

# MESSING

**If you think Sweden's all IKEA and ABBA, think again. Try a rough-and-tumble raft trip through moose country...**

**M**Y DREAM, as I grew up on an old barge on the Thames, was to be able to dive off the boat for a swim in summer and then skate down the frozen river come winter.

Fat chance. I did swim — but alongside sewage and dead cats — and the nearest the Thames ever got to freezing was when the polystyrene packaging dumped in the river looked like fragmenting icebergs.

I was reminiscing about this particular childhood deprivation with some other mothers at the annual secondhand school uniform bun-fight when someone suggested a solution from behind a pile of worn-but-wearable corduroy trousers. 'It's got to be Sweden,' she said.

This sage mother went on to explain that a trip to Scandinavia would make all my dreams come true — and with that, she left, clutching the only nearly-new blazer with an intact hem line.

I had never given Sweden much thought beyond the odd trip to IKEA and acting in a few plays by Strindberg — from which I concluded that the Swedes weren't awfully polly but could work miracles with a kitchen shelving unit. I had certainly never contemplated Sweden as a holiday destination.

But then I was cast in the Bergman play, *Scenes From A Marriage* and this — together with the advice from the mysterious mother — meant that Sweden shot to the top of my destination wish-list.

I travelled in October with the actress and photographer, Serena Gordon — and we opted for a five-day eco-trip with Nature Travels.

The schedule promised a nighttime moose safari, the chance to bed down in an old charcoal-burner's hut, plenty of swimming and canoeing in forest lakes, building and navigating our own

by **IMOGEN STUBBS**

timber raft and, finally, a visit to Stockholm by kayak. It sounded like a real Nordic adventure.

In fact, you can camp anywhere in Sweden — which makes it an attractive proposition for the outdoorsy. Especially as more people are swapping the pampering surrounds of swanky spa hotels for camping holidays and the quest for their inner bo-scout.

We were going at an unusual time of year — after the summer glow and before the snowy winter wonderland — but this did mean we weren't plagued by mosquitoes and there was enough daylight for some good holiday snaps. Rather alarmingly, Nature Travels treats tourists like grown-ups. We were sent our itinerary, details of where to pick up our car — and then map references for our various destinations.

At one point, we were looking for some 'huts' in a forest, near a lake'. That sounded fine until we discovered that 80 per cent of Sweden is either a lake or a forest.

Thankfully, we acquired a sat nav system and everybody seemed to speak impeccable English. That said, we did find one moisturiser advertising its ability to: 'Smooth fine lines and crepe-lines.' Yikes.

The airport in Stockholm is immaculate — clean, calm, beautifully designed and has a great information service. We took a bus to pick up the car and we were off. There was no traffic and the roads were clearly signposted.

Within minutes, we were in a rapturously beautiful landscape of woods and water, with clapboard houses and barns painted burnt umber. Every now



Idyll afloat: Imogen Stubbs

and then, a bleached, bone-white church would peep photographically through the trees. The gardens of many houses led down to lakes where there were wooden jeties stretching out into the still water.

No mess, no squalor and I don't imagine the Swedes have a word for 'unkempt'. Miraculously, nor does anything smell twee. There just seems to be a collective pride in the country and an innate meticulousness.

**W**E ARRIVED at our first port-of-call an eco-camp called Kolarbyn, in the early evening. It boasts a gorgeous location beside a lake full of pine and perch and is surrounded by woodland.

The aforementioned charcoal-burner's huts (in which we stayed) are built from wood, and then covered in earth.

Moss and wild strawberries grow over them and inside there are wooden shelf-beds with sheepskins and a fire-place. They are illuminated by candles — almost like a tiny chapel... or Shrek's forest home.

The loo is an 'eco-loo', housed in a little hut beside a stream. Apparently, trolls live nearby. Interestingly, it was decorated with pictures of the Swedish Queen, Elton John and an elderly scout leader. I couldn't begin to think why.



(left) and Serena Gordon enjoy the peaceful pace of life on their Swedish rafting holiday

then set off for a moonlit moose trek with our guide, Marcus. Before long, we came upon a cow moose with twins. It was a splendid sight.

Then, suddenly, we heard a mournful sound and a magnificent bull appeared and started wooing the lady. It was all going swimmingly, while we were only yards away, lying absolutely still and silent in the dewy grass — when my mobile-phone went off.

Mister and Missus Moose then bolted into the woods and, despite valiant efforts from Marcus, who is blessed with the gift of being able to imitate moose-wooling noises, they were gone.

They were right to be wary. The hunting season was approaching, during which a third of the moose are culled. Our new friends would probably be served up with mashed potato and cloudberry jam for Christmas. We awoke the next day at

dawn, put on wet-suits and plunged straight into the lake. It was shockingly cold but exhilarating and we floated in the water as the sun emerged through a gorgeous display of golden autumn leaves. And then we warmed-up in the sauna.

