

# Swedish style

Perhaps not the first country that springs to most people's minds when planning a sea kayaking expedition, but with 2000 miles of coastline and a stunning archipelago of 24,000 islands easily reachable from the capital Stockholm, Sweden makes a wonderful destination for a sea kayaking holiday.

WORDS & PHOTOS Sofia Carter, Nature Travels



Sweden has a number of archipelago areas, each with its own special characteristics. Norrbotten archipelago in the far north covers a very large area and is ideally suited to extended trips. Further south there is the Högå Kusten (High Coast) with its rocky, dramatic islands, while the Stockholm archipelago is a wonderful combination of the remote and the accessible.

To the south of Stockholm lies the region of Sörmland, an area with an abundance of water and a picturesque archipelago made up of thousands of islands of granite and gneiss. When I was invited to join a trip to Sörmland, I jumped at the chance.

I was born in the archipelago town of Vaxholm and spent all my childhood summers at our summer

house out on one of the lush, tree-covered islands of the central Stockholm 'skärgård', so I am no stranger to the unique charms of this part of Sweden. But in the Sörmland archipelago it is possible to experience both the green landscape of the inner islands and the wide, wild expanses of the rocky, uninhabited skerries in the outer regions even on a shorter tour.

And so, at the beginning of June, beneath bright blue skies, I boarded my Ryanair flight to Stockholm Skavsta (more convenient for the Sörmland area than Stockholm's main airport, Arlanda), to begin my three-day Friday to Sunday sea kayaking adventure. June is a lovely time to visit Sweden, a time when the evenings seem to last forever and there is a certain buzz in the air as the Swedes prepare for the coming midsummer celebrations.

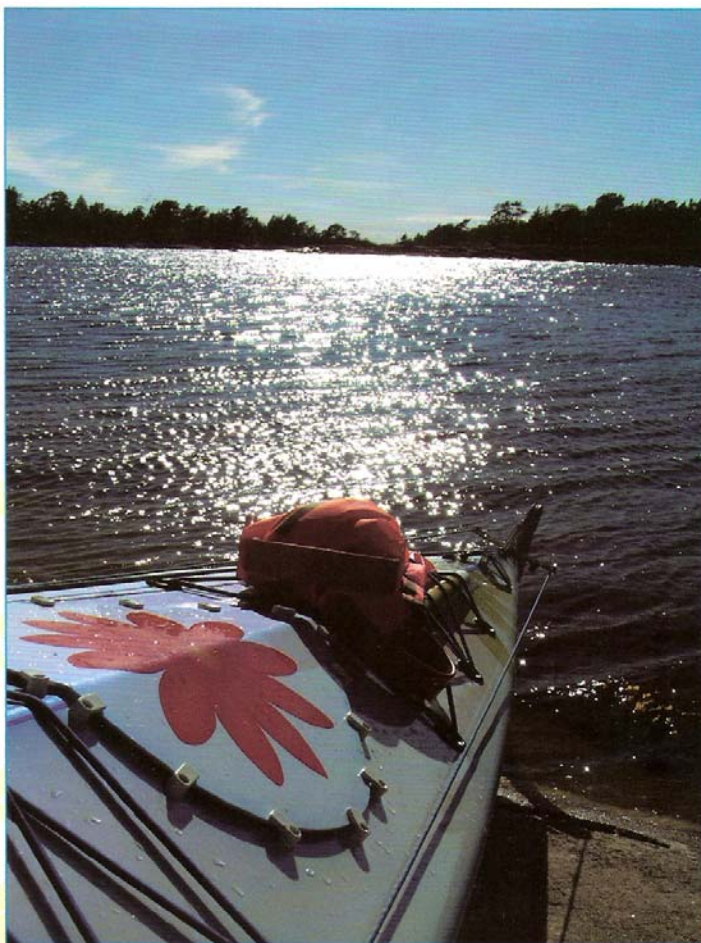
Our group, made up of both English and Swedish paddlers, assembled at Stendörren nature reserve in the afternoon on the Friday. We were treated to our first 'fika' (a Swedish expression, which loses a lot when translated to 'coffee and cake break' — this is not just a question of food, but a central part of Swedish culture!), which gave us a taste of the high quality food we could be expecting on the rest of the trip.

