



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Sweden, one of the “three fingers” of Scandinavia, is just larger than the state of California. It covers 173,860 square miles (450,295 square kilometers). From the northern to the southern tip, Sweden is about 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) long, but only 310 miles (500 kilometers) wide. Thousands of tiny islands line the coast. Mountains form much of the northwest, but most of Sweden is relatively flat with some rolling hills. Many rivers flow from the mountains through the forests and into the Baltic Sea. Sweden is filled with lakes and rivers, which provide ample water for the country. More than half of the land is forested. Rivers in the Norrland region (roughly the country's northernmost two-thirds) provide most hydroelectric power.

North of the Arctic Circle, winters are long and cold, while summers are short and pleasant. But summer's “midnight sun” makes the days long. Despite Sweden's northern location, most of the country has a relatively temperate climate, moderated by warm Gulf Stream currents. July temperatures in Stockholm average 64°F (18°C); January temperatures average 27°F (-3°C). Snow remains on the ground about one hundred days each year.

History

Sweden has been inhabited for nearly five thousand years and was first settled by several Germanic tribes. In the ninth century, Rurik, a semilegendary chief of the Swedes, is said to have founded Russia. In the 11th century, Olof Skötkonung

declared himself king of Sweden. When he adopted Christianity, the religion began to spread. Opponents vied for control of a unified Sweden until the 12th century, when the loose group of provinces became united as one nation. Queen Margrethe I of Denmark united Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in the Union of Kalmar in 1397.

Sweden remained fairly autonomous and began its own parliament in 1435. It became an independent kingdom in 1523, with Gustaf I Vasa as ruler. The kingdom fought wars with Denmark, Poland, and Russia in the 16th and 17th centuries, and Sweden became one of the Great Powers of Europe. It acquired Norway in 1814 through the Napoleonic Wars. During the 19th century, however, Swedish power declined. Finland was part of Sweden until 1809, when it briefly became an archdukedom of Russia. The Frenchman Jean Baptiste Bernadotte was elected Sweden's crown prince in 1810 and became king in 1818 as Karl XIV Johan. His dynasty continues today.

During the 20th century, neutrality was a cornerstone of Sweden's foreign policy, keeping it out of both world wars and allowing it to transform its rather poor society into a prosperous social welfare state. With increased European integration and the end of the Cold War, Sweden joined the European Union (EU) in 1995.

Sweden's image as a peaceful egalitarian society, with relatively low crime, was shaken in 1986 when Prime Minister Olof Palme was assassinated on the streets of Stockholm. Palme was succeeded by Ingvar Carlsson of the Social Democrat Party. After the rejection of his strict economic reforms in 1990, Carlsson resigned and led a minority government until elections in 1991. The new prime

minister, Carl Bildt of the Moderate Party, formed a coalition government. Bildt's administration concentrated on economic challenges and negotiated Sweden's entry into the EU.

The Social Democrats won the 1994 elections, and Ingvar Carlsson returned to power. Carlsson retired from the party leadership in November 1995 and was replaced by his finance minister, Göran Persson. A fiscal conservative, Persson continued economic reforms aimed at improving the country's finances. Although a member of the EU, Sweden opted out of joining Europe's Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in 1999 and again in 2003 because voters opposed giving up local control over economic issues such as welfare services and interest rates. A coalition headed by Fredrik Reinfeldt's Moderate Party replaced the longstanding Social Democrat government in 2006. In response to concerns about climate change and rising energy costs, in 2009, Sweden reversed its policy to phase out nuclear reactors. Sweden experienced its first suicide bombing, carried out by an Islamic extremist in Stockholm in late 2010.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Sweden's population of 9.07 million is growing at 0.16 percent per year. More than 80 percent of Swedes live in the southern third of the country. Most of the population is ethnic Swede. Finns compose a small minority of the population; most are immigrants from Finland, but some are native to northern Sweden. A small indigenous minority (up to 20,000 people), the Sami (pronounced "SAW-me"), lives in the north. Traditionally, they herded reindeer. While some continue that occupation, most are involved in other fields. The Sami are sometimes called Lapps, but this is a derogatory term and therefore not encouraged in Sweden. Immigrants have added to Sweden's population since the 1960s; Swedish immigration laws are some of the most liberal in Europe. Nearly 14 percent of Swedish citizens were born outside of Sweden. Many immigrants come from neighboring Nordic countries as well as the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Turkey, and Latin American or African countries.

