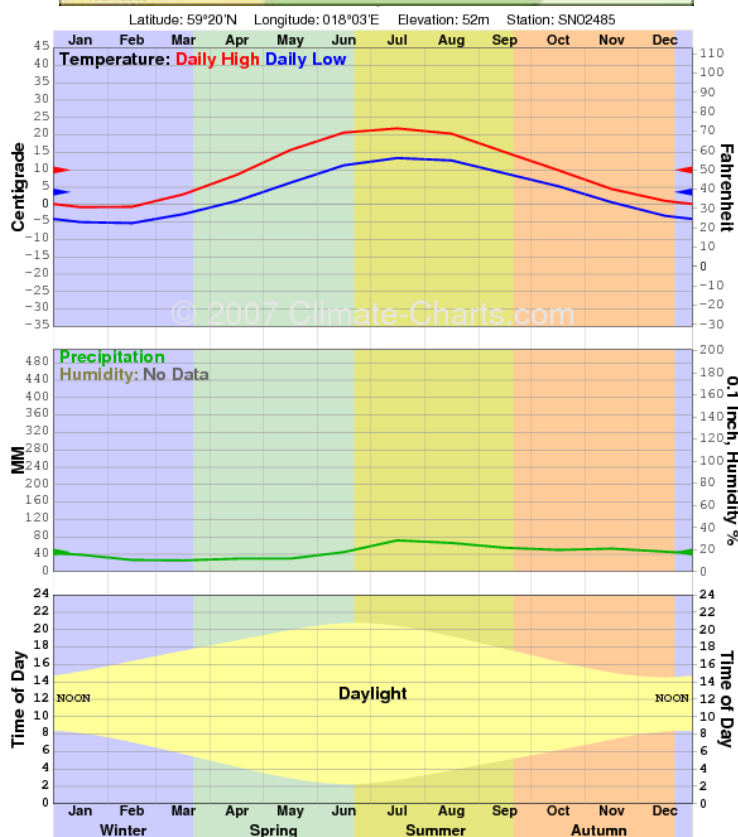


1. The Archipelago Sea

The Archipelago Sea is a part of the Baltic Sea between the Gulf of Bothnia, the Gulf of Finland and the Sea of Åland, within Finnish territorial waters. By some definitions it contains the largest archipelago (island group) in the world by the number of islands, although many of the islands are very small and tightly clustered.

The larger islands are inhabited and connected by ferries and bridges. The Åland Islands, including the largest islands of the region, form an autonomous region within Finland. The rest of the islands are part of Finland Proper. The Archipelago Sea is a significant tourist destination.



Nature and Conservation

The islands provide a unique and diverse environment for wildlife. The bigger islands resemble the coastal regions of continental Finland whereas skerries have a radically different environment. Smaller islands are devoid of trees, but still harbour a rich plantlife. The environment is sunny, has a relatively long growing season and is fertilised by guano. On the other hand, nearly constant wind and thin or non-existent soil



limit plant growth. The very low salinity of the Baltic Sea makes splashes of seawater more benign for plant life. While most of the islands are rocky, some are actually extensions of the Salpausselkä ridge system, and thus composed of terminal moraine. Such islands include Örö and Jurmo. The flora and fauna in these islands is more diverse than in their rocky neighbours.

The conditions can vary radically even within one small island, due to the features of the rock on which the islands are based. There may be small patches of fresh-water bogs, ponds of fresh water, ponds of brackish water, bushes, meadows, barren rocks, wind-beaten shores and sheltered coves on an island only a few tens of meters in diameter. Many plants have altered phenotypes due to the environment. For example, junipers on small islands grow only to a height less than 0.5 meters, but can cover several square meters.

In contrast to the terrestrial and coastal ecosystems of the islands, the sea itself has a relatively low biodiversity. The reason for this is the brackish nature of the water. The salinity is only 0.6% in the Archipelago. The salinity has also varied greatly during the past, making it difficult for species to adapt. However, the great number of individuals indicates a favourable environment. Typical fish species are the Baltic herring, pike, white-fish, perch and flounder.