During the fika we were introduced to each other and to the guides Erik and Tommy. I was very impressed to discover that Tommy was a former Olympic kayaking silver medalist, and I was determined to make the most of my chance to learn from a pro over the coming days. Erik took the opportunity to take us through the itinerary for the weekend. He went through a few practical points and gave us some tips on effective paddling technique.

When we had all been fed and watered, we were shown our kayaks and taken through the kayaking and camping equipment: spray skirts, paddles, sleeping mats and top-of-the-range Hilleberg tents.

With a little help and advice from our guides, we packed the kayaks. Although I have been sea kayaking before, I still count myself as something of a novice and I was amazed how much equipment could be stowed in the kayaks. When I saw all the kit spread out on the shore — a startling selection of food, good wines, beer, tents and sleeping mats, I thought, "This will never fit!" But somehow it all disappeared into the bowels of the kayaks and at last we were ready to take to the water.

We all felt a little nervous at first. I was in a single kayak, and I



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was expecting it to feel less stable than the twins, but it took just a few minutes before I felt completely at ease. The sea kayaks we were using were made by VKV, a Swedish family company that has been making high quality kayaks for generations.

Sea kayaks, or touring kayaks, are longer, more stable versions of the kayaks intended for whitewater paddling. They are effectively small boats with a spray skirt to keep you dry during your adventures. While less manoeuvrable than whitewater kayaks, they are more comfortable and have a greater capacity in the body of the kayak for storage of luggage and camping equipment.

The extra storage space means that you can take everything you need with you, making sea kayaks perfect for extended trips around the Swedish archipelagos. And thanks to the 'Every Man's Right' system of public access, wild camping is generally permitted on most of the islands, so finding a place to pitch your tent is a breeze!

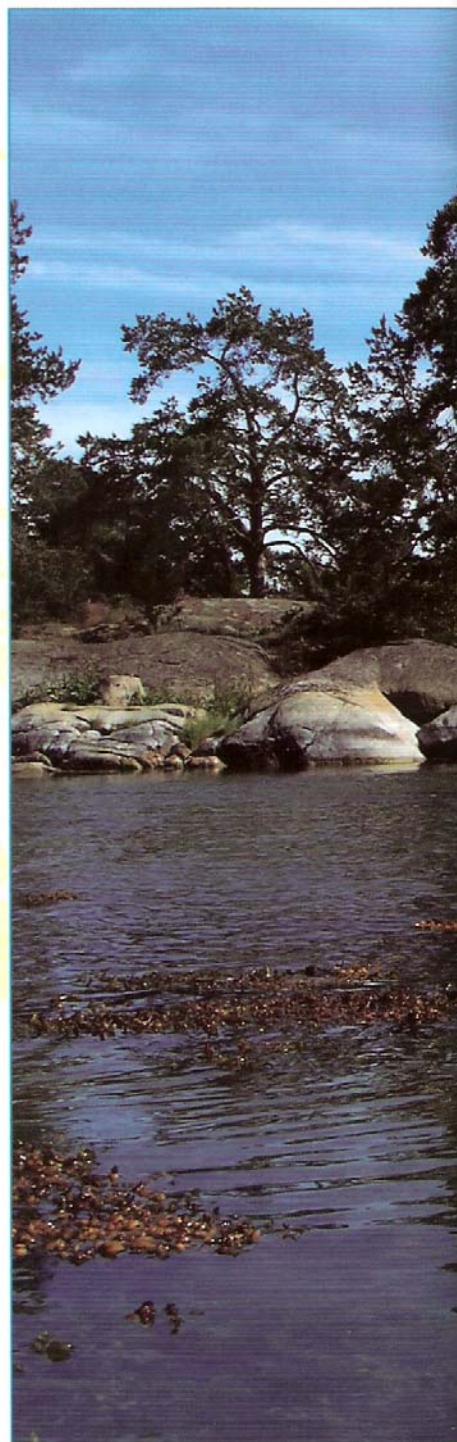
As a participant on this tour, you are told that, "All you need to do is paddle", and this certainly turned out to be the case. While the next three days were certainly active, they were never exhausting — perfect for me, as someone who loves and appreciates being in the outdoors but was not made for extreme sports! During our days on the water, we were given snacks to keep our mood and energy levels up and when we broke for the evening the first thing that was unpacked from

