

News from Sweden #4 Nyheter från Sverige

We've been under a seemingly impenetrable dark cloud layer for days with an occasional day of mixed clouds and sun. This morning we have sunshine and blue skies, a bright omen. Actual daylight is about 8 hours, 30 minutes but with heavy clouds, dark is the operative word. The Sun's maximum attitude is about 15.24 degrees with a direction of 186.87 degrees south. In other words, low on the horizon, looking south. Our view is from the imposing altitude of approximately 50 meters (164 feet) including building height. It is impossible to describe the feeling when the sun shines except 'Lightness of Being'. We also play music from Kona. When we have a clear night sky it is possible to see the Northern lights display.

We have big differences in daylight 'up here' (we are living over 1700 miles north of Julian/San Diego and 5578 flying miles east), nine time zones away. Daylight ranges from 6+ hours to near 18 hours/day over the year, however in the far north, the sun does not set at all in June and in January around the clock darkness. There is hope: the winter Solstice is December 21 (46 days more) when the days will be getting longer by seconds then minutes. Covid-19 has put a major damper on everything including travel. The government doesn't issue orders here. They make suggestions and recommendations, and it happens. Swedes follow their leaders, very little protest if any! No mask wearing, the Chief Scientist for Sweden doesn't believe in them. Therefore, there is not much going on, and everything except essential services is closed. A real bummer.

This is a quiet neighborhood. The only noise is coming from neighbors who work for a living & when their kids return from kindergarten and run through the apartment just because it's fun to make noise (high frequency). The woman upstairs, whom I call 'Thunder Thighs' adds the base, unless they have a pet elephant. No real complaints, it's apartment living.

The Swedes have tried hard to keep the economy going and doing relatively well with that. You are usually working from home if you have a job. And, as in the US, many folks here are going stir crazy. With the mild weather walking is an alternative to a slow death while sequestered. We bought walking sticks. The other nine Nordic countries are not happy with Sweden's approach to Covid-19 and have issued orders for very restricted travel followed by required two-week quarantine periods for anyone travelling to and from Sweden. One may need a Covid-19 test card if one has been to Sweden or leaving. We wear our face masks whenever out in public.

There was a minor crisis here on 1 November (a Swedish holiday) among the American expats because the liquor stores (Systembolaget) were closed. Our neighbor coerced us into joining a senior organization (SPF Seniorerna). One activity they have is called 'carpet curling' played inside a gymnasium (now closed till spring due to Covid-19). Teams of two compete hurling 'stones' (weighing about 10 lbs.) down a carpet with rules much like shuffleboard. It takes me two days to recover. My right arm is now longer. Even as the oldest guy there, my partner and I won the last tournament. I don't need to play anymore, I've done it all. But my neighbor Thore will prod me to join the group in the spring again. I have no choice: either die or deal with long arms.

Christmas or Jul holidays begin on 1 December and continue until 13 January on to Saint Knut's Day. Stores however started exhibiting both Halloween and Christmas decorations before Halloween, reserved for the day before All Saints Day-weekend. Trick or

treating for Halloween is becoming more widespread as the economic benefits became more apparent. There are religious groups who think it is all witchcraft and fret over disturbing the Gods. We Pagans are hoping it wakes them up. The merchants still have hope for shoppers. At least they held off on Christmas music.

There is nothing like Stockholm during the holidays especially with a little snow. Walking around in Stockholm's Gamla Stan (Old Town) with all the Christmas lights and decorated store windows is, as if, in a living art gallery. It may not happen this year. Stockholm has installed a new 140-meter-long, 3,500-ton golden-colored pedestrian, railroad & automobile bridge section over Lake Mälaren connecting the South Island with the entrance to Gamla Stan. A special ship was built to transport the bridge on the 20,333 Km (12635 mile) ocean journey from China. The installation of the huge Chinese-built section can be seen on u-Tube. We watched the installation of the bridge on TV, with the ship being lowered under the water in order to fit the bridge into place. Extraordinary engineering feat! The maximum tolerance of difference was max 25mm. The King and Crown Princess (my new best friend) dedicated the opening. It's stunning!