Language

Swedes speak Swedish—a Germanic language that is closely related to Danish and Norwegian and more distantly related to Icelandic. It developed from Old Norse, which was spoken by the Vikings. Swedish emerged as a distinct language around the 10th century, but speakers of Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian can still understand each other. The Sami speak their own language in addition to Swedish, and the Finnish minority speaks both Finnish and Swedish. Most immigrants speak their native tongue at home. Many people speak English, which is also taught in the schools.

Religion

Sweden, like most of Europe, is a highly secular society. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution. Most Swedes (about 87 percent) are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church but rarely attend church services. The

Lutheran Church still enjoys limited support from the state; however, a complete legal separation of church and state took place in 2000. Now all church decisions are made by church leaders rather than the government. Membership is growing in other religious organizations. Most of these are various other Christian churches, such as the Roman Catholic faith, which has a following of about 1 percent of the population. Other groups, such as Muslims and Jews, are also expanding, primarily because of the immigrant population.

General Attitudes

Swedes are somewhat more reserved than people in the United States. Friendships are important but take time to develop. Swedes are proud of their nation as well as their regions and towns. Visitors who recognize this pride are careful not to praise another area over the one being visited. Swedes value modesty and material security. Punctuality is also emphasized in various aspects of daily life.

Sweden has created an egalitarian society in which men and women enjoy equal access to opportunities for personal advancement. In addition, Swedes highly value their extensive social welfare system, which provides for most of the population's health, education, and retirement benefits. While public sentiment in the early 1990s led to some cuts in the system, most people oppose deep changes in what are called "cradle-to-grave" benefits.

Sweden takes great pride in awarding the Nobel Prizes each year, with the exception of the Nobel Peace Prize, which Norway sponsors. These prizes are given to significant contributors in the areas of chemistry, literature, medicine, and physics. Alfred Bernhard Nobel (1833–96), the inventor of dynamite and a wealthy Swedish businessman, sponsored the prizes.

Personal Appearance

European fashions are common in Sweden, and Swedes are generally considered quite trendy, usually among the first to adopt new styles in fashion and design. However, because of the country's cooler climate, Swedes wear warm clothing more often than other Europeans. Dress is generally conservative; it is important to be neat and clean in public. Swedes may not dress up as much as people in other countries when they go out. They prefer to avoid glamorous clothing but are still fashionable. Traditional costumes, which vary by region, are worn on certain holidays.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Swedes commonly shake hands when meeting. In rural areas, the custom of hand shaking is less common and is traditionally associated with sealing agreements, resolving disagreements, and greeting on formal occasions. Friends often hug when greeting one another. Most adults will shake hands with each person in the room when entering or leaving a social setting. From a distance, one may nod the head or raise the hand to greet another person. People usually address each other by first name; they use titles only in very formal

situations. One answers the phone with *Hallå* (Hello) and clearly identifies oneself. The most common greeting is the casual *Hej* (pronounced "HEY," meaning "Hi"), and the most common way to say "Good-bye" is *Hej då*. However, more formal phrases include *God dag* (Good day), *God morgon* (Good morning), and *Adjö* (Good-bye).

Gestures

Eye contact is important during conversation. Swedes avoid excessive hand gestures when speaking. Chewing gum, yawning, or having one's hands in the pockets when speaking to another person is considered impolite. Although in the past people seldom embraced in public or put their arm around another's shoulder, the population in general is becoming more casual, and such displays of friendship are increasing.

Visiting

Swedes enjoy visiting one another, but they do not often visit without prior arrangement. Hosts usually offer guests coffee or something else to drink. People most often entertain in the home; it is popular to invite friends over for an evening meal. Guests are expected to arrive on time. An odd number of flowers or a box of chocolates is a common gift for the hosts. Sweets for the children are appropriate if the parents approve. Guests unwrap flowers before giving them to the hostess. A thank-you note or phone call is customary after a party, depending on the formality of the situation. It is also important for guests to thank the hosts for their hospitality the next time they meet, using the phrase *Tack för senast* (Thank you for last time).

It is impolite to "eat and run." Swedes expect guests to stay for coffee and conversation, even as late as 11 p.m. Conversation, ranging over a wide variety of topics, is a popular leisure activity, though people rarely speak about religion or spiritual matters. In fact, it's quite popular to meet over coffee and spend time chatting at a café. When leaving, guests say good-bye before they put on their coats.

