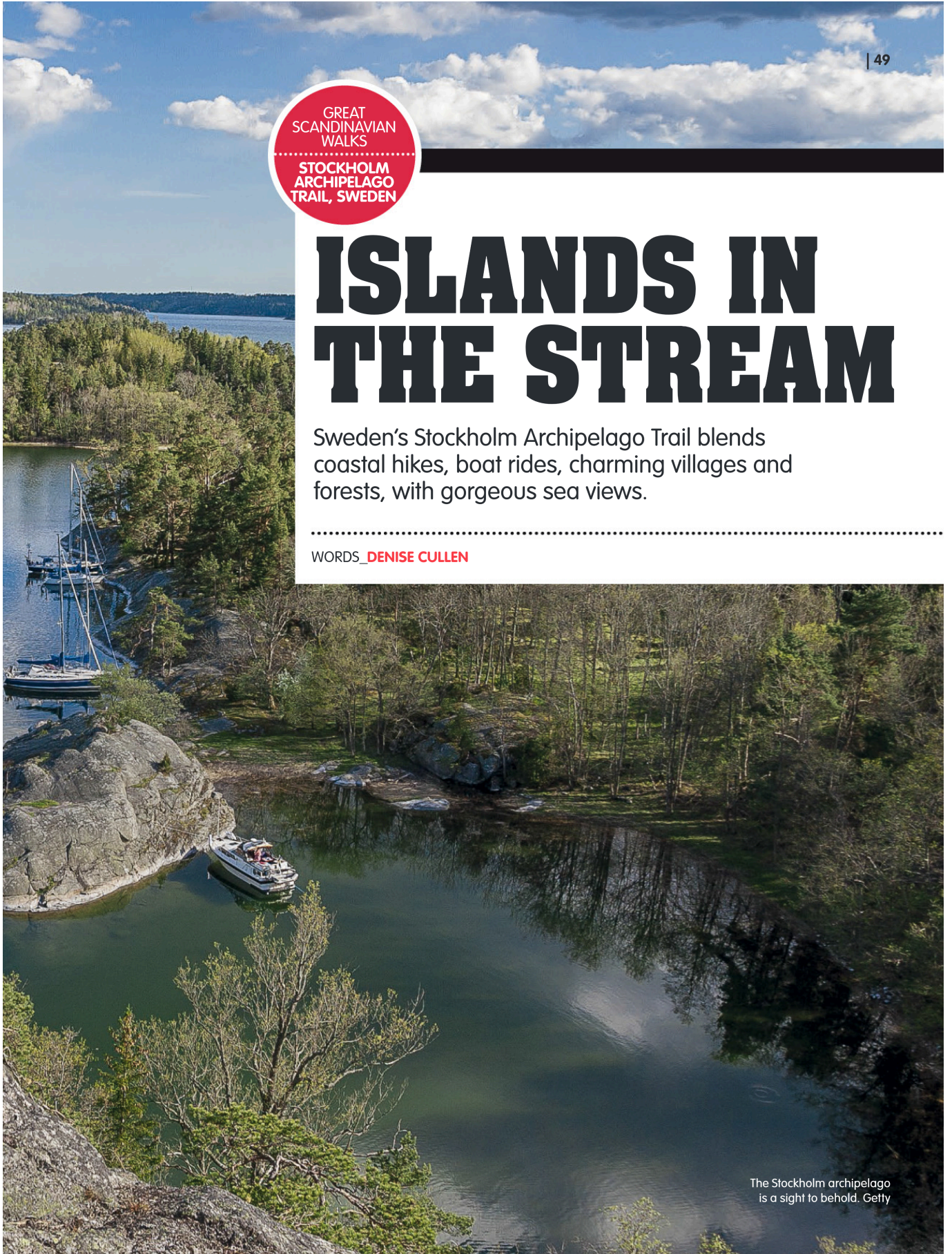


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ISLANDS IN THE STREAM

Sweden's Stockholm Archipelago Trail blends coastal hikes, boat rides, charming villages and forests, with gorgeous sea views.

WORDS **DENISE CULLEN**



The Stockholm archipelago is a sight to behold. Getty



IT'S our last day on the Stockholm Archipelago Trail and we're lost. Waymarkers on this new trail, spanning 20 islands east of Sweden's capital, are colourful ribbons, where yellow represents the sun, blue the sea, and silver the horizon. Yet, somehow we've missed one and are now crashing through the forest on the island of Nämndö, wildly off course. Hearing distant voices, we forge on, only to find ourselves skirting a clutch of holiday houses perched on a cliff, overlooking the sparkling Baltic Sea. At any other time, it would make for a beautiful lookout, but there's no time to enjoy it. The day's final ferry back to the port of Stavnäs is due to leave shortly, and I'm not sure we're going to make it.

