



TRAVELING

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I love visiting other countries. I find their cultures fascinating, love seeing new sights and environments, and learning phrases in their languages or common expressions. However, what I hate the most are planes and airports.

RIGHT now, I'm writing to all of you from Barajas Airport, in **Madrid**, Spain... stuck in here for the last six – oops! Make that seven – hours for my now delayed connection flight to Arlanda Airport, on my way to **Stockholm**, Sweden, my final destination.

For those of you who don't know anything about me – I reside in **Lima**, the capital city of Peru (South America). I left my place around 24 or 25 hours ago, and caught a plane from the Jorge Chavez International Airport... and 12 hours later... here I am, still waiting... and feeling crappy.

When I finally get on the plane, after having some problems with my reservation tickets to get to the [Scandinavian](#) peninsula, I sit while listening to my fix of Celtic music, which I had been obsessing with for the past week or so. A few hours on board, it's already **3 A.M.** (local **Swedish** time), and the sun is already rising. A very odd thing for me to see at this time. The plane descends, and the first rays of sunlight shine above the many tree tops making it seem like they are bowing to greet us. It's an amazing sight, too bad I can't take out my digital equipment to capture this.

The airport is empty, filled only with the people that came on our plane – of course, it's very early in the morning, but you can see the structure of this building is clean and tidy on its own. It's very easy to find your way around, and the environment is very welcoming with the images with the likes of **Greta Garbo**, and ABBA.

Everything seems quiet and still as we make our way to **Solna**, where I will be staying for the time being. Through the window, I notice a mystic mist surrounding the vegetation, it's an amazing welcoming... but today will be a very long day. Very little sleep and loads of walking, the very best thing to do in **Stockholm is walk!** So I wake up after just 3 hours in dreamland to embark on a walking tour of **Gamla Stan (Old Town)** – took the subway from Solna Centrum to Kungsträdgården station, get off at T-Centralen and take a connection to Gamla Stan, and walked across streets and parks.

If you ever walk around these streets, be sure to **watch out for bikes!** I almost got ran over by one, while trying to eat my Swedish

sausage. The hot dogs, Swedish sausage, and chorizo stands are all over town – the you'll need during o

We get to visit the **Royal Castle**, residency of the Royal family in Sweden, with its many large showy rooms that you can view during the visiting hours. We walk across the waterfront canal, and when I get to see the **Grand Hotel**, I get all giddy inside thinking about the Grand Hotel film, starring the fabulous Greta Garbo and the incredible Joan Crawford. The hotel is famous due to all the celebrities that have stayed in there, and the events held in this amazing place.

Finally, we make it to Old Town, the medieval buildings are very picturesque, with warm colors that make it feel more like home. Old Town is, in fact, full of tourists as you can imagine because of its cultural and historic attractions, including the Nobel Museum, Stortorget, and Sundbergs, one of the oldest konditori (bakery café) in here.

My first day in Sweden is a tiring one, a seven-hour difference can really mess someone up, but one must keep on walking. I wake up the next day to buy my **Stockholm Card**, which allows me to enter as many museums, attractions, and use as much of public transport for as long as the card lasts. A 24-hour-adult card costs about **SEK290**, no more than \$70. It's really convenient, so be sure to get one. Finally, activities begin as we visit Fjärilhuset, which literally means Butterfly House – and holy cow! It's

HOT in there. You must watch out for your camera lens when you go in there, because mine got steam all over.

After a short break, we end up in **Djurgården** (Game Park or Royal Game Park), a recreational park area, near the **Vasa Museet** (Museum), where we saw a recovered Swedish ornamented galleon from the 17th century. The vessel was beautifully designed and preserved, and this design knowledge also translated well into the incredible building where the ship is located, and the grand **Nordiska Museet** (Nordic Museum), which was also pretty awesome looking. Too bad the galleon sank because it was too heavy, eh?