The area is home to many species which are not found elsewhere in Finland. Harbour porpoise is one example of such species. It is the only cetacean which is regularly sighted in the northern part of the Baltic Sea. The current population in the entire Baltic is estimated at 600 individuals, down from estimated 10 to

20 thousand a century ago. Another example is White-tailed Eagle, which has a significant breeding population in the Archipelago Sea. Rare or endangered bird and mammal species found in the archipelago also include Caspian tern, Greater scaup, Grey seal and Ringed seal.

The islands are a haven for seabirds. The species include mute swan, black guillemot, great crested grebe and numerous species of sea gulls. Recently great cormorants have spread to the archipelago and their numbers are increasing. This not necessarily viewed as a good thing by nature lovers, since great cormorants live in dense colonies which will eventually poison surrounding plant life by their excrement.

2. Åland islands - The chill out island in the Middle of Scandinavia

The Åland islands are situated between Sweden and Finland, in the northern part of the Baltic Sea. They constitute an autonomous and monolingual Swedish region of Finland with its own flag. Åland also has its own stamps and internet top-level domain (.ax).

A total of 27,500 people live in Åland. About 11,000 of them live in Åland's only town, Mariehamn. The town was founded in 1861 and today it is the commercial and political centre. It is also Åland's seat of government. The only airport on the island is only 3 km from the centre of Mariehamn and there are regular flights weekdays from Stockholm, Helsinki and Turku.



Åland's landmarks

The things that make Åland unique are its unspoiled archipelago and the beautiful bedrock, worn smooth by glacier ice, that gets its red colour from the area's rapakivi granite. Åland's 6,500 islands have a world to offer where the sea is always nearby. Did you know that Åland has more sunshine hours than anywhere else in Northern Europe between May and August?

Another of Åland's distinctive traits is the midsummer sight of maypoles, colourful garlands and old world windmills. You can see some of them in the Jan Karlsgården open air museum in Kastelholm where you'll also get to see what a typical Ålander farm looked like around the end of the 19th century.

The islands' main industries include shipping, trade, banking, farming and the production of food items. Shipping has always been a particularly important activity for the region and, in terms of characterising the Ålanders, there is no other industry like it. Visit the Maritime Museum, the Museum Ship Pommern and the Maritime Quarter in Mariehamn to find out more about the islands' fascinating maritime history.

A youthful town, Mariehamn was founded in 1861 while Åland and Finland formed part of the mighty Russian Empire. Maria, consort of Tsar Alexander II of Russia gave the town her name.

Mariehamn grew up round the farming village of Övernäs, situated on a peninsula. The harbour's built-in sheltered bays came to be of great importance. The streets of Mariehamn are wide and straight. Housing sites were large from the beginning, but today they have been divided to provide space for several houses. A distinctive feature is the Esplanade, an avenue of lime trees stretching from west to east, from harbour to harbour.

The Russian heritage is mainly responsible for the layout of the town. It follows the same basic guidelines as can be found in many Russian cities, with large avenues with promenades in the middle of the street. Apart from that, the only Russian signs left from that era is the multitude of tombstones in the graveyards in Åland.

Useful links:

Åland islands: <http://www.visitaland.com/en>

Online Åland brochure: <http://np.netpublicator.com/netpublication/n09001297>

3. Gotland Island - Great destination for History lovers

The steep western coastline starts becoming discernable during the crossing to the largest Baltic Sea island (3,142 square kilometers in area; 125 kilometers long; 50 kilometers wide; 57,000 inhabitants). Only little forest land is visible, and the countryside is quite flat. It rains little in summer; the subsoil of limestone and sandstone blesses the island with unique vegetation and exotic white beaches, which rank with those of Oland. Unlike Oland, however, Gotland can look back on a brilliant past: bountiful harvests and exceptional trade relations in the Baltic Sea region have determined Gotland's fortunes since the Bronze Age.

