

The 2015 Newcomers' Guide

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Travel

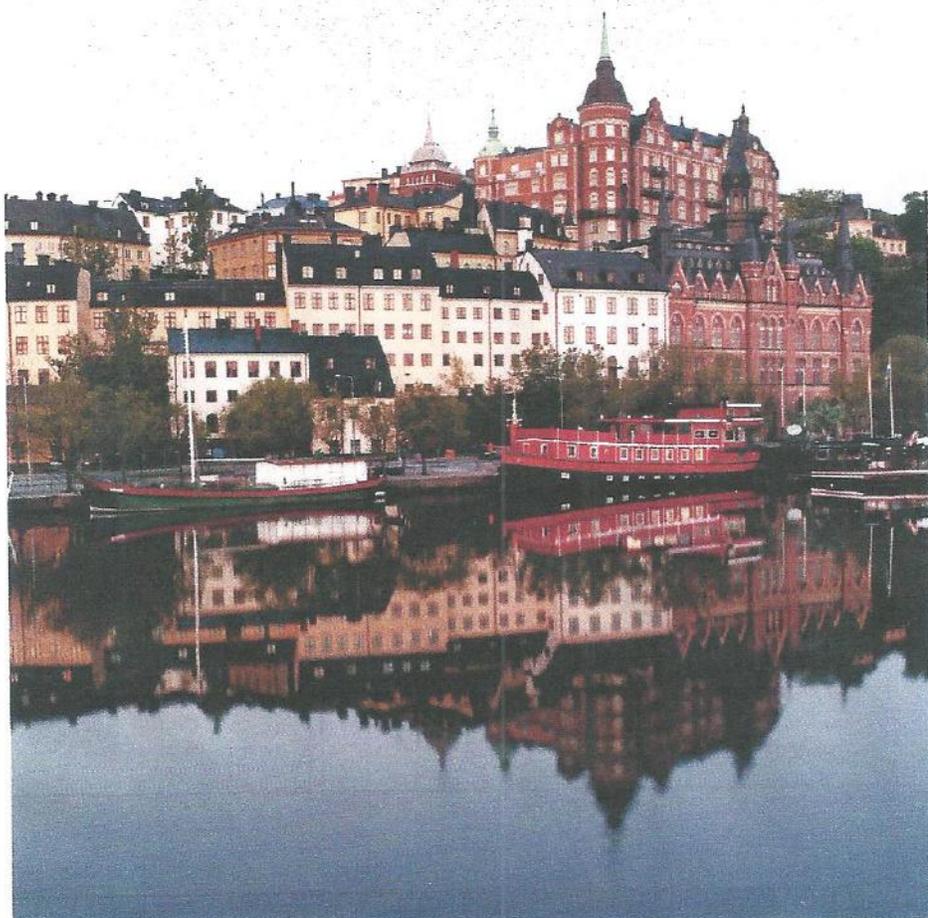


UP ALL NIGHT

Enjoy the festivities of Midsommar, June 19, on Lake Storsjön near Stockholm.

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PHOTO BY TINA S'ARRÉN



FROM LEFT: Buildings along the hills of Södermalm; a Midsommar festival at Skansen; cinnamon buns served during fika

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Celebrate the summer solstice with food and revelry in Sweden

BY BECCA HENSLEY

It's 2 a.m. in Sweden, but nobody's sleeping. On the longest day of the year, the party is just getting started. Cloaked in eerie bright light, I sit on a jetty at **Lake Storsjön** and sip dill-infused vodka from a mug. As far as my eyes can see, flower-crowned revelers cavort on the pine tree-studded shores. Some sing, others chuckle, many flirt. Some don dirndls and other traditional Swedish festival wear. One man casts a fishing line into the lake's indigo waters. A maypole, its ribbons unfurled, looks almost lonely. This homage to the summer solstice will continue until sunrise—though

nobody can be sure when that will happen. The light stays so bright, it's almost surreal. The mid-June summer solstice, called Midsommar in Sweden, is this Scandinavian nation's biggest holiday. For its emphasis on the outdoors and the bounty of the season, many compare it to America's Fourth of July. But its roots date back to pagan times, and its rituals, from bonfires to the maypole, stem from that era. Touted as infinitely magical, awash in superstition, Midsommar references the otherworldly, alluding to luck, love, fertility and prosperity. While neighboring countries such as **Norway** and **Finland** also embrace the day, only Sweden marks

it as an official holiday. Fleeing the cities, where many businesses close for the day, locals gather at cottages in the bucolic countryside or at their cabins on islands amid the sea. Here, immersed in verdant nature, they revel in the never-ending summertime light.

