

A taste of Sweden's first marine park

Chris Madigan discovers abundant sea life, colourful cold-water reefs and wild, car-free countryside as one of the first visitors to Sweden's first marine national park in the Koster Islands

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Safe harbour ... new restrictions on fishing, fuel type and anchoring protect the marine life around Sweden's Koster Islands. Photograph: Chris Madigan

It was rush hour at Västra Bryggan, a tiny harbour of ramshackle brown boathouses in the sound separating the two main Koster Islands, off the west coast of Sweden. You could tell it was rush hour because there were people waiting at both quaysides for the little covered chain ferry, akin to a floating bus shelter. A group of retired ladies was doing Tai Chi on the shore and two cormorants had been disturbed by a fishing boat returning to its mooring.



King Carl-Gustav opens the first marine national park. Photograph: Chris Madigan

The previous morning the scene had been different. A ferry had brought hundreds of people over from the mainland to a ceremony marking the inauguration of Sweden's first marine national park, Kosterhavet ("Koster sea"), centred on this archipelago north of Gothenburg and close to the border with Norway. With cars banned on the islands (only little tricycle mopeds called "flakmoppe" help with goods deliveries), the crowds had continued on foot to see

King Carl-Gustav ring the bell marking the official opening. It was all very feudal.

The Koster Islands themselves have long been nature reserves, but now the unique sea life around the archipelago has been officially recognised and protected with restrictions on fishing, fuel type and anchoring, as well as a speed limit of five knots to discourage commercial shipping. At stake is the welfare of 6,000 different marine species, including 200 found nowhere else on the Swedish coast - notably reefs of "lophelia pertusa" cold-water coral.



Koster Sound. Photograph: Chris Madigan

There are as many species again on land, as we discovered on a guided hike across the two main islands with botanist Lars Avidsson. (The 12 sq km of these islands, makes up just 2.5% of the area of the immense new national park). In places, the land is bare and rocky, elsewhere it's highly fertile - a little like Ireland's Burren. The Gothenburg University botanist explained that parts

of the land used to be sea inlets, but rose to dry out, depositing ground sea shells in the soil and leaving it very alkaline, which suits most plants. We even saw 10,000-year-old oyster shells sticking out of a bank of earth in an oak forest.

Walking is just one of the ways you can explore the national park, whose custodians are very aware of its three levels: land (you can hire bicycles); on the water (sea kayaking is very popular); and beneath the waves (either scuba diving or snorkelling).



Fisherman with his 'flakmoppe' motor tricycle.
Photograph: Chris Madigan

Of the two islands, the north is a little more rugged and untamed by farmers - there are clumps of heather and juniper bushes and a rockier shoreline.

Surrounding the main islands lies an archipelago of countless uninhabited skerries. Most are barren, but attractively so. The pinkish-grey granite and gneiss rock (occasionally streaked with volcanic black diabase) forming the islands was left smooth by the ice age, and they barely rise out of the sea,

resembling whales breaking the waves or basking seals.

Taking to the sea the next day, we saw a colony of harbour seals, out towards the remote lighthouse island of Ursholmen. However, all eyes on the research vessel from the Sven Lovén Centre for Marine Sciences were on the remote operated vehicle (ROV) being lowered into the sea. We had anchored up on the edge of the section of the deep Norwegian trench, which brings Atlantic ocean water into the Kosterhavet, increasing salinity and creating the ideal environment for biodiversity. The ROV delivered live proof of this to a screen in the boat's cabin - every inch of the seabed was covered with brightly coloured life: anemones, cushion starfish, flame shells, crabs and crayfish.

It soon became clear why commercial trawling for prawns and crayfish is so damaging: it rips up this habitat to maximise the catch. Thankfully, inside the national park, only sustainable fishing, using small vessels, is allowed. One such fisherman, Niklas Nilsson, the youngest in the islands at 23, offers visitors a chance to find out first hand what harvesting crayfish with pots entails - by taking you out and putting you to work gathering in the catch. It's laborious work and yields a far smaller catch than trawling, but has minimal impact - crucially not destroying the tunnels in which the crayfish live.



Fishing the sustainable way. Photograph:
Chris Madigan

Dressed in bright orange, with thick gloves to protect me against the claws of our catch, I hooked in the buoy that marked the link of 40 pots, reeled in the line and emptied the pots of their contents. There was something compelling and immersive about the activity. You are pulling up the pots that you hope will contain food for your own dinner - so each one that contains two or three crayfish or a large crab feels

like a triumph, as you prize the crustaceans out of the pot; and each one that doesn't is a disappointment, as you throw sea cucumbers, little fish or tiny crabs back into the sea.

Back at the harbour, we had an unusual treat in store. Niklas plunged the catch straight into boiling sea water right there on the pontoon, as he would before selling them to one of the excellent seafood restaurants on the islands for around £1 each. But rather than waiting for the traditional serving method for crayfish - cold with mayonnaise, lemon juice and bread - we got to eat them fresh and hot. The pot method of catching them not only protects their habitat, it improves the flavour too.



Fresh seafood for lunch. Photograph: Chris Madigan

This is perhaps the very paragon of slow food, a movement that has captured the imagination of people in the Koster. There is a smokehouse on South Koster and another by the docks in the gateway town of Strömstad, where Åse Jensen and her husband are bringing back local specialties such as salt-smoked mackerel. On South Koster, Stefan von Bothmer has set up an organic garden and cafe, where flavour-packed dishes such as pumpkin soup and pea hummus offer an

alternative to yet another tempting feast of seafood. The peaceful gardens and greenhouses are tended by volunteers who have signed up for free board and lodging (and use of Stefan's sea kayaks) as "willing workers on organic farms" (www.woof.org).

Before tucking into dinner, however, Stefan takes us on a cycle tour of South Koster. Bicycle is the ideal means of transport here, although, it takes a while to get used to the backward pedal brake system on the local bikes - my ankles took a battering. The tour itself had a very different tone to the botany professor's, as Stefan combined a deep understanding of the anthropological history of the islands with some new age concepts. We cycled down to the unexpected, long Kilesand beach, framed by pine trees. Stefan brought out magnifying loupes and placed them in the sand. Apparently, under every footprint there are 20,000 microscopic worms or larvae and 20 million algae. We couldn't see those individuals, but the little creatures, tiny shells and fragments of minerals the magnifying glasses reveal, looked like an array of jewels to make Bulgari blush.



Sundown on the Koster Islands. Photograph: Chris Madigan

We then climbed Koster's mountain. The 45m fjell afforded a surprisingly comprehensive view - from the mainland coastline to the Ursholmen lighthouses. The sun was setting, throwing the scores of skerries into dramatic relief. Stefan led us down the hill, then we plunged through a tunnel in the bushes to emerge on another bulbous granite outcrop by the sea. Stefan's boathouse, his escape from what little stress there is on these

islands, is one of the most peaceful places I've ever drunk a sundowner.

Getting there

[SAS](#) flies between London Heathrow and Gothenburg for around £167 return, and has optional carbon offsetting built in to its booking system.

[DFDS](#) operates overnight ferries between Harwich and Esbjerg from £43pp one-way, based on four people sharing an ensuite cabin.

[Västrafik](#) runs trains (from SEK240 return) between Gothenburg and Strömstad, from where a ferry (SEK120) takes you to the Koster Islands.

[UK-based Nature Travels](#) offers three-day kayaking and camping trips in the Koster archipelago from £349 (not including travel).