THE ONLY WAY IS UPPSALA

Sweden's original capital is a neoclassical delight with Viking remains and unspoiled wilderness close at hand

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There isn't an English equivalent of the Swedish word 'hemmablind', but there ought to be. Literally translated as 'home blind', it means failing to appreciate things that are right under your nose. For people in Uppsala it's a particularly cruel affliction, because there's so much for them to appreciate.

Lying 45 miles north-west of Stockholm, Uppsala is the cradle of Swedish civilisation. In fact, until Stockholm nudged it out in the seventeenth century, it was the country's capital. It has Sweden's oldest cathedral and university, and was home to its greatest scientist, the botanist Carl Linnaeus, whose garden can still be visited. It is also extremely pretty, with cream-coloured eighteenth-century buildings lining the riverfront – yet you only have to drive north for an hour to find yourself in a vast, awe-inspiring wilderness.

To understand Uppsala's history you need to start at the Viking sites of Valsgärde and Gammla Uppsala a few miles outside the city. In the old days it was possible to sail a ship from these downriver to the Baltic Sea, do a bit of raiding, and bring the spoils back to your longhouse. Now the rivers have narrowed and retreated, leaving isolated mounds rising above flat farmland. One of these at Valsgärde was found to contain the graves of fifteen chieftains, buried in their boats, which had been hauled ashore and covered with wood and turf. You can still make out the shapes of these makeshift tombs, while the museum at Gammla Uppsala gives a good idea of the artefacts – including jewellery and a spectacular helmet – which were buried with them.

Christianity came late to this part of the world and Gammla Uppsala, the forerunner of the modern city, was still a centre for human sacrifice in the eleventh century. Every nine years nine victims were offered up and their corpses hung from the trees until they decomposed. When the Vikings

converted, a cathedral was built on the site of the king's mansion, and though it was destroyed by fire, a mediaeval church of great beauty stands in its place. Bizarrely, the locals carried on sacrificing, though to the Virgin Mary rather than goddess Freya, and happily not making offerings of people.

Again, it was the shrinking of the rivers which relegated the Viking settlement to history and brought Uppsala itself to prominence**.** Today it is the fastest-growing city in Sweden, but the centre remains small and easy to walk around. It's remarkably quiet, too, though only twenty minutes by train from Stockholm's main airport, and half an hour from the capital itself.

If it doesn't feel like a mediaeval city, that's because three quarters of it was destroyed by a terrible fire in 1702. It was rebuilt in the neoclassical style, creating the elegant streets celebrated by Ingmar Bergman – who spent much of his childhood here – in his film *Fanny and Alexander*. Sadly a swathe was cut through the middle by 1960s developers, sparing only the house of Andreas Celsius, inventor of the modern temperature scale. But there is not a high-rise to be seen, and you can walk along the River Fyrisån imagining – but for the whizzing of bicycles – that nothing has changed in 300 years.

Back then the brightest star of the university was Carl Linnaeus, the man who ingeniously and scandalously devised a system for classifying plants based on their sexuality. For anyone interested in flowers, his house on Svartbäcksgatan – now a small museum – and its formal garden are essential places of pilgrimage. (You can also visit his country estate at Hammarby, eight miles outside the city.) Even if you don't revere him, the house provides a fascinating snapshot of eighteenth-century scientific life, with its cases of stuffed animals and home dissecting table.

Unfortunately the garden took a battering from Linnaeus's menagerie (which included a camel, a racoon and several monkeys), and more seriously from regular floods. After his death one of his student set about transplanting it to higher ground close to the city's sixteenth-century castle – so you can now

see a recreation of the garden on its original site, and the botanical gardens that evolved from it a short walk away.

Between the two stands a magnificent reminder of the mediaeval city, the Gothic Domkyrkan. The early Uppsalans wanted to build the largest cathedral in Scandinavia, and succeeded, but could only afford brick for the exterior. Inside, however, the great vaulted roof rises in a tranquillity of grey stone, creating a suitably magnificent setting for the royal coronations which took place there until the late nineteenth-century. For a Lutheran cathedral it has some surprising contents, including a gold-plated chest containing the bones of St Erik – once carried through the fields at harvest time – and an extraordinarily convincing waxwork of the Virgin Mary, which I mistook for an elderly tourist.

The nearby university library has treasures of its own, among them the sixth-century Silver Bible and a glorious early map of the northern ocean in which behemoths frolic among the waves and sledges scoot across frozen seas. But if you want to get a real feeling for Scandinavian mythology, you need to venture outside the city for some trollskogsvandring.

This is another useful word, meaning ‘wandering through the troll wood’, and it is applied to Firby urskog, a nature reserve half an hour’s drive from Uppsala on a road lined with enormous boulders left over from the Ice Age. Although 80 per cent of Sweden is forested, only a small fraction consists of ancient woodland, which is why the 125 acres here are so precious. With pines, larches and birches soaring upwards, a small river running through it, and banks of moss deeper than you would have thought possible, it was – even on a cold, damp day – one of the most romantic places I have ever set foot in. The branches gleamed with silvery lichen, and wild strawberries lay hidden underfoot; a woodpecker rattled in the distance. There was no sign of troll activity, but I was told that a moose could sometimes be glimpsed ambling through the trees.

From Firby uskog we headed fifty miles north to a far larger reserve, the Färnebofjärden National Park – 25,000 acres of the closest Europe gets to wilderness. Along the way, farmland dotted with rust-red homesteads gave way to thick forest, stretching – so our guide said – 'all the way to the Arctic Circle'.

The heart of Färnebofjärden is a huge expanse of water containing more than 200 small islands and edged with sandy beaches. As it fills the horizon, it looks like an inland sea; in fact it is part of the Dalälven River. You can hire a canoe to explore it, sleep overnight in a holiday cottage or open-sided 'wind shelter', and fish for fourteen different kinds of brown trout. The water is clean enough to drink.

A good starting point is the small but highly informative visitor centre at Gysinge. What makes the park particularly interesting, the exhibits explain, is that it lies on a biological border where flora and fauna peculiar to northern Sweden (such as Lapland willows and alders) meet those belonging to the middle of the country (such as oak, hazel, lime and ash). The same is true of birds and animals – so you might spot Ural owls, whooping swans, dippers, grus grus, ospreys, lynxes and beavers. For us the highlight was watching a golden eagle swooping over broad, foaming rapids.

Unfortunately the park is also home to vicious mosquitoes, so high summer is not a good time to visit: try late spring or early autumn instead.

Taking a different road back to the city, we passed the small town of Morgongava, home to an elk park. The name, our guide told us, was one of the most beautiful in Sweden, translating as 'morning gift'. But to my ear 'Uppsala' takes a lot of beating.