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Insider Tips

▼
If you are in Stockholm and want to experience Midsommar, head to the Skansen Open Air Museum, where folk artists re-enact an authentic celebration.

▼
Smorgasbord, a Swedish-style buffet, is the country's favorite way to eat. Expect hot and cold dishes, including multiple types of pickled herring.

▼
The Swedish love to take coffee breaks, which they call fika. You'll see locals at all times of day sipping black coffee and eating cinnamon buns.

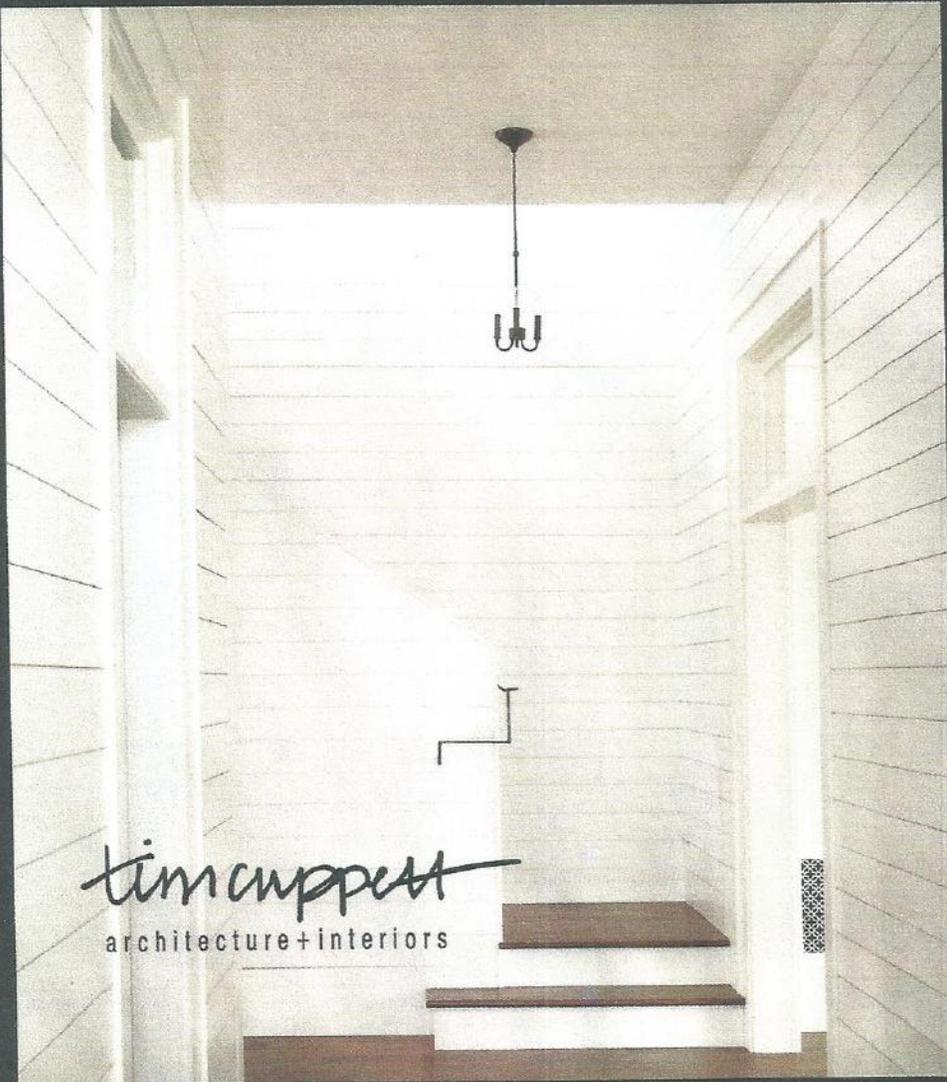


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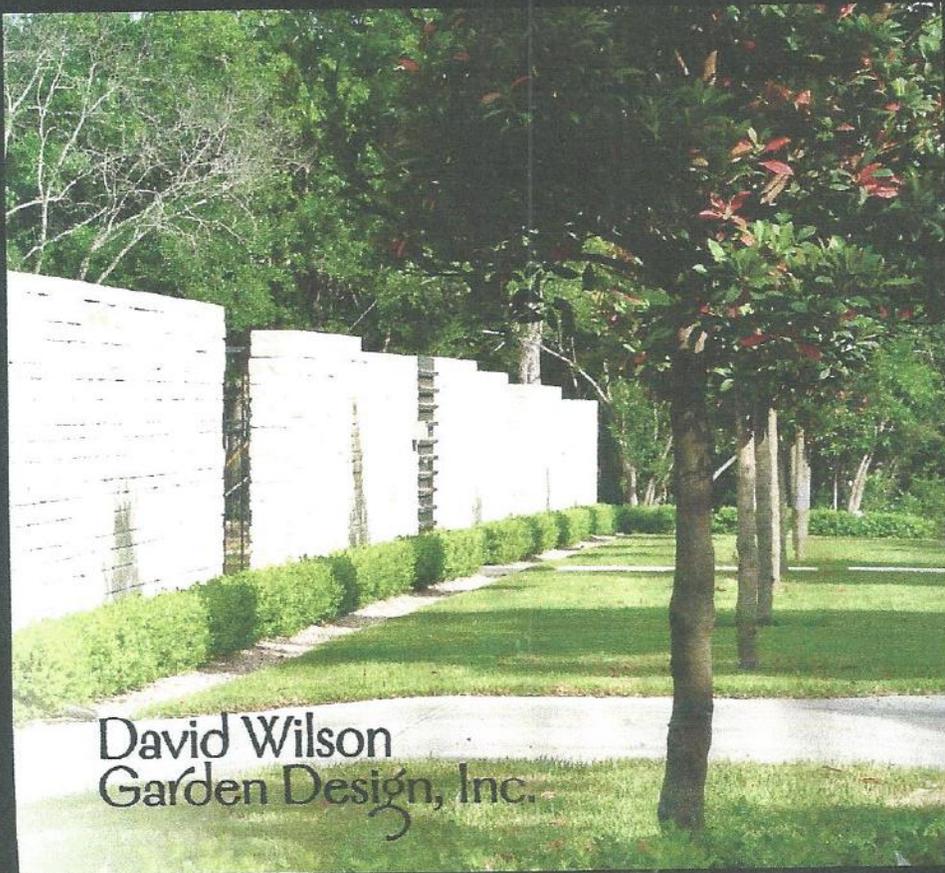
For the solstice, I visit my friend Elisabeth at her cabin on Lake Storsjön, north of **Stockholm**. We hike the region's trails and kayak in the lake, one of the country's largest. Half-jokingly, we also hunt for the lake's legendary Loch Ness-like monster. "Really, I know people who have seen him," Elisabeth says later, as we work in her small kitchen. I ponder that for a moment, but I am easily distracted when she offers to teach me how to make aquavit (schnapps), Sweden's most revered tippel. I watch as she pours vodka into prepared containers, then packs them with lemon peel, dill and fennel. "Ready in a few days," she says, slipping them into the fridge. Later, as we nibble homemade kanelbullar (cinnamon buns) and sip strong coffee, I have a revelation. "Ah, maybe the aquavit has something to do with the lake monster sightings," I say. Elisabeth just shrugs.

On Midsommar morning, we get up early to bake bread and prepare for the all-night party. Then we trek through the meadows with baskets. We pick wildflowers, herbs and berries and gather greenery to decorate the house. With the help of her children, we string the flowers together to make colorful crowns. Near lunchtime, people all along the shoreline begin emerging from their cottages. Suddenly, the lake is filled with action. Picnic tables beckon. Bowls of plump strawberries, platters of pickled herring, plates of thinly sliced gravlax, herb-infused potatoes, tiny meatballs, boiled duck eggs, salmon and crusty, seed-rich bread compose the feast. Beer and aquavit go without saying. Soon, a maypole ritual ensues. There's lots of singing and laughing, not to mention kissing. The day goes on like that, with intermittent snoozing par for the course.

At 2 a.m., though, I end up on the pier. A teenage girl joins me, holding a handful of flowers. "Look," she says. "I picked seven flowers in seven meadows. I'll put them beneath my pillow and dream of my future husband. It's our tradition." After she leaves, I stare into the illuminated lake, looking for the monster. He might still appear. After all, the night is young. 



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