German settlers and Hanseatic merchants, mainly from Lubeck, first began using Visby as a lucrative trading center. They left their distinctive mark on the culture and politics of the flourishing city. With their favorable relations to central Europe, they gradually drove the Gotlanders out of the island's back woods. The locals had not only subsisted on farming, sheep raising and fishing, but they were experienced mariners and merchants as well. Their competition, the town dwellers of



Visby, recognized envy and unrest developing in the back country; they therefore protected their valuable possessions with the city wall still visible today. The wall had to undergo its first use for defense when the farmers revolted against the townsfolk in 1288. In 1361, Visby citizens had no choice but to passively watch from the battlements while the Danish king Valdemar IV Atterdag laid waste to the farmland.

Afterwards, the city and its surroundings were weakened by attacks from the Swedes, the Danes, Hanseatic merchants and pirates, as well as through the government changing hands. In addition, the European trade routes moved westwards from the Baltic Sea area: Gotland had lost the importance it once enjoyed - that is, until tourists discovered "The Pearl of the Baltic Sea" in the 19th century.

Gotland's North

From Visby's Norderport (North Gate), Route 149 runs north almost parallel to the striking cliffs on the west coast. While on the east side of the road open plains such as the airport grounds, fields and meadows dominate, the view of the sea on the west is often obstructed by the thick forests.

Located in the dense forest near the steep coast five kilometers south of the village, the popular dripstone caves (grottorna) of Lummelunda - 2.6 kilometers in length - are among Sweden's longest cave systems.

Miles of pebble beaches have evolved at the foot of the high cliffs. Sandy beaches, like on the small cove directly adjacent to the harbor of Lickershamn, are more of an exception in the northwestern areas of Gotland. Here, on the other hand, are the dramatic wind- and water-beaten remains of a limestone cliff, the only preserved rank. The Jungfrun rauk is the tallest (27 meters) of these peculiar rock towers and can be reached after a 600-meter walk from the harbor. Hiking trails along the steep coast (klint) lead to beautiful panoramas or additional raukar near Hallshuk, the northern tip of the island.

The villages in the protected inland area are part of the long tradition of the Gotlandic farming community - still visible due to their churches. The houses of worship of Lummelunda and Stenkyrka (Stone Church) are just two examples of approximately 90 churches from Gotland's heyday prior to the 15th century that are still in use today. Stenkyrka, formally a tingstad (council and court town), presumably had the first wooden church on the island (11th century). The inhabitants built a new church in the 12th century; this time of stone, thus giving the town a new name.

Despite their dissimilar appearances, the rural Gotlandic churches actually do have a similar history. After Christianization - according to legend, Saint Olav converted the inhabitants of Gotland to the new faith during a visit to the island in 1029 - wooden churches were built in the tingstade, or council and court towns; Stenkyrka in the north, Atlingbo in central Gotland and Fardhem in the south. However, the widely traveled and wealthy farmers soon replaced the old wooden constructions with solid Romanesque stone churches exhibiting elaborate furnishings.

The churches were continually undergoing modifications in accordance with the latest style. However, after the demise of the farmers' culture in the 14th century, the resources for further restoration and additions were lacking dreadfully. For this reason, these beautiful churches have been handed down to us as heirlooms in relatively original Gothic and Romanesque styles.

The murals have been preserved in most of the churches, and in some, even valuable glass windows from the Roman Era still remain. The names of the architects are largely unknown, however, stylistic peculiarities of the artists have inspired art historians to assign names: a "Byzantios," for example, refers to Byzantine models, or a "Calcarius" used limestone for baptismal fonts instead of the customary sandstone.

In some cases, the community eventually disappeared, whereas the solid stone church endured, at least as a ruin. Five kilometers east of Stenkyrka, the side walls of Elinghems iidekyrka were restored around 1924 so that it could be used for open-air productions. The vaulted ceiling and roof no longer remain. Ganns iidekyrka, four kilometers north of Larbro, has also been preserved in its ruined state.



