

Fact Sheets on Sweden

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General Facts about Sweden

Large country, variable climate

Sweden is a large country—in Europe, only Russia, Ukraine, France and Spain are larger. It extends 1,600 kilometres from north to south, the same distance as Berlin–Moscow or New York–Minneapolis. In the north, winters are long, cold and snowbound but during the brief summers the midnight sun provides daylight around the clock. In the south, winters are considerably milder and summers longer.

More than half of Sweden's land surface is covered with forest, mostly coniferous woodland rich in fauna. Some 100,000 lakes enliven the countryside. Outside its lengthy coasts overlooking the Baltic Sea in the east and the North Sea in the west are archipelagos comprising thousands of islands. On 1 July 2000, the Öresund Bridge linking Malmö and Copenhagen was opened and Sweden moved a step closer to Denmark and the European continent.

Small population, many new Swedes

This wide-flung country has a small population of about 9 million. Some 85 per cent of its inhabitants live in the southern half of Sweden, in three major urban centres in particular: the capital city of Stockholm (1.7 million including suburbs), Göteborg on the west coast (800,000) and Malmö in the south (500,000).

For a long time, Sweden was ethnically homogenous. Before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the Samis (Lapps) were the only distinct minority of any size in the country. Today, some 20 per cent of Sweden's inhabitants are of foreign extraction in the sense that they were either born outside the country or have at least one parent who was born abroad.

Immigration speeded up during and after the Second World War. Sweden took in a relatively large number of refugees during the war years and also opened its borders in later decades when political crises broke out in other countries. In 1992 alone, 84,000 people were taken in, most of them from former Yugoslavia.

Language and religion

Swedish belongs to the northern branch of the Germanic family of languages, along with Norwegian, Danish and Icelandic. In Finland, which for 600 years was a part of Sweden, some 300,000 people speak Swedish as their mother tongue.

In the 16th century, Sweden broke with the Catholic Church and thereafter had an Evangelical-Lutheran 'state church' for over 400 years. On 1 January 2000, the Church of Sweden was made independent and given the same status as other religious communities. In 1999, about 84 per cent of the population belonged to the Church of Sweden.

Parliamentarism and monarchy

Sweden is a parliamentary democracy. The Swedish parliament, the Riksdag, is a unicameral assembly with 349 seats. Ordinary elections are held every fourth year and the minimum voting age is 18. Seats are distributed

proportionately between those parties that poll at least 4 per cent of the national vote or at least 12 per cent in any one constituency.

The Social Democratic Party has been in power in Sweden for much of the post-war period. In 1976–82 and again in 1991–94 the country was ruled by a 'non-socialist' (centre-right) government. After the 1998 elections, the Social Democrats formed a minority government which today collaborates in a number of areas with the Left Party and the Green Party.

In 1998, the Social Democrats received 36.4 per cent of the vote while the second largest party, the Moderate Party, received 22.9 per cent. The figures for the other parties were: Left Party 12 per cent, Christian Democrats 11.8 per cent, Centre Party 5.1 per cent, Liberal Party 4.7 per cent and Green Party 4.5 per cent. The Prime Minister is Göran Persson.

The Swedish monarchy is purely constitutional. In all essentials, the duties of the monarch as head of state are of a representative, ceremonial nature. The present king, Carl XVI Gustaf, was born in 1946 and is a descendant of the Bernadotte family of French extraction. Queen Silvia is the daughter of a German businessman and his Brazilian wife. The next in line to the throne is Crown Princess Victoria, born in 1977.

Many wars, lasting peace

Today, Sweden is in the privileged position of having enjoyed almost 200 years of unbroken peace. But for many centuries prior to this period, the country was involved in divisive conflicts and lengthy wars. Starting in 800 AD and for the next 250 years, Vikings from Sweden and other Nordic countries travelled far and wide on voyages that combined trading, looting and emigration.

The kingdom of Sweden took shape in the 12th century. Up until the 16th century the borders between the Nordic countries tended to be transitory. For a time in the 14th century, Sweden, Norway and Denmark were joined in a union. By then, Sweden had already annexed Finland. The foundation of the modern Swedish state was laid in the 16th century. Over the following century, Sweden developed into a great power in Europe with extensive dominions around the Baltic. But such a small country was too fragile a base for such a mighty empire, and Sweden's power steadily declined in the 18th century.