the kayaks was a little table with a red and white tablecloth, on which magically appeared a selection of wines, beers, Coke, parma ham and crisps. In fact, I had to keep glancing at the gorgeous panorama of rocks and sea lit by the setting sun and our kayaks pulled up out of the water for the night to remind myself I was on a camping trip and not enjoying an aperitif in some rather upmarket restaurant!

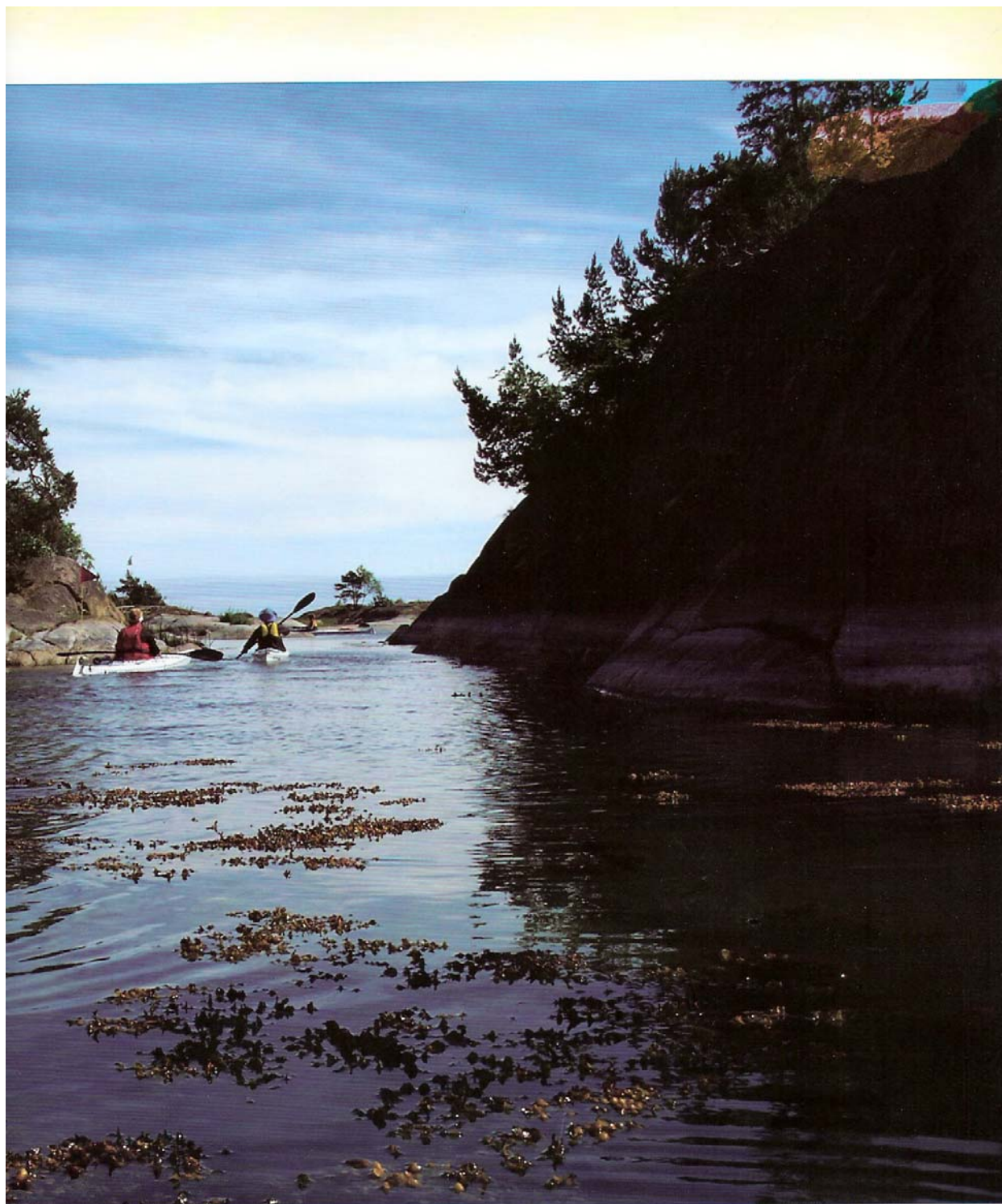
After sitting down for a snack, Erik showed us how to pitch our tents on the rock. The tent was surprisingly easy to put up and we chose our spots. Then we sat down on our sleeping mats, which cunningly converted into comfortable armchairs, with a glass of wine and waited while the guides finished cooking our three-course dinner. I myself am not used to such luxury, but I quickly became accustomed to the pampering and let my mind wander to my less fortunate colleagues I had abandoned back in the UK.

