



LESLIE FORSBERG

Swedish Idyll

Swedish folklore blends with modern charms

By Eric Lucas

The lilac is colloquially known as the “queen of shrubs”—a humdrum moniker that fails to do justice to the stately, fragrant and lively ancient lilacs I’m riding past on Sweden’s lovely Baltic Sea island, Gotland. We’re in the serene countryside of Gotland’s far southern tip, using bicycles for a day trip, and the scene at each old farmstead is wondrous. A century or more ago, it seems, most every farmer on the

island lined his lane with lilacs. Today the bushes thrive beyond all expectations.

Still grows the vivacious lilac a generation after the door and lintel and the sill are gone, unfolding its sweet-scented flowers each spring, to be plucked by the musing traveler; planted and tended once by children’s hands, in front-

yard plots—now standing by wall-sides in retired pastures. ...

So wrote Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, perhaps around the same time these very bushes were set in the ground. Indeed, here on Gotland the lilacs are sometimes the only hint left of a farmstead,

and my companion, Leslie, and I have ridden past dozens of such stands of lilacs.

We’ve also passed innumerable still-sturdy homesteads with ice-cream-colored stucco walls and russet tile roofs. Vast fields of ripening hay are bordered by poppy-clad fencerows and ivory-trunked birches. On twin-track gravel paths hugging the Baltic shore, platoons of wildflowers paint the gently sloping land in whites and yellows.

Gulls wheel and cry above. Wavelets brush the shore. The sunlight is spread wide by light clouds above.

Author Eric Lucas pedals past a Gotland farm, its fencerow lilacs in full bloom.

GOTLAND—its name refers to the original inhabitants, the Gutes, who may have also been the Goths—is a remarkably inviting but little-known corner of Scandinavia. It was better known a millennium ago, when its compact and charming capital, Visby, was one of the centers of the Hanseatic League, a confederation of Baltic-region merchant guilds, and trading vessels sailed from here to Russia, Istanbul and Africa. Vikings roared past these shores; traders and adventurers flocked to Visby; settlers of many types came and went.

Small Swedish cultural-interest signs point into woods and meadows to spotlight ... well, mysteries. The wise visitor will wander off to them and find everything from historic barns to Neolithic ruins.

Today, Gotland is a quiet, pastoral retreat; 700,000 people visit the island each year, most of them European. The majority stick close to Visby. The climate is near-Mediterranean, the lifestyle peaceful and agrarian, the visitor appeal based on the island's present serenity and past heritage.

"I wonder if we'll ever see a car?" I ask Leslie, as we pedal a back road past a pine forest, two hours into our ride. This is not a complaint, nor is it even a real question. We have seen cars. Two.

Reminders of Gotland's deep heritage appear periodically around the island. Standing stones—flat sheaves of slate set upright in the ground for unknown purposes—still rise mysteriously beneath birch trees one-tenth the markers' age. A ship setting—pointed stones arranged in the ground in the outline of a ship hull—marks a long-ago chieftain's burial site. Churches older than entire civilizations soar atop massive stone buttresses beside patriarch oaks.



ROBERT MATTON AB / ALAMY

Old stone windmills still dot the Gotland countryside. Some have been revived to mill heritage grains, such as spelt, recently rediscovered on the island.

We stop for a picnic lunch in the side yard of one such church, in Vamlingbo, an ancient hamlet whose imposing 13th century church has medieval wall murals that depict the archangel Michael weighing the soul of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry

II. Henry was the only Germanic monarch to be canonized, and in the 13th century, Gotland was, as part of the Hanseatic League, as Germanic as it was Swedish.

Down the road is a gorgeous restored thatch-roof barn that houses a farm museum.

Beneath the rafters are historic implements and tools.

A small cafe serves a Gotland specialty: saffron cake.

The rest of the afternoon takes us around a district of fallow fields, tidy woods and peaceful farmhouses hidden behind ancient hedges. The afternoon's colors are straw gold and pine green, and wisps of birdsong ride the sea breeze. On one

stretch, we pass a low ridge dotted with stone windmills. Roaming the field are Gotland sheep, a unique breed whose ewes have horns, just like rams. The windmills are still and silent, but elsewhere on the island they have been revived to mill Gotland spelt, a species of wheat.

GOTLAND IS A 1,212-SQUARE-MILE package of surprises. Visby is an ancient walled-

WHAT TO EAT

Although it is far from the Mediterranean climes in which saffron is grown, Gotland was on extensive trade routes in ancient times that brought the fragrant spice north. Thus the signature Gotland treat, **saffron cake**, a sort of thick pudding that blends rice, cinnamon, almonds and saffron. Look for it in any coffee shop (the Swedes take coffee seriously!) or on dessert menus. —E.L.



GRANFELT, LENA / GETTY IMAGES



COLOURIA MEDIA / ALAMY

Above: A herd of Swedish “Gotlandsruss” ponies roam free near Lojsta moor in Gotland.
Below: A standing picture stone is displayed at the Bunge open-air museum in Gotland.

fortress city remarkably similar to those a thousand miles south in the Mediterranean. Roses spill over stone walls, and warm sun burnishes red-tile roofs. Medieval churches ruined by long-ago wars hold small courtyards where visitors savor coffee and pastries. Cobblestone lanes lead past ivory-walled stucco villas to centuries-old watchtowers. A World Heritage Site, Visby has been deemed by UNESCO to be the best-preserved fortified commercial city in Northern Europe.