The weather has been relatively mild (varying from 40-60 degrees with a mild wind, some light rain). The winters have been mild the last two years in this area and likely the same this year. The more northern areas have had snow and a few snowstorms. The Sami Jokkmokk market in Lapland during February, an event ongoing for 415 years, has been cancelled much to Ingrid's disappointment. She had planned to attend with a friend. Lapland is in the seriously Arctic region of Sweden, nearly a 4-hour flight from here. Many Reindeer products and crafts are offered for sale.

The cashless/digital society is driving us a little crazy. Likely not a problem for a native born. Ingrid is becoming a master using the iPhone to conduct business. If you want to frighten a merchant to death try to pay with cash. A credit or debit card is essential. Nearly everything else is done with an iPhone including operating the TV. Our, old trembling fingers are not built for such a plan. I am still wondering what the banks do here, because what we ask them to do (like deposit a check or take cash) is not possible, only special dedicated banks do such simple things. I wonder why people are working in banks, they do not seem to know anything, just use robots. I must be polite now or this article would be filled with more color than a New England fall. Additionally, a simple purchase must also include one's personal number (Social security number), sometimes an ID, some code or other before the transaction is completed. Security is a priority and time consuming. I am assuming all this inconvenience slows down the bad guys too.

Despite, what some in the US believe, the Swedish police are actually taking action against the bad guys. Now if they could just improve sentencing. The immigrant population is not committing the crimes as some folks in Sweden and the US believe. The regular low-life Swedish-born, who hate immigrants and everything else make up the gangs: Angry, disenfranchised and ignorant. Muslim ghettos have formed in Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö, full of young men without work. Speaking Swedish and having a skill is mandatory for most jobs, the latter most immigrants/refuges do not have.

Our little community has been here since 400BC and now has many 'new' immigrants making for a rather diverse group: Folks from the Middle East, Slovak countries, the transient families of Romas, a few American and British ex-pats. Still the natives are very reserved and must be engaged. The young are plugged into an iPhone so engagement is complicated. While only a 20-minute train trip (25 km) into Stockholm, this still affordable area is considered the suburbs. One would never know the population is about 42,000.

While there is an urban center most surrounding areas are very rural with farms and villas within minutes by car. We have now been inoculated with 3 of 5 tick vaccines and both pneumonic bacterium and flu vaccines. I am having dreams from scenes of 'Young Frankenstein'.

We have yet to figure out paying for parking. I am not sure how long we can plead ignorance. The library is wonderful, however I have read nearly all the books they have in English, starting now on pre-kindergarten Swedish books (Åsa loves Lasse, but Lasse loves Ulla, who in fact loves Åsa), the usual love triangle for kids books. Rather exciting. I am looking forward to the pre-adolescent stage, my own as well as authored in kids' books.

Prior to complete lockdown we traveled a bit for family purposes: Söderhamn along the Baltic north for fun with relatives and touching base with newly discovered relatives, a funeral in Sollefteå, a visit to my ancestors' graves at Högsjö kyrka (church) and my mother's family farm in Judeby near Ramvik, then lunch at Axmar Brygga across from the old Englund compound on an inlet from the Baltic. We all enjoyed a Swedish river fish. The Brygga (dock) is a refurbished stone building once used as a warehouse for the old steel mill. The building was built from slag, a byproduct of steel production. The steel mill closed in the late 30s. It was the place where generations of Englund men worked. Working conditions there drove my grandfather (Farfar) to immigrate to the US. Photos of some family members are still on the wall upstairs.

We stored the red truck in Borlänge (200kms north) to avoid buying winter tires for it. We bought a demo with only a handful of miles, thus lowering the cost significantly. It is a red 2020 Toyota Corolla hybrid, an absolutely fantastic vehicle, with heated steering wheel & seats. By Swedish law: snow tires by 1 Nov. or else. They come off when we are instructed to do so. Many people just garage the car in winter receiving a rebate on their car insurance & road tax during the winter period. Both of our vehicles have been winterized including plugin systems to warm the engine and passenger area.

We have enjoyed lunches in an old estate and a former castle and, concerts at nearby Fresta and Eds churches. One thing we did immediately was install bird feeders on the outside balcony feeding the few birds remaining in Sweden over the winter. They did not fly to Spain where we should have been now.

We welcome your calls. Use 'WhatsApp' or 'Facetime' between 0600 and 1200 hours your time (1500-2100 our time). Oh yes, they removed the 'Farhinders' (speed bumps) from the smaller roads making it easier for the snowplows. You can stop laughing now.

Our very best,
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