



Logging in:
Victoria took four hours making her raft, Lady Jane



A raft of delights

Welcome to the weird world of Sam Spallucci, Lancaster's whiskey drinking, chain smoking investigator of the paranormal.



"With a delight in the absurd and the grotesque, as much as in comedic observation, Chambers places the Sam Spallucci series squarely in the category of cracking fun."

Douglas Lindsay - author of the Barney Thomson series

www.aschambers.co.uk



VICTORIA SMITH EMBRACES THE JOYS OF REMOTE VÄRMLAND, SWEDEN, ON A RIVER JOURNEY WITH A DIFFERENCE

WE DO this with 3,500 people per year and haven't lost anyone yet... I'm standing on the banks of the Klarälven river in Sweden's vast, empty Värmland county and I must look apprehensive about the task at hand - constructing a raft out of 60 pine logs, then navigating it 10km downstream - because my instructor Jan is quick to offer up this stat. He looks like he knows what he's doing - suntanned skin, weathered hands, wearing waders like they're not the most ludicrous things in the world - so I push aside my nerves, pull up my own thigh-high wellies and get stuck in.

About three hours north of Stockholm, Värmland - all 4,560sq miles of it - is renowned for its natural beauty, namely lakes (more than 11,000 of them), forests and endless opportunities for adventure. Merely one day into our five-day trip around this wild, beautiful region and my boyfriend and I have decided it could be Europe's best-kept secret for fans of the great outdoors.

Scenery comes in widescreen round here: tall, spindly pines for miles in every direction, those huge, crystal-clear lakes and mountains carpeted in trees standing dark and mysterious on the horizon. It all looks exactly how you want Sweden to look. Plus there's the added thrill of potentially spotting a moose or, gasp, a bear (rare, we're told, but I keep my eyes peeled regardless).

Back to those logs. It's a slow process, and Jan's patience with me as he explains, repeatedly, how to perfect the art of the 'half hitch' knot is astonishing, but four hours, some serious lifting, rolling, rope-tying and teamwork later,

and we're standing in front of the good ship Lady Jane and she's ready to go. As we set sail, my departing exchange with Jan is fresh in my mind. Me, shrill: 'But how do we steer it?' Him, amused: 'You don't - the river will take you!'

We soon realise why this activity once made National Geographic's '50 tours of a lifetime' list. Floating down the river in silence overlooked by nothing but the endless trees, watching the water sparkle as it unfolds ahead of us, breathing what feels like the freshest air in the world, is about as peaceful - and safe - an experience as you're ever going to get.

We take time to explore more of Värmland over the next few days, heading further into the forests and discovering riverside hikes, mountain bike trails, fishing and picnic spots,



Remember to check entry requirements for the country you are planning to visit at gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice. Currently you do not need to quarantine on arrival to or return from Sweden.



Sweet: Victoria paused for coffee and cake, known as fika in Swedish, and loved lakes like Upper Fryken, below

THREE MORE VÄRMLAND HOTSPOTS

Sliperiet
After a serious dose of Scandi-cool? Try this restaurant/gallery that's owned by a Swedish rock star and housed in an old paper mill in the 'surely it can't actually be this beautiful' village of Borgvik. Not only is this spot super chic, it's also utterly charming.

sliperietborgvik.se

Sahlströmsgården
A one-time artists' retreat (above) now turned hotel and restaurant near quiet, quaint Torsby village, the food here is local and hearty

with service to match. Also relish a great wine list while sitting in front of one of the open fires. Simple but stylish light-filled rooms and a gorgeous farmland setting too.

sahlstromsgarden.se



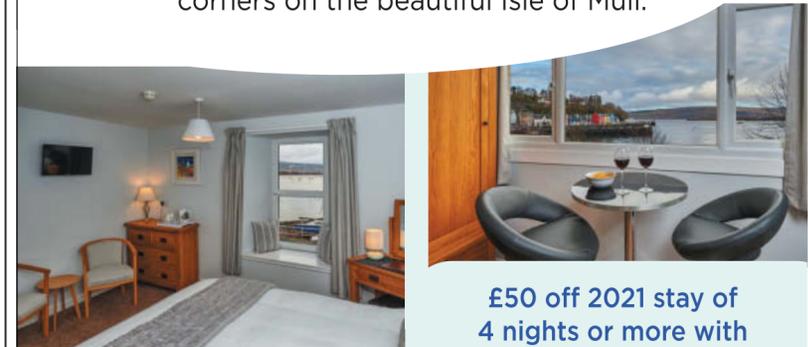
Naturbyn

A place that takes the notion of 'getting away from it all' very seriously indeed, this electricity-free lakeside haven (right), where you stay in treehouses or log cabins, is the passion project of one man, Thomas Petersson, who built the entire place by hand. naturbyn.se



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fields, farms and innumerable spots to stop for 'fika', the traditional Swedish practice of pausing for coffee and cake. Cheeks become ruddy and shoulders sag as our lungs become accustomed to the fresh air and our ears attuned to the total silence, save for the odd rippling stream, kite call or crackle of the forest floor underfoot.

When the time comes to head home, reluctant to leave behind the landscapes, active endeavours and beautiful wildlife, I ask my boyfriend if he'd recommend it here. His reply? 'Definitely, it's amazing. Plus my mates would love it because you get to use an axe.'

So there you have it - an under-the-radar destination bursting with epic scenery and adventures where you can immerse yourself in nature and harness your inner lumberjack.

Rafting packages from £149pp for two days, or £297pp for five days, vildmark.se. For more info, see visitvarmland.com and visitsweden.com. Flights from London to Stockholm from £107 return, flysas.com