Now, strutting through a cemetery – they are pretty cool! Loads of vegetation around, clean, and most of all, peaceful. I'm on my way to **Skansen zoo**, the first open-air museum and zoo in Sweden. However, it's already pretty late, so we're not sure we'll find it opened... but we do! We get in, and walk, even though we are very tired by now. We go to the escalators, instead of visiting the aquarium first... we decide to make our way down from the top, instead of the way up from the bottom. Tough luck! The animals are pretty much asleep, and we never get the chance to see the aquarium. The highlight of this walk was when **I saw a freaking peacock flying up a tree!**

Dragging my feet a few hundred feet, we make it to Gröna Lund, or Tivoli, a small amusement park inside the Royal Game Park, where we get some junk to eat, and I get on the Free Fall game – a God-knows-how-tall ride that gives you one of the best views of the city. The problem is... no cameras on the ride, and if we go up... we have to fall. With my heart pounding, I count the seconds and we drop as my unwanted scream comes out of my body involuntarily! What a long day, extensive walks, and loads to see and try!

Today's a brand new day, and festivities for Midsommar begin! Midsommar or Midsummer in English, refers to the summer solstice, in other words... let's celebrate the longest day of the year! These celebrations are held around the world, but they are particularly important in Scandinavian countries like Norway, Finland and Sweden, where it's one of the most important festivities throughout the year, rivaling Christmas.

We begin with a traditional
Swedish lunch,

that includes **Pickled Herring**, **Crème Fresh**, **Potatissallad** (Potato Salad), **Kalles Kaviar** on eggs, and loads and loads of **alcohol**, which will continue until late hours of the night. In the meantime, we go to one of the many Midsommar celebrations around the country, and attend a local park, in which we find parents and their kids dancing around the **Midsommarstången**, or maypole, to the rhythm of the Frog Dance, or the unique Washing and Hanging Your Clothes song. It is a sight to be seen! People singing and dancing, some wearing traditional clothing.

After an interesting afternoon, we went 30 to 40 km. Away from the city for a family dinner in a small ranch, surrounded by dogs and horses. There was, of course, a lot to eat for dinner. However, the main attraction this time was all the **different types of alcohol** on the table, including the mind-blowing **Grappa**, a grape-based brandy that reached 82% of alcohol by volume. Also on the table were the Mexican Tequila... accompanied by double-measure-of-alcohol Margaritas served on a gasoline container, Swedish and imported beer, Vodka, wine, and the **Peruvian Pisco**, another mind-blowing grape-based type of alcohol if served on shots.

Finally, after the sun completely disappears, and night falls with all its might at midnight, we decide to take a well-deserved rest. Of course, the following day is a relaxing one... it's **Red Day!** Everything seems closed, and only very few establishments are opened.

The day is quite fresh, and the drizzle keeps the streets from being crowded. If you ever visit Stockholm, be sure to visit the **Kulturhuset**, or Culture House, a cultural center opened in 1974 in central Stockholm, where you can find various photography or art galleries showcasing different themes, cultural exhibits, food, etc. In it you'll also find Lava Serieteket, a library of all types of series, including manga, books, comics, and graphic novels. Kulturhuset is the place



for shows, parties and music! Right now, they are showcasing the life of Swede author **Astrid Lindgren**, writer of the **Pippi Longstocking** series. This exhibit will later be touring other places.

Very close to Kulturhuset, you'll find **T-Centralen** station, which will connect you to all the train lines to mobilize yourself in the city. However, you don't need to go too far to find tons of places to shop for the latest fashion items, music or gadgets, as well as souvenirs. You'll find places to eat from cafés to restaurants, junk food and a varied selection in the food court of Japanese, Hindi, Chinese, and even Cajun or Lebanese food. Just a few steps away, you'll find the market place, right on the plaza of the **Konserthuset**, or Concert House, and right across, you'll find the movie theaters.

Central Stockholm is an awesome place for a person like me, who enjoys art, music, film, and so much more!

Solna and Stockholm are pretty fabulous, but we are ready for more Swedish traditions, so we take the ferry that will take us to **Gotland**, the largest of the many Swedish islands in the Baltic Sea. Original homeland of the Goths, some say, and home to the **city of Visby**, where over 20 000 people live.

Visby is probably the **best preserved medieval town** in Scandinavia, thus was selected by the UNESCO as world heritage. The city's most notable remains are **the Ringmuren**, a 3.4 km. Wall that encircles the city, and the old church ruins. The Ringmuren, or Ring Wall, probably began construction in 1200's, and was built and rebuilt to its current and characteristic shape throughout the years.