After dinner, we sat back to relax, enjoy the evening and share our impressions of the day while our guides cleared up. "It's like having your own buller!" one of the Irish girls pointed out. Finally, the guides finished their chores and joined us to chat and watch the sun sink in a blaze of colour below the horizon. As the light faded, feeling rather full and very content, I crawled into my sleeping bag and slept like a baby.

This was the first of three wonderful days sea kayaking out in the



wild reaches of the Sörmland archipelago. Over the course of the trip we explored the waters around a multitude of islands, rocks and skerries, made detours into hidden bays, and even took an afternoon out to climb one of the outcrops for a magnificent view out over the archipelago world. While never forcing their knowledge on



us, our guides were always willing to offer advice and assistance. I was delighted as I found my kayaking technique improving by the hour, until by the end of the trip I have to admit to feeling rather proud of my progress under Tommy's patient and skilful tutelage.

For me, watching out for wildlife is a central part of any outdoor

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experiences, and I was thrilled when I spotted white-tailed eagles and osprey soaring majestically above us, and equally thrilled as each evening I was served a mouth-watering procession of quality food, from chocolate cake to seafood soup to fillet steak. Erik believes strongly that good food is an essential part of the outdoor experience, and I have to say that I agree wholeheartedly. Somehow the kind of indulgences you would feel guilty about at home seem perfectly justified after a (moderately) hard day's kayaking out on the water!

It was with mixed feelings that we paddled into shore on the Sunday afternoon. I was sad to be leaving new-found friends, as well as this truly magnificent marine environment. But my head and heart was full of memories of our adventures and a warm glow of pride at our achievements. Although my body

felt a little tired, my spirit had rarely felt so invigorated and I was already beginning to wonder how long it would be before I could once again take to the water...

Sea kayaking is environmentally friendly and an appealing and accessible way to travel, suitable for adventurers of all ages who enjoy open spaces, salt air and the feeling of being at one with nature. When you're paddling along at three miles an hour, you're moving at the speed humans were designed to go. No vessel allows you quite such an intimate relationship with the water around you as a kayak. In a sea kayak, you are not so much on the water as a part of it.

With the waves lapping gently at the side of the boat and the cries of seabirds echoing across the water, sometimes it seems that the Swedish coastline might have been created just for sea kayakers: so get paddling!

Sofia Carter works for Nature Travels, the only company in the UK specialising solely in outdoor and wildlife holidays in Sweden.

Nature Travels offers a wide range of year-round responsible travel experiences and ecotourism holidays in Sweden for independents, families and groups. Sea Kayaking in Sörmlands Archipelago is available on fixed dates between June and September and 2007 tours cost from \$277 per person. Groups of minimum six can book the experience on other dates by arrangement. To find out more visit [www.naturetravels.co.uk](http://www.naturetravels.co.uk) or telephone 01929 463774.