

Lots more than hockey on Swedish trip

By Terry Pook

Arriving at 11:30 a.m. Swedish time on Dec. 27, we were welcomed by an enthusiastic group with flag waving, hugs, warm greetings and a renewal of acquaintances for those who had met last year.

We boarded a bus that was so long that even Diane Sorensen would have trouble manoeuvring it! The driver for this trip from Arlanda airport to Akersberga had the duty (dare I call it pleasure?) of transporting our group numerous times throughout the next 12 days.

He truly deserved the hat, exchange pins and thank-you gift from our team!

Host families

In Akersberga, we gathered with our hosts in the gymnasium of the Akersberga Sports Complex for a welcome snack consisting of coffee, soft drinks and "glog", a traditional, warm, wine-based concoction served with almonds and raisins.

After greetings from the Akersberga mayor and hockey officials, our boys were matched with the families with whom they would be staying. Some of the host families had sons who were no longer playing hockey or who had moved up from Bantam, but were keen to return the hospitality they had received in St. Marys last Christmas.

We soon discovered that almost everyone spoke English very well, and this certainly helped the boys feel more comfortable. As the host families took over complete responsibility for their billeted hockey player, the parents bid their sons farewell and were then taken to their hotels in Stockholm, a 40-minute drive away.

Stockholm hotels

Akersberga, a coastal town about the size of Stratford, is basically a "bedroom" community where most people commute to work in Stockholm. The Akersberga committee, therefore, decided to accommodate the adults in Stockholm, which they felt offered better shopping and restaurants, as well as places of historical interest.

The Hotel Parlan, which St. Marys Midget parents stayed at when in Sweden four years ago, was filled to capacity with our folk and still couldn't accommodate all of us. We also filled two floors in the Hotel Kommendoren, a couple of blocks away. Both hotels are barely noticeable from the street, just a doorway marked with a small brass name plate. Breakfast was provided for all guests, a Swedish smorgasbord of plain yogurt, cereals, a variety of breads, meats, cheese, fish pate, vegetables, lindenberry jam and an assortment of beverages.

Although the Kommendoren hotel could boast of a fitness program (we had to climb five flights of stairs to our rooms), we envied the Parlan people who bragged daily about the eggs in their breakfast buffet!

Both hotels were conveniently located near the subway and train station, with the main shopping area of downtown Stockholm being only a 20-minute walk away.

Stockholm

The city of Stockholm is over 700 years old and richly deserves its title "Venice of the North". It is situated on 14 islands with numerous bridges and waterways throughout the city.

Stockholm is very different from North American cities in that there are no skyscrapers downtown. Most buildings are about six stories high. The numerous parks, squares and treed boulevards lend a feeling of tranquility and intimacy to a city of over 1,000,000 people.

Shopping

Stockholm offers shops, department stores, markets and enclosed malls to satisfy even the most avid shopper. One of the main streets downtown is closed to traffic to form a mile long outdoor pedestrian shopping walkway.

On Thursdays, one of the squares becomes a flourishing market with the most incredible array of open-air flower shops and fruit stalls. Popular souvenirs are beautiful Swedish crystal and leather goods, hand-woven table runners, woolen mittens, candle holders, Hard Rock Cafe T-shirts, and unique Swedish Christmas decorations.

One store did a fine business selling us an unusual kitchen utensil, a flat whisk which apparently will help to create the perfect gravy or sauce.

Shopping was particularly enjoyable in "Old Town", the original city of Stockholm which dates back to 1200 a.d. Most of the buildings and cobblestone streets have been preserved with shops, restaurants and small businesses on street level with apartments above. A short detour down a tiny side alleyway might lead to the discovery of a basement cafe nestled into the original town wall where one could take a break and enjoy Swedish coffee and a delicious apple streudel with warm vanilla sauce.

Canadians are already louding protesting the proposed 7 per cent Goods and Services Tax. In Sweden there is a similar tax already in place called the Value Added Tax, adding 23 per cent to the price of everything! Tourists can get a rebate on this tax if they produce their receipts and their parcels sealed in the original bag at the airport when they are leaving the country.

Food in Sweden

Our preconceptions of exorbitant prices and a diet of sour yogurt, fish and potatoes were soon dispelled. Host families made every effort to cater to the tastes of their billets, while at the same time giving us the opportunity to savor traditional Swedish fare.