Eating

Swedes eat a light breakfast around 7 a.m., and they might have a coffee or tea break at midmorning. Traditionally, the main meal (*middag*) was eaten at midday. This is still the case in most rural areas, but urban residents eat only a light lunch at noon and then have their main meal around 6 p.m. It is common to get together with friends for *fika* (coffee, tea, or soft drinks, perhaps with a light snack of a sandwich or pastries). People may meet for *fika* at cafés or at home.

Swedes eat in the continental style, meaning they hold the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. A dinner knife is not used as a butter knife, since separate butter knives are usually provided. Diners keep hands, but not elbows, above the table during the meal. Guests are served first. When finished eating, a person places the utensils side by side on the plate. Leaving any food on the plate is impolite. Guests usually wait for the hosts to offer second helpings. Declining is not impolite, but guests may take more if they desire. Food is placed in serving dishes on the table, so if the dishes are empty there is usually no more food; asking for more would be impolite.

For some occasions, the host makes a welcome speech at the beginning of the meal. The host then makes a toast (*skål*) and all dinner guests taste the wine. The guest of honor makes a speech during the dessert, elaborating on the meal and the charm of the hostess. Each guest personally thanks the host directly after the meal.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The nuclear family is the basic social unit and is usually strong and close-knit. While the nuclear family remains the ideal, most families are now structured less traditionally because parents have never married, have divorced, or have remarried. There is no stigma associated with divorce, and it is common for people to marry several times.

Many women work outside the home; they comprise nearly half of the labor force. However, women remain underrepresented leadership positions. In recent years, there has been an intense debate in Swedish society about how to increase the number of women in top positions. In the home, women still do most of the household chores, though this is changing among the younger generations.

Most families have only one or two children. Children are often doted on by their parents, a tradition that prompted the term *curling parents* (which refers to the sport of curling, in which players sweep the ground in front of the curling stones), indicating the belief that many Swedish parents spoil their children too much and for too long. Today, it is common for families to help children financially for longer than in past generations; to what extent depends on the economical means of the family. However, it is also common for university students to work in addition to studying.

Due to grants and student loans, most young Swedes can afford to move away from home after high school, often to student dormitories and apartments. Young people who work can also most often afford to find a home of their own, while young unemployed people might need to continue living with their parents.

Extended family relationships are maintained through gatherings and holiday visits. Young children are cared for during working hours at day-care centers. While in past generations, families expected to care for aging parents in the home, elderly individuals now generally rely on the social system or themselves for their care and support.

Housing

Over a third of Swedes own the homes they live in, and home ownership is a common dream. However, it is also common to rent an apartment for many years. Urban apartments are generally spacious and well kept. In the center of the larger cities, the apartment buildings are usually from the latter part of the 19th century and onwards. The apartments in these buildings are usually very expensive. Storage space and laundry rooms can be found in the basements of apartment buildings, which may be surrounded by gardens and play areas. Many families rent an urban apartment and own a country cottage, where they spend holidays and vacations.

Larger cities often experience housing shortages, which impact young people and low-income families most. The larger cities are surrounded by suburbs, which range from wealthy areas with large, high-quality homes to poorer suburbs dominated by public housing apartment buildings from the 1960s and 1970s. Recent debates have centered on the increasing segregation within Swedish society, which is visible in many suburban areas, where large groups of immigrants inhabit older, lower-quality buildings without becoming integrated into the community.

Most people in smaller towns and rural areas live in single-family dwellings. Sweden is known for its red wooden houses, built centuries ago, that still dot the countryside. Today, traditional homes may stand next to a variety of modern styles of homes. Swedes take pride in making their homes beautiful: the Scandinavian style of decorating with blonde woods, natural fibers, pale tones, and abundant light is popular. Those who have gardens tend them carefully. Most Swedes tend to prefer modern design, but in recent years people have begun decorating with vintage objects and furniture. There is a booming do-it-yourself movement since it is generally very expensive to pay someone to do work in a private home. People throughout the country own vacation homes in the mountains or on Sweden's islands.

Dating and Marriage

Although serious dating is reserved for older teens, Swedes start to date early. They enjoy going to movies, dining out, having parties, and dancing. Many couples meet through internet dating sites or social networking sites. Casual sexual relationships are common. Many people choose to live together before or instead of marrying. Often, a couple marries when they have a child. Half of all Swedish marriages end in divorce, and single-parent homes are becoming more common. Unmarried couples who live together have nearly the same rights and obligations as married couples. That is, cohabitation is nearly the same as marriage under the law. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in marriage, and the wedding industry in Sweden is booming.