Island treasures beckon

Launched in 2024, the Stockholm Archipelago Trail is a 270km hiking route which covers just a handful of the estimated 30,000 islands, islets, and skerries off Sweden's east coast. Stretching from Arholma in the north to Landsort in the south, these islands are car-free, accessible

by public ferry or water taxi, and perfect for exploring on foot.

The Stockholm Archipelago Trail was built by threading existing paths – some forged by Vikings and others by moose, deer and other animals – into a coherent whole. It was created, in part, to redistribute foot traffic away from busy ports and piers, and to stretch the hiking season beyond the busy summer months. Varying in difficulty from 'easy' to 'challenging', the different routes meander through diverse landscapes, including flat sandy stretches of beach, towering granite boulders, and enchanted forests filled with birch, spruce and pine.

Each island is unique. Some boast historical relics and ruins, some inspire artists and writers, others support fishing and farming communities, and still others possess lonely lighthouses, stately churches, or outdoor sculptures. The common thread is their remote windswept beauty. With only three days at our disposal, my husband and I decide to target a trio of islands located within easy distance of our rented cottage in Barnvik, about 40 minutes by bus from central Stockholm.

It's possible to stay on the islands, but ferry timetables mean that island-hopping isn't always easy or convenient. Using Barnvik as a base made it easy to explore a different island each day – while only carrying daypacks.

Meandering on Möja

The sun rises at around 4am this time of year, so our first morning in the archipelago arrives bright and early. After a leisurely breakfast, we catch the first public bus to Sollenkroka brygga (pier), to catch the ferry to the island of Möja. Möja became inhabited year-round during the Viking Age (793 to 1066) and is described as Myghi in King Valdemar's Sailing Route, a navigational document from the 13th century.

We disembark at Långvik and set off on the 'easy' 13.8km route that follows the coastline, passing old fishing villages filled with rust-red cottages. The official trail on Möja follows a rough gravel road that's mostly flat. Rather than keep to the trail, we detour onto many of the unmarked 'desire paths' into the forest, where we tread on a carpet of pine needles,

“OUR FIRST MORNING IN THE ARCHIPELAGO ARRIVES BRIGHT AND EARLY”





scramble over exposed roots, dodge fallen pinecones, and gorge on the abundant wild blueberries which grow in dappled shade.

After a couple of hours, we reach the bustling village of Berg, where we stop for *fika*, a Swedish cultural tradition that involves coffee, conversation and a sweet treat. I slip into the bakery to buy *kardemummabulle* (cardamon buns) to devour now and *skorpor* (biscotti-like rusks) with a rich vein of cinnamon paste for later. Afterwards, we explore the elegant Möja Church, after spotting its wooden-gothic style tower through the trees.

Inside, a model ship, inscribed with 'Crownship Adolphia from Stafsud 1797' on the stern, hangs suspended from the ceiling. I later learn that 'votive ships' are common in Swedish churches; their presence serving as a reminder of Nordic cultures' vital but perilous connection to the sea.

We enjoy fish and chips at the open-air seafood restaurant Les Poissonniers de Möja before heading up a granite hill to the local history museum. Möja Hembygds museum is comprised of three huts filled with tools, utensils, photographs, traditional dress, fishing gear, and more.

Museum volunteer Kerstin Malmer spent the first 12 years of her life on Möja. Now in her late seventies, she traces her ancestry on Möja as far back as 1595 and says she and other volunteers are seeking to preserve a vanishing way of life.

"We're trying to revive our histories," she says.

The Sandhamn stretch

Our second day starts with an early bus to the port of Stavnäs and the ferry (used as an icebreaker during winter) to Sandhamn, one



Clockwise from left:

Walking path on the island of Arholma. Henrik Trygg

Walking beside the water in the Stockholm archipelago. Henrik Trygg

Enjoying the Stockholm Archipelago Trail. Henrik Trygg

Much of the trail on Nämndö is in dappled shade. Denise Cullen

of the archipelago's most well-known islands. Historically a grazing island and a safe harbour for ships during storms, Sandhamn became a summer holiday destination for Stockholm's elite in the 1900s – hence the beautiful homes which cluster above the pier and dot the rest of the island.

Today, Sandhamn is still a popular summer day trip. It's also known as the start and finish for the Gotland Runt regatta and as the setting in Viveca Sten's Sandhamn Murders series. (You can catch it on SBS on Demand).

We start the day's 'easy' 8.1km hike, which essentially circumnavigates the island, first cutting behind the *Seglarhotellet*, a popular place to stay, eat, and dine, to ascend a gravel road leading to a plateau overlooking the sea. Known as Dansberget (the Dance Rock), the plateau's elevated position and smooth stone surface meant it was once used as an open-air dance floor.

We then follow the trail left onto a sandy path, which takes hikers far from the restaurants, hotels and cafes at the pier and into a sparse, silent pine forest. Further on, the trail follows idyllic stretches of sand in parts, and pebbled shorelines in others.

