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Swedish Summers

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Introduction

Imagine a place where sunlight lingers late into the evening, casting a golden glow over meadows freckled with wildflowers and quiet waters that mirror the endless sky. This is Sweden in summer—a brief, beautiful season that transforms the landscape and the spirit of all who call this Nordic country home. After enduring long, dark winters, Swedes look forward with vivid anticipation to the arrival of summer, when everyday life spills outdoors and the nation comes alive in celebration.

The transition from winter's hush to summer's exuberance is profound. Lakeside cottages, usually shut beneath blankets of snow, reopen, their red-painted facades bright amidst the greenery. In the cities, outdoor cafés bustle with laughter and conversation, as friends linger over coffee and cakes in the gentle warmth, savoring the simple act of sitting in the sun. Beyond town and city, a vast patchwork of forests, archipelagos, and countryside becomes a playground for hiking, swimming, cycling, and the sheer joy of being in nature.

Summer in Sweden is as much a cultural awakening as it is a change of season. Ancient traditions—like Midsummer's maypole dances and crayfish parties under lantern-lit trees—are observed with genuine devotion, their rituals deeply rooted in history yet vibrantly alive today. These gatherings foster a singular sense of togetherness and community, making even visitors feel at home. Regional festivals, lively markets, and local customs fill the long days and radiant nights with music, stories, and celebration.

Yet it is the landscape—stunning in its variety and tranquility—that forms the true heart of Swedish summer. From the thousands of islands scattered along the Stockholm and Gothenburg archipelagos, to the mystical light of Lapland's midnight sun, and the serene forests and wildflower meadows across Skåne and Dalarna, Sweden offers a rich tapestry for the senses. Here, you'll find moments of solitude and reflection as treasured as companionship and festivity, in harmony with the Swedish ideal of lagom—a life of balance and moderation.

No Swedish summer is complete without its flavors. The season's bounty bursts onto tables and picnic blankets, from the first strawberries of June to the last crayfish in August. Home kitchens come alive with the scents of dill, herring, and new potatoes, while traditions like fika invite you to pause, sip coffee, and savor a piece of cake in the shade of a leafy tree. Fresh, uncomplicated, and gathered from land and sea, Swedish summer food is a celebration of simplicity, togetherness, and nature's gifts.

This book is your invitation to discover Swedish summers in all their richness. Whether

you're planning a journey to Sweden, hoping to bring its traditions home, or simply dreaming of Nordic lakes and long, light-filled evenings, you'll find inspiration within these pages. Through evocative stories, practical travel guidance, vibrant photography, classic recipes, and personal insights, "Swedish Summers" will immerse you in the traditions, landscapes, and flavors that make this season so beloved. Welcome to the warmest chapter in the Swedish year.

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CHAPTER ONE: Midsummer Magic: Sweden's Solstice Celebration

Midsummer in Sweden isn't just a holiday; it's a profound cultural moment, a joyous explosion of light and life after the long, dark Nordic winter. This celebration, often considered the most important date on the Swedish calendar, marks the summer solstice – the longest day of the year. While its roots stretch back to agrarian times, when it served to welcome the season of fertility and growth, today Midsummer is a cherished occasion for friends and family to gather, embracing the warmth, the light, and the simple beauty of nature.

The precise date for Midsummer's Eve always falls on a Friday between June 19th and June 25th. This strategic placement ensures a long weekend, allowing most Swedes to escape the cities and head to the countryside. As Midsummer approaches, a noticeable exodus occurs from urban centers; city streets become eerily quiet as families and friends pack their cars, eager to celebrate amidst the silver birches and blooming fields. Booking accommodation in popular tourist areas during this period is a wise move, as many Swedes also take their annual summer holidays around this time.

At the heart of almost every Midsummer celebration is the *midsommarstången*, or maypole. This tall, wooden pole is typically adorned with fresh leaves, birch branches, and vibrant wildflowers, transforming it into a towering floral centerpiece. The word "maypole" in Swedish, *majstång*, actually derives from the old Swedish word "maja," meaning to decorate with leaves, rather than the month of May itself. Once the maypole is raised in an open field or garden, it becomes the focal point for traditional ring dances, drawing in people of all ages, from the youngest children to the more spirited adults.

These ring dances are often accompanied by traditional folk songs, with participants mimicking actions or movements described in the lyrics. One of the most famous and beloved of these is "Små grodorna" (The Little Frogs). This whimsical song involves dancers hopping around the maypole, playfully imitating frogs and touching their ears and "tails" in time with the music. It's a truly communal experience, with everyone from small children to prime ministers joining in. The melody of "Små grodorna" can actually be traced back to an old French military march.

Another iconic element of Midsummer attire is the *sommarkrans*, or flower crown. These beautiful, handmade wreaths, crafted from freshly picked wildflowers and lush greenery, are worn by men, women, and children alike. The tradition of wearing flower

crowns is deeply symbolic, representing renewal, fertility, and the sheer joy of the summer season. In pre-Christian times, flowers were believed to possess magical properties, and this belief continues to imbue the crowns with a sense of enchantment.

Indeed, Midsummer was, and to some extent still is, considered a magical night. Ancient folklore suggested that plants gained enhanced healing powers on Midsummer's Eve. One charming tradition, particularly for young, unmarried women, involves picking seven different kinds of wildflowers in silence and placing them under their pillow before going to sleep. The belief is that this ritual will lead them to dream of their future spouse. Another custom, also tied to the number seven, involves jumping over seven fences, a practice believed to bring good health and a successful harvest.

Beyond the dancing and flower crowns, Midsummer is, of course, a feast for the senses, especially when it comes to food. The Midsummer meal is a lavish affair, centered around a traditional *smörgåsbord*. The quintessential dishes include various types of pickled herring (*sill*), often served with new potatoes boiled and tossed with fresh dill, soured cream, and chives. Cured salmon, or *gravlax*, with its delicate dill-mustard sauce, is another essential component. And for dessert, there's nothing quite as Swedish as fresh, ripe strawberries, often served simply with whipped cream or milk and sugar, or as the star of a classic strawberry cake.

Accompanying the food, cold beer and *schnapps* (also known as *nubbe* or *akvavit*) flow freely. These small glasses of potent, often spiced, liquor are typically consumed with much enthusiasm and are almost always preceded by a *snapsvisa*, a traditional drinking song. The most common of these is "Helan går" ("The whole thing goes down"), which encourages everyone to empty their glass in one go.

While the official school summer holidays typically run from mid-June to mid-August, many Swedes specifically plan their vacations around Midsummer. This mass exodus to the countryside means that cities can feel remarkably empty, providing a unique quietude for those who remain. However, the main thoroughfares leading out of urban areas are usually bustling with cars, all heading towards family gatherings, summer cottages, and open-air celebrations.

Midsummer, in essence, is a deeply nostalgic occasion for Swedes, a collective agreement on how the day should unfold. It's a time invested with a certain magic, combining age-old traditions rooted in folklore with a joyful, contemporary celebration of community and the arrival of summer's boundless light. It's an invitation to shed the seriousness of everyday life and embrace the simple, unadulterated pleasure of long days, good company, and the beauty of the Swedish summer.

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