NORTHERN EXPOSURE

With lush forests, raging rivers, magnificent mountains and the old-meets-new beauty of its cosmopolitan capital, Stockholm, at its heart, Sweden is a beautiful, yet expensive, place to visit. But it will capture the heart of travellers of every stripe, from sporty mountaineers to culture buffs seeking relaxation. FC Magazine takes a look at one of the world’s most beautiful countries.

BY ALEXANDRA ROACH

Between Denmark and Sweden lies the Kattegat, a small sea which drains into the Baltic Sea through the Danish straits to the south, and into the North Sea toward Norway and the Arctic. It is from across this sea that hundreds of thousands of the more than five million tourists who visit Sweden annually journey to this fascinating slice of Scandinavia, usually on large ferries from Denmark or Britain.

Floating into Swedish waters via boat is the perfect introduction to a nation famed for its lakes, wetlands and love of the sea. Indeed, as you sail toward the rocky outcroppings which lead the way to the famed port city of Gothenburg (or, as the Swedes call it, Göteborg), the pristine coastline is dotted with people holding all manner of fishing rods, as well as those braver souls casting their lines from fishing boats of all shapes and sizes.

Left: Nature’s true wonder the Northern Lights, or aurora borealis.
The marvel of Scandinavian engineering that is the Älvsborg Bridge, which stretches for almost a kilometre and towers more than 100 metres above the water, is the first of Gothenburg’s impressive landmarks to greet seafaring visitors, the bridge’s soaring rectangular towers flanking the city’s eclectic, ancient-meets-modern skyline.

In all, Gothenburg is the traveller’s perfect starting point. A network of bridges and tunnels connect Gothenburg’s islands, although most tourists probably won’t even notice crossing between the islands as this infrastructure is so well integrated into the city’s design.

Although the city has a public transport system that can only be described as “excellent” – ferries, trams, trains and buses run throughout the city all day, year-round – Stockholm is a fairly flat, endlessly fascinating city you can easily explore on foot, with many of the main sights and attractions within strolling distance of Stockholm’s Central station.

Stockholm is home to more than 2.1 million of Sweden’s 9.5 million residents and is famed for its sleek, beautiful architecture: cultural and natural beauty; more than 50% of the city is crown parkland, stunningly lush and green in the warmer months, and blanketed in crisp, white snow in the winter.

All around Stockholm’s 14 islands are the smaller islands – close to 25,000 in number – which form the Baltic Sea’s second-largest archipelago, which is a summer attraction in itself. Boating, biking and hiking tours operate year-round in the Stockholm Archipelago, ensuring tourists can admire the sights in style.

True cultural hub, Stockholm has museums dedicated to everything from those great Swedish exports ABBA and the Nobel Prizes, to the open-air museum Skansen, which shows the way Swedes lived at the turn of the century and also houses a printing press full of native animals, including reindeer and elk. The city’s world-famous amusement park Gröna Lund is a popular attraction for the young and the young at heart, the Swedes take great pride in the park, with locals making up a large number of its visitors.

Stockholm’s is one of the more unusual museums, dedicated to the mighty warship Vasa. Only minutes after it launched in August 1628, the ship sank to the bottom of Stockholm Harbour, taking 902 people down with it (most of whom, thankfully, escaped a watery fate). Why did it sink? The ship’s 69 metre long, 11 metre wide hull was not strong enough to support its own weight.

The ship was raised from the seabed in 1961 and a massive restoration effort followed in which the more than 14,000 pieces of the ship were recovered painstakingly restored and pieced together.

But if one only has time to see one of Stockholm’s many attractions, the city’s historic Old Town (or ‘Gamla Stan’) is surely the best choice.

Dating back to the 13th century, its cobbled streets, stone buildings and historic tall, narrow, brightly-coloured buildings speak of history and times long gone.

The lights – curtains of red, green, yellow, pink and blue – are indescribably beautiful. It’s worth the freezing temperatures to see one of nature’s true wonders with your own eyes.

The little village of Jukkasjärvi, in Lapland in Sweden’s far north, may seem an unusual holiday spot at first glance. At winter’s height in December, temperatures average -15°C, and the town plunges into the dark, almost-unlit winter the Arctic Circle is famed for.

Jukkasjärvi lies in the shadow of rugged mountain ranges, including Sweden’s tallest peak Kebnekaise, which towers 2,117 metres above sea level and is perpetually snow-capped year-round, giving the village a fairy-tale feel.

But there are advantages to the darkness. From November to March, the skies of northern Scandinavia – along with those of Alaska, Scotland and Canada – alight with one of nature’s true wonders: the Northern Lights, or Aurora Borealis. And Jukkasjärvi neighbours one of the world’s best vantage points from which to see the Northern Lights: Abisko National Park.

Abisko lies about 10km from Jukkasjärvi and about 90km from the village of the much-larger neighbour Kiruna. Sweden’s northernmost town is home to almost 20,000 inhabitants.

The lights – curtains of red, green, yellow, pink and blue which float across the Arctic and Antarctic skies when atoms and energy-charged particles in the Earth’s atmosphere collide – are indescribably beautiful. It is more than worth the freezing temperatures to see one of nature’s true wonders with your own eyes.