The whole island has fewer than 60,000 inhabitants: About a third of those live in Visby. Not that the city feels crowded—even on a summer day, with two big ferries at dock, the city’s history museum is quiet as we wander the rooms and halls.

Having bought pastries and coffee in a small cafe halfway up the city’s hillside, we settle in among the ruins of a church reincarnated as a grassy courtyard. This commerce, small though it is, melds with the ancient Gotlandish mercantile character, revealed in one of European archaeology’s biggest surprises in the late 1990s. That’s when the Spillings Hoard—the largest silver treasure ever found, with 14,300

coins, 486 bracelets and many other valuables, totaling 148 pounds of silver—was discovered, some 1,200 years after being hidden under the floorboards of an ancient farmhouse.

Peering through the glass encasing the collection at the history museum, we eventually discern a remarkable fact: Virtually all of the coins are Persian or Turkish. No North European country was minting coinage in the late days of the first millennium (the hoard dates to A.D. 870), and traders bought and sold in the common currency of the time, which they brought back from their journeys to the eastern



ARMANDS PHARYOS / ALAMY

WHEN YOU GO

While it’s almost exactly in the center of the Baltic between Sweden and Latvia, Gotland is indelibly Swedish—so much so that the movies and TV shows based on the beloved children’s books character **Pippi Longstocking** were filmed here. The house used for Villa Villekulla can still be seen in an island amusement park, Kneippbyn Activity Centre.



HEMIS / ALAMY

Two ferry routes reach Gotland from the mainland, departing Nynashamn, south of Stockholm, or Oskarshamn, near Öland. Crossings take three hours; for more information, visit destinationgotland.se/en, which is also the best source of general travel information about the island.

Multiple daily flights reach Visby from both Stockholm airports, Bromma and Arlanda; fares are generally less than \$100 and flights take about 45 minutes.

Where to stay

The vast majority of Gotland visitors rent small vacation cottages, called *stuga*, with kitchens and small yards; both vrbo.com and airbnb.com list a wide range of choices. In Scandinavia, you’re expected to bring your own linens.

In Visby, **Hotell Strandporten** features airy rooms in shades of ivory and blue, and is within just minutes of the city’s museums, parks, cathedral and docks; gtsab.se/strandporten.

Outside Visby, the other options are holiday resorts with family cottages and communal dining rooms. **Holmhällar** is one such, at the island’s quiet south end, near Vamlingbo. There’s a nice beach; holmhallar.se. —E.L.



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Gotland, Sweden

Mediterranean and Middle East.

Elsewhere on the island are wild horses, which here on Gotland are forest creatures. Ponies, really. Sturdy little denizens of a piney woods. We approach the Gotland ponies by treading carefully down sandy tracks through quiet copses where cloud shadows play with tree limbs, and we find the horses by spying their flicking tails. We carefully peer around pine trunks on the theory that the animals might spook.

As I move closer, the half-dozen

Legend has it that
Gotland was once
an enchanted isle
that rose from the
sea each evening
and sank every
morning.

Gotland ponies exercise an equine prerogative I have seen before: Even though they're well aware of me, I don't really exist until I reach the point where I wander into their personal space. Then they look up, staring stolidly as if I had just landed in a spaceship.

That night we head out for dinner at a delicatessen at the edge of a tiny farm hamlet. Hablingbo Deli, it turns out, has divine crusty table bread. We also order soup and handmade pizza, a Swedish mainstay that in the Hablingbo version measures up to any we've had anywhere: thick crust, savory fresh toppings of sheep cheese and Baltic anchovies.

While we're waiting, I inquire about the bread. Turns out it includes a heritage spelt grown on the island and "discovered" right nearby.

"Is it as old as the Spillings Hoard?" I ask. The server smiles. "Older. Ancient. Like nowhere else," he says.

MORE ANCIENT HISTORY awaits down the road the next evening. Following a path indicated by yet another cultural-interest

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sign, we encounter an otherworldly sight: a vast dryland barrens. The scene is sheer Tolkien: mist races past, distant dark woods seem to harbor trolls, and the landscape—which might be called a moor elsewhere—is marked only by huge rock barrows. These seven cairns, the largest 25 feet tall and 150 feet across, are among the more than 1,300 such on Gotland.

Most are smaller. They're of uncertain age, but surely thousands of years old, and may have served as watchpoints, or burial mounds, or beacons—no one is sure. A ceremonial stone, believed by archaeologists to have been used for sacrifices, rests near one of the cairns. While we're inspecting that stone, a cool mist rises behind us and dampens our shoulders.

Legend has it that Gotland was once an enchanted isle that rose from the sea each evening and sank every morning, so perhaps the barrows held fire beacons to lure in wayward sailors. Geologically speaking, the island has been above and beneath the Baltic surface many times, and human beings have been here 7,000 years.

Maybe those earlier civilizations built the cairns, but the locals heartily embrace their mythology: Perhaps it was a race of Nordic giants that built the cairns.

As we head back to our cottage, the mist lifts and the evening light angles through a small stand of birches. We fall asleep long before the summer sun falls into the sea, and wake the next morning to the same light and the quiet chuffing of nearby horses. ▲

Eric Lucas is contributing editor at Alaska Beyond.

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