Those Swedes who choose to marry have either a religious or a civil ceremony; both are common. Civil weddings have a long tradition in Sweden and are closely tied to the society's secular ideals. Both religious and civil ceremonies vary according to the choices and economic means of the bride and groom. Most ceremonies include the exchanging of rings and vows. At church weddings, the priest speaks, passages are read from the Bible, and a relative or friend might sing a song or read a poem. At the end of the ceremony, the priest blesses the couple. Civil ceremonies usually contain roughly the same components but without the religious elements, with the officiator speaking and friends or relatives singing or reading poems. Civil ceremonies tend to be shorter than church weddings. The specifics of each ceremony are decided upon by the couple, in conjunction with the priest or the officiator. When the couple comes out of the church or other building, guests usually throw rice or confetti over them. After the ceremony there is often a reception and dinner followed by a party.

Life Cycle

Most women work full-time through the length of their pregnancies, if possible. Swedish fathers are very involved in pregnancies, attending courses at the children's clinic and checkups at the midwife's in addition to the actual birth of the child. A room in the house is generally converted into a nursery, which parents carefully prepare for the baby. When the parents return home with the new baby, family and friends come to visit and bring gifts.

Many children are given a Christian baptism even if their parents rarely or never attend church services otherwise. After the baptizing there is usually a reception. However, an increasing number of parents are choosing not to baptize their children. A growing number of families opt for a non-religious naming ceremony. Since this is a relatively new tradition in Sweden, there are few set patterns for these ceremonies. Generally, parents hold a small party and serve cake. Sometime during the party, the parents ask for everyone's attention and announce the child's name. They might tell a short story about why the selected name.

Young people are considered adults at age 18. Graduation from high school is considered a milestone and is celebrated with a large party for families and friends. After graduating high school, many students take a year (or years) off to work or travel. Many people then go on to some sort of higher education. Other milestones include receiving a driver's license (usually at 18) and reaching the voting age and the drinking age (also 18). Most young Swedes leave home after high school, but many of these continue to be supported by their families until they finish university or get a job. The time between leaving high school and becoming financially independent has steadily increased over the last few generations. Some families support their adult children well into their twenties. During this time, young Swedes often mix work, travel, and schooling. In between their different activities, they often return home and stay with their parents. While this lifestyle is very common among the middle class, not all Swedes can afford to prolong their entrance into the workforce, and many choose to complete universities more quickly or skip straight to getting a job.

The retirement age is 65, though some people retire a bit sooner or later, depending on their situation. The current generation of retirees has approached retirement differently than in the past. Today's retirees often have more savings, which allows them to continue their lifestyle after they stop working. Many do not consider themselves old and instead see retirement as their "golden years," in which they will stay active and pursue their interests.

Funerals are quiet, family affairs that take place within a few weeks of the death. Church funerals are common even if the deceased rarely visited church during his or her lifetime. Secular funerals are increasing in popularity. At church funerals, the priest usually talks about the deceased. Passages are read from the Bible and a prayer may be said. Sometimes a relative sings a song or reads a poem. The specifics of the ceremony are usually decided upon by the priest and the relatives. Secular funerals follow a similar pattern, but without any allusions to religion. After the ceremony, relatives and friends usually bid a final farewell to the

deceased by passing by the coffin, placing a flower on top, and saying a few last words. A reception usually follows after the funeral. Food is served (usually a simple cold meal with dessert and coffee). At the reception, the closest relatives usually thank everyone for attending the funeral. Those who wish to share a memory about the deceased. Today, some Swedes are choosing to have their ashes spread in memorial groves, though many still prefer a traditional burial.