The island of Gotland was conquered by Denmark in 1361, however, it was taken and plundered by pirates of the Baltic Sea until **King Eric of Pomerania**, first King of the Nordic Kalman Union, settled himself there for twelve years, during which the city became a pirate's nest. After 300 years of Danish occupation, Gotland was again conquered by Sweden in 1645. However, it took two or three centuries for Visby to develop and attract commerce, and harbor the industry once again.

If you're visiting Visby, be sure to check out **Medeltidsveckan**, or Medieval Week, on week 32 of the year (usually first or second week of August) for a festival full of music, theater, jesters, and loads of people dressed up in Medieval costumes!

Inside the island of Gotland, we take a small ferry to **Fårö**, which translates from the Swedish "Sheep Island." I was told that the reason for it was that there were more sheep than people in the island. Fårö was also home to famous filmmaker **Ingmar Bergman** (R.I.P.), who shot **Hour of the Wolf**, **The Passion of Anna**, and **Skammen** there. Other notable sights are the rock formations, in the Langhammar peninsula, called **Rauks**, funky-shaped rocks that resulted from the erosion during the Ice Age, a very nice spot for picnics in the

Swedish summer.

Back in the Scandinavian peninsula, I also got the chance to visit **Ludvika**, a very scenic small town with wonderful landscapes that look very much like charming little painting postcards. When I visited the city, they were having the biggest music festival in town known as the **Ludvikafesten**, held from June 28 to June 30 – this time, the festival included talents like Alice Cooper and Iggy Pop.

If you get the chance to go to Ludvika by car, be sure to make plans to **visit Oslo**, the capital of Norway, because the deviation it's right on the way from Stockholm, so once you're done visiting Ludvika, you can just go back a few miles, and head over to Oslo! You won't regret it... like me! Instead, I got the chance to visit **Helsinki**, capital and largest city of Finland.

In 1155, the Swedish king led the first crusade to Finland, after which Finland belonged to Sweden for 650 years, and **Helsinki was founded in 1550**, plagued by poverty, war and diseases. And it was not until Russia defeated Sweden in the Finnish War in 1809 that Finland began to truly change. This explains the strong influence from both Russian and Swedish cultures that I noticed in my few hours in the place.

Here's the plan in case you've got four hours in Helsinki. Take the **Audio City Tour** or the guided one, which last about one or two hours for **€25**. This gives you just enough time to look for a great place to eat, and I heard eating **bear meat** is a rare thing to do. But if it's not your cup of tea, there's plenty of places where to eat, from Mexican, to Italian, fast food and many others... pick your choice.

However, if you're planning on staying more than a couple of days, here's what you could do in the city. Get a **Helsinki card**, which will grant you access to different activities, entrance to museums, and transport. You can get the 72-hour-adult card for **€53**, and you'll be able to get on any of the City Tours, visit **Suomenlinna Sea Fortress**, the largest sea fortress in the world and chosen by the UNESCO as world heritage. You'll also get discounts on half-day tours to the city of **Porvoo**, on the cruises to **Tallinn**, in Estonia, and day trips

to Lapland where you will be able to see the **Midnight Sun on the Arctic Circle**.

Finland is another European city full of culture, art museums, astounding design, and marvelous architecture. Be sure to visit the **Helsinki Cathedral**, as well as the **Temppeliaukio Church** (Rock Church), and the **Uspenski Cathedral**, all of them incredible sights to see. And if you're a sucker for design, be sure to do the **Design Walk**, a guided tour that will walk you through the history of Finnish design.

It is finally time to go from Scandinavia. It has been an amazing cultural experience, as well as a nice family reunion, but it's time to say goodbye. On my **way back to Lima**, I stop for three days in Madrid, Spain. Landing in Madrid is a total different feel from landing in Stockholm. While Scandinavia was full of green shades all around, the Iberian peninsula is one big canvas of browns and warm colors. The Madrilenio landscape is very similar to the one in my country, no wonder Peru was one of the most well-known Spanish colonies during the Viceroyalty period. If you take a cab from the airport to the city center, it's only around **€25**, it saves you time and gets rid of the possibility of getting lost in a city we have no idea of... specially if you're carrying much stuff.