During breakfast, I attempted to put in my contact lenses and dropped one. A little tip: it is a seriously bad idea to drop your lens in pine-needles and then put it in your eye. Another tip: when pouring milk from a carton into your tea, first check it isn't yoghurt.

Next up, raft-building at Klarälven. On the Nature Travels website, it looked like the timber raft was built by a dozen lumberjacks with large scythes. I had come equipped with a small pen-knife and a dodgy torch. We secretly hoped there would be a 'here's one I made earlier' approach.

But no. No sooner had we arrived than our instructor, Anika, had set us

to work. Basically, you drag differently-sized logs down to the river where the raft is assembled in tiers and then knotted together with rope. And then you build an elaborate stick construction (OK, I don't know the correct terminology) on top. It takes hours.

And then, when we finally leapt aboard to start our adventure, we discovered we were stuck. Fortunately, a nice man in a chunky-knit sweater came to the rescue with a burly Viking shove, and our raft groaned off the sandbank and into the current of the river.

The current dominates the raft experience. The paddles are of little use and you go with the flow. At first, it is alarming to have so little control.

At one point, something whacked the underside of the raft and we screamed 'shark!' somewhat hysterically. In retrospect, I think it was probably a log or a disorientated

**TRAVEL FACTS**

NATURE TRAVELS (01929 463774; naturetravels.co.uk) offers a two-day Elk Safari Adventure experience with accommodation in charcoaler huts from £133 per adult; five or eight days' timber rafting on Klarälven from £173 per adult; and three days sea kayaking in Sörmlands Archipelago from £277 per adult. Tailor-made itineraries can be arranged on request.

RETURN flights to Stockholm from Heathrow with SAS Scandinavian Airways (flysas.co.uk; 0870 60 727 727) from £107.

beaver. That evening, it got dark rather suddenly. We had no idea where we were but saw a tiny bench and tied up the raft — trying to remember some of the knots from the 17 copits of *The Dangerous Book For Boys* that my son got for Christmas.

Miraculously, we managed to put up the tent and cook on the stove in the pouring rain — wondering if there were bears and whether the weird insects landing in our candles were going to feed on us.

We slept, just (it was freezing cold), and reloaded the raft and floated-off as the mist lifted from the silver birch trees. We made tea on our stove and basked in the whole experience.

**T**HE SILENCE was interrupted only by the kettle whistling — and Serena's phone ringing. It was Anika, the instructor, wondering where we were. It turned out we were five hours late for the pick-up. At which point, Serena tripped backwards and fell in.

Anika resurfaced, grabbed the raft and heaved herself out quickly. We had a good laugh, but then came the chilling reflection — we had put on our life-jackets only minutes earlier because we were cold. And she was wearing thigh waders tied to her trouser belt. The waders had instantly started filling with water.

We reached our destination and dismantled our raft with some sadness. We had had fun and would certainly like to do it again in the summer, when we could fish and swim (voluntarily). It is normally a five-day trip, which allows the raftees plenty of time to unwind and really go with the flow.

On our drive back to Stockholm, we spent the night in a hotel in the pretty (and pretty expensive) town of Karlstad, where Serena had a classic mother-away-from-home phone conversation with her

little son. 'Hello darling. Everybody alright? Did you win? Oh dear. Maybe if you visit. Oh no! The hospital?' It turned out not to be too serious a sporting injury, but it is an added hazard of travelling: the guilt-trip power of abandoned infants.

Her other son asked her not to bring back a present from Sweden but wondered whether she could get him a video i-Pod instead.

In Stockholm, we stayed at the Grand Hotel. We were met by a porter who took our bags, parked the car and within minutes had us installed in a fabulous suite looking across the harbour to the Royal Palace.

We were in one of the suites given to Nobel Prize winners. All I can say is lucky them. The service was fantastic, the food delicious (especially the Matsbaren restaurant) and the location ideal. And the hotel bar is as hip and buzzing as anything in New York.

We wandered around the old town which is charming and, amazingly for a touristy area, peppered with fabulous shops. And that evening, we saw a production of *Macbeth* at the Royal Theatre. Another tip: don't play *Macbeth* if you look like Austin Powers.

The next day, we went kayaking around Stockholm's many islands with Erik of activity company Greenatlitudes. The kayaks have amazing rudders (making them very easy to steer) and were the perfect way to see the city.

Sadly, it was too cold to swim and not cold enough to skate, but Erik was a splendid guide — like all the Swedes we met, he was articulate, funny and courteous.

Stockholm is really beautiful. The comparison to Venice is an obvious one, although the coffee is definitely cheaper.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Sweden was a great power. And as we finally left for the airport, I couldn't work out why it still isn't one now. Perhaps they're all just having too much fun messing about on the river.



Picture: MAGNUSON