Routes 147, 148 and 149 converge in Larbro. While constructing their church in the 13th century, the citizens of this town spared neither labor nor expense: the interior decoration and furnishings are of excellent quality, and the church tower has a rather unusual octagonal base. The kastal, or fortified tower, directly adjacent to it is a reminder of the tumultuous times towards the end of the Middle Ages.

Today limestone is quarried on Gotland, mainly for the production of cement. The most important industrial town is Slite, nine kilometers south of Larbro. There are numerous abandoned quarries in the northeastern part of the island. Blase, located about 15 kilometers north of Larbro, is home to the very informative Blase kalkbruksmuseum; the former limestone quarry, in operation until the 20th century, has been converted into a museum.

The Kulturhistoriska museet in Bunge welcomes you to ethnological and archeological expeditions through centuries-old farming culture. In addition to houses, mills and utensils of days past, there is an impressive collection of Gotlandic rune stones (bildstenar) on display - these are unique memorial stones customarily used between the 5th and 12th centuries. The mighty tower and the embrasures in the cemetery wall reveal that the church of Bunge once served as a fortress.



Route 148 ends just three kilometers farther east in the town of Fariisund. If you like lonely beaches and barren sheep pastures, then you will love it here.

The raukar on the peninsula of Langhammer in the far north present a fabulous natural spectacle - as does Digerhuvud, Sweden's largest rank area with its six-kilometer-long coastline west of here.

Gotska Sandiin is even more remote. After a two-hour cruise from Farosund, this national park welcomes you with dunes, heathland, virgin pine forests and sandy beaches, as well as simple holiday cabins for accommodation.

There are also impressive dunes on Faro, in the nature reserve of Ullahau in the eastern part of the island. The southerly and easterly aligned coastal regions of Faro and Gotland are considerably flatter and more isolated than those in the west, and boast many sandy beaches. The beach town of Aminne, south of Slite, is especially popular.

Returning to Visby on Route 148, you cannot miss the 55-meter-high church tower of Tingstade. Not only did the villagers demonstrate their wealth in the 13th century, but also their appreciation for art with the magnificently decorated Romanesque church portals. The square, wooden defense fortification (Bulverket) from the Viking Age, long submerged in the village lake, still remains indiscernible to the rapidly passing motorists on Route 148.

In Bro, 12 kilometers east of Visby, we are reminded of the grand shipping days of Gotland since the church, repeatedly built in Gothic and Romanesque styles between 1200 and 1300, was considered to be an important offertory church by the mariners. The area is teeming with relics of prehistory, most of which date back to the Bronze Age. The grooved stones at the sacrificial spring from pagan times are rather mysterious (southwest of town en route to Hedeby). Around 2,000 such stones have been found on Gotland; no one has succeeded in solving their puzzle.

Central Gotland

Just 17 kilometers after leaving Visby via Osterport (East Gate) on Route 143, you will arrive at the Roma kloster. Built on fertile soil around the middle of the 12th century, this is said to have been an unusually rich Cistercian monastery, but served as a source of stone for a long time after the Reformation in the 16th century. Only the majestic nave remains as a roofless ruin.

In the 19th century Visby and its hinterland were provided with a rail connection for the transportation of sugar beets from central Gotland. The old train, which was taken out of service years ago, can be seen at the Museijarnvag in Dalhem, six kilometers from Roma. The fertile region also displays its wealth by the impressive sacral buildings here. There is, for example, the church in Dalhem, with valuable glass paintings, the pure Gothic church in Ekeby, and the uniquely disproportionate church of Kallunge, which resulted when the elaborate plans for a giant choir were abandoned in the 13th century.