Many of us were invited to our son's host for coffee, dinner or for a late evening snack. Swedish coffee is very strong and is usually taken black. Like espresso, it is made by boiling the grounds in a pot of water and then filtering into a carafe for serving. Some of us were unable to enjoy it, some grew to like it, one said "this is the coffee I've been waiting for all my life!"

Fish is a main staple in the Swedes' diet. We were able to try marinated herring with dill or with mustard sauce, anchovy scalloped potato casserole, shrimp appetizers and salmon prepared in a variety of ways.

Stockholm offers a wide choice of international cuisine, including McDonald's! Although restaurant food can be expensive (McDonald's is more than twice the price it is here, a bottled beer is \$9), there are many luncheon cafes that offer homemade soups, open-faced sandwiches and a Swedish pastry for a reasonable price.

Tax and a service charge are included in the menu price.

Climate and landscape

With a latitude equal to the southern tip of Greenland and part of the country within the Arctic Circle, one would expect much colder temperatures than we experienced. Sweden is warmed by the Gulf Stream and seems to have a climate similar to ours.

We were comfortable with temperatures ranging from -1 to -4, with no wind or snow in Stockholm. A couple of days were quite foggy, two were clear and sunny, most were overcast. When we travelled north of the city, there was a little more snow and colder temperatures. The countryside is fairly flat, with rocks, lakes, fir and birch trees reminiscent of Northern Ontario.

In Stockholm, the daylight hours are few in winter and long in summer. When we were there, the sun rose about 9:30 a.m. and began to set by 3 p.m. In the summer we were told it never gets totally dark and golfers can tee off until 11:30 p.m.!

Recreational facilities

With 10 hockey games in 12 days, we had the opportunity to see several arenas and sports complexes in the Stockholm area. The premiere structure is the Globe Arena in Stockholm, the largest spherical building in the world.

With a flexible interior reminiscent of the SkyDome, it is designed to accommodate sport and cultural events, with seating for 16,000 spectators. Although we didn't play in this arena, our group was taken on an official tour and some returned later in the week to see a professional hockey game.

Almost all hockey in Sweden was played on outdoor rinks until approximately 15 years ago. We played in some rinks which had once been outdoor, but are now covered with a wooden shell. These buildings tend to be rather cold. The dressing rooms were in another building across a parking lot.

Other arenas were fairly new beautiful structures with high ceilings and attractive in their use of wood for beams, walls and seating areas. The Marsta arena dressing room even had a sauna in it. Most arenas also had an outdoor rink adjacent to them.

This outdoor rink would be maintained by the same staff and flooding equipment as the main arena and if it had cold pipes underneath it, it would share the same compressor equipment used indoors. An idea for St. Marys? Most arenas also housed gymnasiums in the building; one included an indoor pool.

Our host town, Akersberga, maintained not only an indoor arena and an outdoor rink, but a bandy rink as well.

Bandy is the Swedish game with rules rather like soccer, but played on skates with field-hockey styled sticks and a small hard rubber ball. The ice surface is immense, probably four times the size of a hockey rink.

Our Bantams played bandy at a rink about a half-hour drive north of Akersberga. The bus stopped at the side of the road in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. We were directed towards a path into the forest which we walked along for quite some distance in the gathering dusk.

Suddenly we came upon a clearing in the woods, a huge well-lit artificial

ice surface, unlike anything we had ever seen before. A small wooden building at the side served as the dressing room. At minus 12 degrees outside, many spectators used it to come in for a cup of strong coffee from a thermos and just to keep warm!

We were very aware of the central part that physical activity plays in the daily life of Sweden. On a Sunday or holiday, everywhere we went we saw people outdoors walking, enjoying the fresh air and each other's company.

One sunny afternoon, we drove by a large frozen lake and saw dozens of people skating, pulling toboggans, pushing strollers and just walking on the ice. The physical activity and healthy diet must have their effects as we noticed how very few Swedes were overweight.

Transportation

Most of us quickly adopted the habit of walking almost everywhere while in the city itself. Downtown Stockholm seemed to have relatively little traffic compared with London or Toronto and no visible parking lots.