At Trouville Beach, we strip down to swimsuits and join the holidaymakers who are already enjoying a dip in the bracing waters of this small, sandy cove. We don't stay in long. Despite it being midsummer, the water temperature is still 15-18°C, which makes it feel like a cold plunge pool.

After completing the day's hike, we pull up chairs at an outdoor table at Sandhamns Vårdshus for the quintessentially Swedish lunch of *steckt strömming* (fried herrings) accompanied by mashed potatoes, lingonberries, and browned butter.

Amid nature on Nämndö

We're back at Stavnäs first thing in the morning to catch a small passenger ferry to Nämndö, disembarking at the village of Solvik. Before setting off on the 13.1km trail, rated 'average' in terms of difficulty, we stop at the bakery to fuel up on the nation's beloved *kanelbulle* (cinnamon buns) and to purchase sandwiches for a trail meal later.



Like Möja, Nämdö was first mentioned in the ancient King Valdemar's Sailing Route. Its Viking heritage is revealed through place names, like Knarrhamn and Bunkvik, with 'knarr' being a ship used by the Vikings for long sea voyages, and 'bunke' being a cargo space. We follow the trail clockwise from Solvik, past a church that was built in 1876, and to the village of Sand. The terrain is more varied than what we'd seen on the first two days.

We hike through shady forests and wildflower-strewn meadows. At one point, the trail passes through cattle pasture. I note, with some trepidation, recent cow pats, suggesting these beasts aren't too far away. We see fruiting cherry and apple trees along the route, along with bees and butterflies sipping nectar from clover and meadowsweet.

We stop to eat lunch overlooking Storträsket, a lake more picturesque than its translation ("big swamp") would suggest. A Swedish man walking a dog passes by, remarking (in perfect English) that everything tastes better under a blue sky. Mouth full, I nod in agreement.

We then start to hike towards Långvik, just off the archipelago trail. Tucked away amid trees on the edge of a harbour, there's an unstaffed public sauna housed in a rustic timber A-frame hut. Maintained by The Archipelago Foundation, the sauna is stocked with everything visitors might need, including matches and wood. We gather kindling and pre-cut logs to start a fire in the sauna's metal stove. Steam rises with a hiss as I use the supplied saucepan to tip fresh water over hot stones. Underneath a single window, we stretch out on towels on the well-worn wooden benches, enveloped in heat and sweating



profusely. When the temperature becomes too intense, we throw open the door and take the few steps down to the water, which laps at the rocky shoreline.

After the sauna, we follow the section of the trail which leads to Östanviks gård, a working farm which makers of the Stockholm Archipelago Trail describe as a 'must-visit'. But today, there doesn't seem to be much going on, and the only thing for sale in the farm shop are seedlings which (we know) won't make it through Australian customs.

Maybe this small disappointment makes us careless. Maybe it's the dull stretch of gravel road from Östanvik back to Solvik, or the

“WE DON'T REALLY WANT OUR TIME ON THE TRAIL TO END”

accumulated fatigue, or the fact that we don't really want our time on the trail to end. For whatever reason, it's at about this point that we miss the crucial way marker and find ourselves lost on the side of a cliff. We can still hear distant voices and the chugging of boats, so the pier must be close. We follow the auditory trail, scrabbling through spiky vegetation and skittering on rocks.

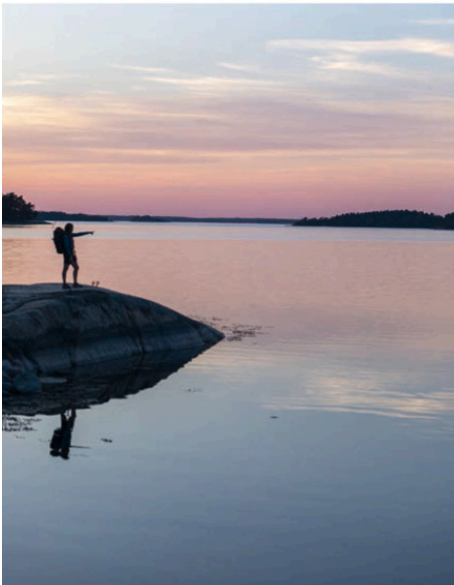
Before long, we burst into someone's back garden and we end up trudging through a row of private properties to get back to the pier. Fortunately, the Swedish law of *Allemansrätten* (the right of public access) means that no-one shouts at or chases us, or even blinks an eye. We reach the pier with just enough time to raise the semaphore (signal board) to ensure the boat stops. I register that my legs are aching as we clamber aboard and start to plan our next visit.

Perhaps we'll tackle the 'challenging' Utö or Nättarö, try out the communal rowboats between the Finnhamn and Ingmarsö sections, or tour the military battery on Arholma. There's still so much to explore. 📍

Above: View over the island Utö.
Henrik Trygg

Below: Butterflies on Nämdö.
Denise Cullen

Left: Sunset on the archipelago.
Henrik Trygg



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