While the region is more densely wooded farther east, the churches of the coastal areas are protected by a kastal. Good examples of this are the church in Gammelgarn, with its splendid sculptures at the south portal and the lavishly painted church in Gothem. But even before the time of Christ, the inhabitants apparently sought protection as well - on the steep limestone plateau of Grogarnsberget located on the coast three kilometers east of Katthammarsvik, or in the forest hidden back behind the twometer-high walls of layered limestone of the Herrgardsklint (commune of Gammelgarn). Also located in the dense woodlands, Sweden's largest fortress grounds, the Torsburgen, provided lodging and shelter for many in times of threat, from the Roman Iron Age into the 13th century.

Katthammarsvik, on the east coast peninsula of Ostergarnsholm, possesses an ideal harbor for shipping the locally quarried limestone (since the 17th century). Today, the Kalkpatronsgarden, the manor house of a quarry owner, offers accommodations to tourists passing through.

Ljugarn, 48 kilometers southeast of Visby, has been the most popular seaside resort on the east coast since the 19th century. Its harbor played an important role as early as Gotland's initial seafaring days. A large

geographical depression crosses the island between Ljugarn and the west coast. Archeologists built a replica of the Iron Age castle of Lojsta slott at the edge of the swampland on a lake. The radiant, colorful glass windows of the village church of Lojsta, three kilometers west (Route 142), have been gleaming since the 13th century. The depression continues farther west with the forests, willows and swamps of the Lojstahajd region, where the gotlandsruss, a species of semi-wild horse, grazes.

Like a fortress, the 12th-century church of Froje¹ is located on a hill and affords a magnificent view of the central west coast of Gotland and the Karl Islands located just offshore. The ruins of a kastal can be found nearby. During the peak season, boats from the little harbor of Klintehamn service the island of Stora Karlso daily. Like its sister island Lilla Karlso (accessible by boat from Djupvik), it appears to rise off the coast like a platform. Day tourists can take walks through opulent flora to the bird cliffs and Stone Age caves.

Many interesting prehistoric findings are located near the coast, for example, Bronze Age stone settings in the form of ships at Gannarve and Gnisvard; or Vallhagar, a large community from the Iron Age with an extensive burial site near Frojel. The settlement, for reasons still unknown, was suddenly abandoned in the 6th century. The present-day harbor of Vastergarn was a significant competitor for Visby during the Viking Age.

Located 20 kilometers from the island's capital city is Tofta strand, a large sandy beach with an adjacent pine forest - a real magnet for summer vacationers. Closer to Visby, the west coast cliffs become more prominent and reach a peak in Hogklint, with a beautiful view of the city eight kilometers away. Princess Eugenie enjoyed the wooded, hilly landscape and Gotland's mild climate so much that she had a Swiss-style summer house (Fridhem) built in the area, which is now used as a hotel. The extensive vacation resort of Kneippbyn, with a large amusement park, is particularly suitable for families with children. From here it is only five kilometers to Siiderport (South Gate) from Visby's city wall.

Southern Gotland

The island of Gotland, flat - with gently flowing ripples at most - is an ideal landscape for bicycling. The roads are maintained in excellent condition and some bicycle routes are marked. You do, however, need to reckon with strong winds, especially in the south. Here, on the peninsula of Nasudden, the rotors of a wind-power station are in practically continuous operation.

Hemse - where routes 141, 142 and 144 converge - imparts the overall impression of a new town with a modern shopping center. Nevertheless, the wellpreserved remains of a timber church from the first half of the 12th century were found here; so valuable that they were even adopted by Stockholm's history museum. The stone church from the Middle Ages, on the other hand, remained in the village, as did the Romanesque stone church of the 12th and 13th centuries located in Fardhem four kilometers away. This is the southernmost of the three Gotlandic tingstade (council and court towns) from the beginning of Christianization - and the third one having a church at all, a wooden one, though, that is since long gone.