Further setbacks followed. After a war with Russia in 1808–09, Sweden was obliged to relinquish Finland. The union between Sweden and Norway established in 1814 was dissolved in 1905. Sweden subsequently remained outside both the First and Second World Wars, and maintained its policy of neutrality in the post-war period as well. Non-alignment in peacetime in order to preserve neutrality in the event of war became an official doctrine that enjoyed broad political support.

Sweden, however, has always been keen to play an active part in the international arena.

Today, a strong commitment to the UN is a cornerstone of Swedish foreign policy. Sweden also cooperates closely in most areas with the other Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Iceland.

New relations with Europe

The upheavals that occurred in Europe in 1989–91 necessitated some extensive revision of Swedish foreign policy. The collapse of the communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union created a situation that opened up new avenues in Sweden's relations with the outside world. In 1991, Sweden applied to join the European Union (EU) and an agreement on membership was reached in 1994. Following a national referendum, Sweden formally took its place in the EU in January 1995. When European Monetary Union (EMU) entered into force on 1 January 1999, Sweden chose to remain outside but kept the door open for accession at a later date. A final decision on EMU is to be taken after a national referendum.

Swedish defence reforms

During the Cold War years, Sweden had been forced to consider the risk of coastal invasion in the event of an open confrontation between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. This situation changed after the break-up of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Swedish defence, which is based on military conscription for men, is now smaller in volume than before. As the result of a parliamentary decision in 2000, the number of military units has declined while quality and flexibility have increased. The air force now occupies a pivotal role. Sweden maintains a degree of military readiness for participation in international crisis management efforts. Over the years, more than 60,000 Swedish soldiers have served with the UN in various parts of the world.

Membership of NATO has been discussed but is not a matter of current interest. Sweden contributes actively to Partnership for Peace (PFP) and the peace forces operating in former Yugoslavia.

A poor country grew rich

In the mid-19th century, Sweden was one of the poorest countries in Europe with 70 per cent of the population working on the land. Little more than a century later, it was one of the richest and most industrialised countries in the world, and today only 2 per cent work in the agricultural sector.

In the post-war decades, the Swedish economy advanced rapidly. GNP rose, prosperity increased and the welfare society was steadily strengthened. But in the early 1990s, Sweden experienced its worst crisis since the 1930s. GNP declined, the Swedish krona depreciated, unemployment soared and the national debt grew alarmingly. Sweden slumped down the international prosperity table.

Extensive restructuring of the Swedish econ-

omy followed. By the beginning of the new century, public finances were once again in good order. Today, the rate of economic growth is relatively good, inflation is low, the national debt is shrinking, real wages are on the rise and unemployment is declining. Sweden is deeply dependent on its export industry, which is responsible for maintaining a substantial surplus in the balance of trade. Germany and Britain are Sweden's two main trading partners, on both the export and import side. The Swedish manufacturing industry is largely based on the country's most important raw materials, timber and iron ore. Engineering companies, including carmakers, account for more than 40 per cent of added value in Swedish industry. The timber and the pulp and paper industries account for just over 20 per cent. The chemical industry's share is around 12 per cent.

IT, the new information technology, is playing an increasingly important role in the Swedish economy and studies show that Sweden is one of the leading IT nations in the world. Over half of all Swedes use the Internet and there are more than 4 million mobile phones.

Tough debate on nuclear power

Environmental issues in general are important in Sweden. One of the most controversial issues relates to energy supply. Nuclear power accounts for half of the country's electricity. Following a national referendum in 1980, the Riksdag voted to close all nuclear reactors by 2010, but this timetable has since been abandoned. One reactor was shut down in 1999 and another is due for closure. How the nuclear phase-out continues will depend on how rapidly alternative sources of energy can be developed at reasonable cost without causing serious air pollution.

Advanced welfare state

For many years, Sweden's highly developed welfare system gave the country a prominent position in the international debate. Swedes were able to count on public support in most phases of life. The country's economic crisis in the early 1990s, however, led to government cuts, but some of the welfare benefits that suffered in the process were restored once public finances had been put in order. On the whole, the welfare state has survived intact.

The growing proportion of pensioners in the Swedish population is creating economic problems—as it is in most other comparable industrialised countries. Life expectancy has risen to 76.7 years for men and 81.8 for women. A new pensions system taking both new realities and economic growth into account was introduced in 1999.

Equality of the sexes

As a result of the 1998 elections, 42.7 per cent of Swedish MPs today are women, while at the beginning of 2000 women were in a majority in the Cabinet. Sweden could be described as the world leader in terms of gender equality in politics. The aim of current legislation is to further equality between women and men in such areas as pay and career opportunities. Family welfare policy encourages both parents to combine paid work with joint responsibility for the children.