Diet

Health concerns have affected eating patterns in Sweden in much the same way they have in other industrialized countries. Once heavy in meat, fish, and cheese, the diet now includes many fresh vegetables and fruits. Vegetarianism is a growing movement among some young Swedes. Cuisine from all areas of the world is popular, both in restaurants and home kitchens. Common foods include potatoes (eaten a few times a week), seafood, cheeses of many types, and other fresh foods. For breakfast, one might eat *fil* (a kind of yogurt), *knäckebröd* (crisp bread) with margarine, and coffee. Oat porridge with milk and jam or syrup is another common breakfast. *Smörgåsar* (open-faced sandwiches) are also popular. Some favorite main-meal dishes include *Köttbullar med kokt potatis, brun sås och lingonsylt* (meatballs with brown sauce, boiled potatoes, and lingonberry jam); *Stekt falukorv med senap och potatis* (fried slices of thick German sausage with mustard and boiled or fried potatoes); *grillad lax med spenat, citron och potatis eller ris* (grilled slices of salmon with spinach, slices of lemon, and potatoes or rice); and *Pytt i Panna* (potatoes, leftover meats, and onions, fried with an egg on top and served with pickled beets). The average Swede drinks several cups of coffee each day, and Sweden ranks as one of the top consumers of coffee, per capita, in the world.

The *smörgåsbord* is a lavish buffet eaten (mostly at restaurants) on holidays or special occasions. It is not an everyday meal. A *smörgåsbord* includes warm and cold dishes, meat, fish, and desserts. Some families have a special type of *smörgåsbord* on Christmas Eve.

Recreation

Swedes are sports enthusiasts. Physical fitness is particularly important to Swedes. Most aspire to lead active, healthy lives. Popular sports include soccer, horseback riding, ice-skating, skiing, tennis, golf, swimming, ice hockey, *bandy* (a sport similar to hockey), and orienteering races (using a map and compass to cross an area). Ice-skating and other winter sports are common. In the wintertime, Swedes enjoy participating in and watching downhill and cross-country skiing. In February, schools are even given a week off, called "the sport vacation." During this time, most students take part in winter sports, and ski resorts are usually fully booked. Physical fitness is particularly important to Swedes. Most towns have lighted exercise trails for jogging/walking (in the summer) or cross-country skiing (in the winter). Indoor gyms are also popular for activities like aerobics and yoga. Swedes also spend time indoors, playing computer games and using the internet.

Even more popular than sports are activities such as

hiking, fishing, and bird-watching. Swedes love nature and spend as much time as possible outdoors. Many people consider it ideal to own a summer cottage for weekends and vacations. Sweden's mountains are popular destinations. Favorite leisure activities also include attending cultural events such as the theater or concerts, reading, watching movies or television, and surfing the internet or playing computer games. More traditional entertainment, such as opera and classical theater, are usually popular with older audiences. More modern culture, such as break-dancing performances and hip-hop concerts, attract a younger, more mixed crowd. Many people are taking a greater interest in food and cooking. Singing in choirs is by far Sweden's most popular hobby, with 1.5 million participants.

By law, Swedish workers are given at least 25 days off each year. Vacation activities vary according to a family's income. Summer cottages are very popular, and people who do not have their own often visit the cottages of family and friends. Many Swedes also enjoy boating, and boat ownership is common. Group camping trips are affordable and popular. It is increasingly common for people to go abroad during their vacations, with warm-weather destinations among the most common.

The Arts

Because the arts in Sweden receive substantial public and private funding, cultural activities are accessible throughout the country. Each city has a community center, where young people can gather and stage performances. Common crafts include wood carvings, ceramics, textiles, and stainless steel. Traditional handicrafts have increased in popularity in recent years, with more young people, particularly women, taking them up as hobbies.

People enjoy traditional music by singing, playing instruments, or attending festivals. Common types of music are the *polska* (polka) and the *vals* (waltz). Prominent instruments include various wind instruments, the fiddle, and the accordion. The *nyckelharpa* (key fiddle) is a Swedish invention. Sweden also has a lively modern music scene. Swedish filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman are known worldwide, and Swedish design and architecture are recognized for their simplicity and functionality.

Holidays

Sweden's national holidays include New Year's Day, May Day (1 May), and National Day (6 June). Other holidays are often associated with the season or a religious event. *Påsk* (Easter) is celebrated over several days, beginning with *Skärtorsdagen*, the day before Good Friday. Children dress up like old witches with brooms and go door-to-door (among friends and neighbors only) to hand out Easter cards and collect candy. On Easter, people dye eggs and give away egg-shaped boxes of candy. Homes are decorated with twigs, colored feathers, and Easter lilies.

Valborgsmässoafton celebrates the arrival of spring and traces its roots back to paganism. On the last day of April, bonfires are lit throughout the country and choirs gather to sing traditional songs. In some university towns, students wear traditional *studentmössa* (white hats with black bills)

