

Secret GOTHENBURG

*The Swedish city may be small, says
YVONNE GORDON, but it throws up all
kinds of surprises on a short break*



Oysters at Restaurang Gabriel

Fresh cod, crayfish, salmon, monkfish, hake, mackerel, tuna... they're all lined up in neat rows in the Feskekôrka — a fish market shaped like a Gothic church beside Gothenburg's Rosenlund Canal. Johan Malm, who owns Restaurang Gabriel here, tells me he selects the best fish from this selection every morning — his fishmonger will have been to the fish market at 6.30am.

Johan also fills me in on the secret of being the world's fastest oyster-opener: "Everyone is equally good at opening one oyster, but when it comes to 30 oysters, with AC/DC on the speakers, and a man saying 'hurry, you've only opened two!', people get stressed and start to lose the rhythm and pace," he laughs.

The 31-year-old Swede is a former World Oyster Opening Champion and never misses the Galway International Oyster festival. Johan opens around 500 oysters every week and says Swedish oysters are among the most exclusive foods you can get, given their complexity. Besides oysters, another of his specialities is a hot

shrimp sandwich — great for a hangover.

Quality food and coffee are big themes in Gothenburg. Six restaurants have Michelin stars here, a high ratio for a city of less than half a million people. It's a compact place and there's plenty to admire at first glance — parks and gardens, canals, wide boulevards, the old City Hall and the Stora Theatre. Trams rattle along tree-lined avenues. There's an art museum, a concert hall, a theatre and Liseberg amusement park.

But it's time spent wandering the small streets that really unlocks the city's cool, creative vibe. On Magasinsgatan — a cobbled, pedestrian thoroughfare — designer shops mix with vintage stores and trendy cafés including Da Matteo coffee shop and roastery. I first stumble across this when curiosity takes me through an arch into a courtyard where potted plants, trees and flowers spill down the stairs and across the cobbles from flower shop Floramor & Krukatös.

Tucked away in the corner is the rear entrance to Da Matteo, where bicycles hang from the ceiling, sacks of coffee beans

are stacked up against brick walls and creative types sip espresso tonics while typing into their Macs. At the front of the coffee shop is a courtyard with food trucks serving sausage and salad wraps or fried herring and mash, with chairs and tables adorned with umbrellas and flowerpots beside each truck.

Over on Kyrkogatan, a crate of apples resting on a wooden box outside an old door first draws my attention to an ecological juice bar, Juice Källan. When I venture further in past the archway, I find a tiny courtyard filled with tables, chairs with cushions and cute potted plants, with a tree in the centre. There's a retro music shop called Music Lovers Records, a café, a salon and a champagne bar. Under the tree, a woman is sipping coffee and reading a book.

This courtyard isn't signposted, but I discover many secret, plant-filled escapes like it around the city. For sleeping, trendy design hotels on the scene include Hotel Avalon with its Arne Jacobsen chairs and spirulina shots for breakfast; and the Elite Plaza, a slick four-star where Scandinavian



A cobble street in Gothenburg

design mixes with Italian stucco arches and mosaic floors.

Another secret of Gothenburg is its beautiful, car-free archipelago. After a tram to Saltholmen (40 mins), it's just a 15-minute ferry ride to Styrö island. From the jetty here, it's a short walk to Pensionat Styrö Skäret — a large, yellow guesthouse in which stresses are soon dissolved with an atmospheric mix of open fires, candles and cosy couches.

Tempting as it is to relax in the wooden house, however, I'm curious to explore the island and there are free bikes for guests, so I soon set off armed with maps full of notes. Ola, the guesthouse owner, has marked the best swimming spots, cafés and scenic harbours. He suggests I start with a climb to Stora Rös, the nearby viewpoint where he

tells me I will be able to see "halfway to Ireland".

I take the bike along the narrow roads, passing the odd golf cart — used instead of cars on these islands — and reach the viewpoint after a gravel path through a forest trail. The only noise is birdsong and a gentle breeze blowing through the trees. From here, I can see tiny islands, little red wooden houses and a harbour.

The island is quite small (just 1.58 square kilometres) and a great place for walks, cycling and swimming. At Halsvik harbour, there's a man tying a small boat to a small jetty and a row of red wooden sheds. At Styrö Tangen, I take my bike on the ferry to the neighbouring island of Vrångö, admiring the harbour views and walking through the nature reserve to the south. Here, I find a Stone Age Cairn, and quiet paths wind past honeysuckle and orchids, with the calls of different songbirds in the warm breeze and views of anchored ships far off out to sea.

There's just enough time for tea and cinnamon cake in the harbour café's garden, before hopping on the ferry back to the guesthouse in time for a crayfish dinner and a sound night's sleep.

WHAT TO PACK

Many city streets are cobbled, so bring flat, low-heeled shoes for lots of walking. Pack a waterproof jacket or raincoat for the islands. Don't forget your swimming togs too — sea temperatures on the islands can reach up to 21°C in summer. The local currency is Swedish Krona.

3 must-dos...



RENT A BIKE

There are plenty of cycle paths in Gothenburg. Bike rental costs from €21 per day with Cykel Kungen (cykelkungen.se) or with a city card — which also gives free entry to attractions and tram/ferry transport (goteborg.com; from €38 for 24 hours). You can also use the city's bike scheme.



DINE IN STYLE

With six Michelin-starred restaurants, Gothenburg does great food — and surprisingly, it won't break the bank. Try the four-course menu of local produce with a Swedish twist at Bhoga (€55, bhoga.se). At Atelier — a funky, French-themed attic at Hotel Pigalle — mains start from €20 (hotelpigalle.se).



THRILLS N' SPILLS

Take an old-fashioned tram from Central Station to Liseberg amusement park, which has 42 rides including AtmosFear, Europe's tallest free-fall attraction; the 4G and 100kph rollercoaster Helix and the rib-shaking extreme plunge, Mechanica. One-day passes from €45/€23pp. See liseberg.com.



GETTING THERE

SAS (flysas.com) flies from Dublin to Gothenburg from €53 each way (direct flights on Saturdays from August 15 to September 26). Norwegian (norwegian.com) also flies from London Gatwick and Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies from London Stansted. For more information on the city, see goteborg.com.



WHERE TO STAY

Rooms at the four-star Avalon Hotel (avalonhotel.se) start from €132 per night, while rooms at the four-star Elite Plaza (designhotels.com/elite-plaza-hotel) in Gothenburg start from €158 including breakfast. On Styrö island, a double with breakfast at Pensionat Styrö Skäret (pensionatskaret.se) starts from €180.

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