Education and research

Sweden has a nine-year compulsory school and children attend from the age of six or seven. Most children attend municipal schools, which are free of charge. Almost all (98 per cent) continue at three-year upper secondary school where both theoretical and practical programmes are available. Over a third of upper secondary school leavers go on to university or some other form of higher education. The aim is to bring this share up to 50 per cent. Total Swedish investment in research and development amounts to 3.8 per cent of GNP, which is the highest figure among the OECD countries.

Press freedom with traditions

The first law on freedom of the press was passed way back in 1766. The current law is intended to make it easier for the media to perform their time-honoured task of scrutinising officialdom. All official documents are available to the general public—with a very few, clearly specified exceptions. Censorship is prohibited and anyone communicating information to the media enjoys immunity—here, too, with few exceptions. Development in the media sphere is rapid. Newspapers, however, are doing comparatively well in competition with new types of media. Swedes are among the most avid newspaper readers in the world.

Growing tourism

The growth in tourism that Sweden has experienced is due in large part to its relatively unspoilt countryside and its numerous opportunities for outdoor recreation and relaxation. The traditional Swedish right of common access to the countryside applies to residents and visitors alike. However, it requires people to show care and consideration towards nature and the owners of land. Most foreign tourists come from the Nordic countries, but Germans account for the greatest number of overnight stays. An increasing number of Germans, as well as Norwegians and Danes, are buying summer cottages in Sweden.

Famous Swedes

Abba launched an internationally successful era for Swedish pop music in the 1970s and this music has since become an important export. When Abba broke up in 1982, their records had sold 250 million copies.

Ingmar Bergman, b 1918, a legend of both stage and screen, made 40 films in the period 1946–82. 'Smiles of a Summer Night' brought him international fame. His last film was 'Fanny and Alexander'. He is still working in the theatre.

Ingrid Bergman (1915–82) went to Hollywood in the early 1940s. Her most famous film today is 'Casablanca' (1943) in which she starred opposite Humphrey Bogart. She was awarded three Oscars during her career.

Jussi Björling (1911–60), one of the world's leading tenors, made his debut at the Stockholm Opera House while still a teenager. He later became a household name in international opera.

Björn Borg, b 1956, was voted the foremost Swedish sportsman of the 20th century. He made history by winning five Wimbledon singles titles in a row.

Greta Garbo (1905–90). 'The Divine Garbo' was born and buried in Stockholm. She began her Hollywood career in 1926. Her beauty and her voice made her one of the greatest box-office attractions in film history.

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–61) was UN Secretary-General from 1953 up until his death. He died in a plane crash while on official business in what is now Zambia. Hammarskjöld sought to give the UN an active role in dealing with international crises.

Astrid Lindgren (1907–2002) was one of the best known of all Swedes and perhaps the best loved. Her children's books have been translated into more than 60 languages and inspired 40 films. Pippi Longstocking fascinated children throughout the world.

Alfred Nobel (1833–96) invented dynamite, which made him rich and famous. He donated most of his fortune to a foundation which awards Nobel prizes at ceremonies in Stockholm and Oslo on 10 December every year, the anniversary of his death.

Olof Palme, 1927–86, internationally the best known of all Swedish politicians. Prime minister in 1969–76 and 1982–86, leader of the Social Democratic Party from 1969 until his death. He was shot dead in a Stockholm street. The murder has never been solved.

August Strindberg (1849–1912) is traditionally viewed as the giant of Swedish literature. His vast output embraced every genre. Abroad, he is best known as a playwright.

Raoul Wallenberg, (1912–), saved tens of thousands of Jews from deportation in Budapest in the Second World War. He was taken away by the Soviet military in 1945. According to the official Soviet version, he died in Moscow in 1947, but his fate remains a mystery.

The Swedish Institute (SI) is a public agency established to disseminate knowledge about Sweden abroad. It produces a wide range of publications, in several languages, on many aspects of Swedish society.

This fact sheet is part of SI's information service. It can be used as background information on condition that the source is acknowledged.

For further information please contact

the Swedish Embassy or Consulate in your country (in the U.S.: Swedish Information Service, One Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10017-2201, Internet: www.swedeninfo.com), or the **Swedish Institute**: Box 7434, SE-103 91 Stockholm, Sweden. Office: Sverigehuset (Sweden House), Hamngatan/Kungsträdgården, Stockholm.
Tel: + 46-8-789 20 00 Fax: + 46-8-20 72 48 E-mail: order@si.se Internet: www.si.se



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