The city center of Madrid is full of places to stay, so no one will ever run into problems finding where to spend the night. And if you're not nit-picky like me to eat, you'll find loads of places to eat from KFC, to McDonalds, and other café-restaurants. However, if you want to eat Spanish food, don't forget to look for **Tapas**, **Jamon Serrano** Sandwiches, **Ahumado** (smoked) plates, **Tortilla de Papa** (Potato Scramble), and **Paella**... if you can find a good Paella place, of course!

Now, if you have very little time to stay in Madrid, like me, I suggest getting on **Madrid Vision**, a tourist bus that takes you around Madrid city in an hour-and-some-minutes-drive, and shows you the spots you're supposed to visit. The two-day-ticket is **€20** and it lets you hop-in and out of the bus as many times as you desire until midnight. The one-day ticket is, of course, cheaper, however, I recommend the two-day-one because it lets you enjoy of the city drive during daytime and



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nighttime, and lets you choose your stops for the following ride next day.

One of the places you should definitely visit in Madrid is the **Palacio Real**, or Royal Palace, built throughout the 16th century, and rebuilt during the 17th, 19th and 20th century. Nowadays, the palace is only been used for official royal ceremonies. Entrance tickets are €8, which includes entry to the palace, the garden and the **Royal Armory**, one of the main exhibitions of weapons and armors in Europe. However, if you get the €10 ticket, you'll get a guided visit, where you will learn the story of the many visited rooms in the tour.

Mandatory stops in Spain are the **Thyssen Museum**, as well as the **Museo del Prado**. Both of these museums are filled up with everything you can appreciate of art history. From renown Spanish artists like **El Greco**, **Fracisco de Goya**, **Picasso**, **Joan Miró**, and **Salvador Dalí**, to **Peter Paul Rubens**, **Jan Van Eyck**, **Hans Holbein**, **Rembrandt**, **Titian**, **Vincent Van Gogh**, **Rodin**, among many others.

I'm in luck when I visit the Thyssen Museum, I have the chance to see three very distinct exhibitions. One of them is **Van Gogh** – Los

Últimos Paisajes, a showcase of the final paintings in his life. Most of the work are unfinished pieces, and some of them are only sketches, but it's a wonderful thing to see when you think of creative process. The other exhibit is the work of American photorealist, **Richard Estes**; and the last one belonged to American photographer, **Lynn Davis**.

The quick visit to the Thyssen Museum lasts for about three hours, because we rush through the many floors and galleries! So be sure to give yourself at least four or five hours, if you really **love art** and want to appreciate it. But I have to move along... the **Museo del Prado** is just right across the **Thyssen Museum**, so we go there afterwards. Just like the Thyssen, the Museo del Prado has many floors and rooms filled with tons of famous paintings, and other pieces of fine art, so give yourself **time to visit** it as well.

Well, that's all the time I have to visit Spain, but if you have a few more days, be sure to go to **Sevilla** with the train for a couple of days, or maybe a visit to **Barcelona**! I, on the other hand, head back to Barajas Airport to take the flight back to the Jorge Chavez International Airport, in Lima... where everything started.

useful phrases

swedish/svenska

Hej **Hi/Hello**
Talar du engelska? **Do you speak English?**
Ja **Yes**
Nej **No**
Var finns...? **Where is the...?**
Toaletten **Bathroom**
Tack **Thanks**
Varsågod **You're welcome**
Hej då **Goodbye**

finnish/suomea

Terve **Hi/Hello**
Puhuteko englantia? **Do you speak English?**
Kyllä **Yes**
Ei **No**
Missä on...? **Where is the...?**
Vessa **Bathroom**
Kiitos **Thanks**
Ole hyvä **You're welcome**
Näkemiin **Goodbye**

spanish/español

Hola **Hi/Hello**
¿Habla inglés? **Do you speak English?**
Sí **Yes**
No **No**
¿Dónde está el...? **Where is the...?**
Baño **Bathroom**
Gracias **Thanks**
De nada **You're welcome**
Adiós **Goodbye**