Route 142 leads to the southern tip of Gotland via Grotlingbo, with its massive church. Relief works of the master stonemason Sigraf (early 13th century) were taken from its Romanesque predecessor and used in the 14th-century Gothic church; he also crafted the baptismal font. Only three kilometers away, the medieval court building of the Kattlunds gard in the center of town reminds us of the island's significant agricultural and mercantile tradition. Located on the isthmus of the southern peninsula, the church tower of *Oja served as a navigational point until recent years. The community was able to afford a magnificent

triumphal crucifix in the second half of the 13th century and built a kastal to protect themselves from pirates.

The giant depiction of The Weighing of the Soul of Emperor Henry II by the Archangel Michael leaves the most lasting impression of all the murals in the church of Vamlingbo.

The village of Sundre©, not far from the coast, was also protected by a fortification tower close to the church. The extremely fine sandstone, which has been quarried here for two centuries and processed into whetstones in the Slipstensbrott, comes from the rural commune of Kattelvik located directly on the west coast. Gotland's sandstone and limestone were important exports as early as the Middle Ages.

Hoburgen, the often storm-buffeted, southwestern tip of Gotland 37 meters above sea level, is personified in its impressive 4.5-meter-high Hoburgsgubben rock, the "Old-timer of Hoburgen:" The expansive view and the various flora of the limestone heath (alvar) continue to fascinate hikers. They also enjoy wandering to the raukar in the cozier bays of Holmhaller on the east side of the southern peninsula or to the numerous small nature reserves in the area. An abundance of orchids and other flowering plants flourish here, especially during May and June. In addition to the alvar areas, the grassy meadows interspersed with light woods have an especially large number of varieties of blossoms.

Useful links: <http://www.gotland.info/language/eng/gotland.php>

4. Oland Island - The Swedish vacation island

As a vacation island, Oland offers a lot of what you would expect to find in more southern climates; miles of sandy beaches, deciduous forests and windmills are not exactly typical of Sweden. The little precipitation in the summer months can even lead to water shortages. The island is a large, half-submerged mountain ridge 137 kilometers long and no more than 16 kilometers wide. It precipitously drops away in the west while gently sloping into the sea in the east; the ridge is only thinly covered with deposits from the Ice Age. The vegetation, so different from that of the mainland, is due to its chalky sandstone subsoil.

Oland was already inhabited in the Stone Age; the Vikings and their successors built refuge forts here. The windmills - once numbering 1,300 - are signs of bountiful grain yields.



The Barren South: Stora Alvaret

Oland can be reached by a six-kilometer-long bridge built in 1972, which spans the sound between Kalmar and the island. You will arrive at Farjestaden, the former ferry station.

Heading south from Farjestaden (Route 136), you should switch over to Route 946 in Skogsby, which runs parallel to the main road near the coast. After five kilometers, you will arrive at Karlevistenen; it is considered to be the most beautiful rune stone on the island. The stone, still standing at its original location, was erected by a Danish king more than a thousand years ago. Altogether there are more than a dozen such stones scattered about the island, many others, though, are likely to have ended up as building material for churches.

The Stora Alvaret, a vast limestone steppe covering most of the southern part of the island, begins near Vickelby, where a 12th-century fortified church still stands. At first glance the grassy heath countryside looks rather sparse, but actually, quite a variety of plant life thrives here. Some 35 types of orchids, rare grasses and herbs flourish here in the mild, dry climate.

There is a good view of the countryside from the gentle hills of the burial mounds of Mysinge, south of Resmo. Ornithologists also prize these hills, especially for watching the resting swarms of cranes on their southward migration, for instance. A narrow road that winds through the Stora Alvaret and leads to the east coast begins at the Ice Age refuge fort of Barby borg.

If you continue driving farther south, you will pass through the Iron Age burial grounds of Gettlinge and arrive at the Wall of Charles X on the other side of Gronhogen. The king, an avid hunting enthusiast, had the five-kilometer-long wall built from coast to coast in 1653 to prevent his royal deer on the southern tip from leaving their territory, thereby protecting the farmers' fields.

The 18th-century Lange Jan, Sweden's tallest lighthouse, is located on the southern cape of Gland. The 42-meter tower is open in summer to visitors.

The East Coast

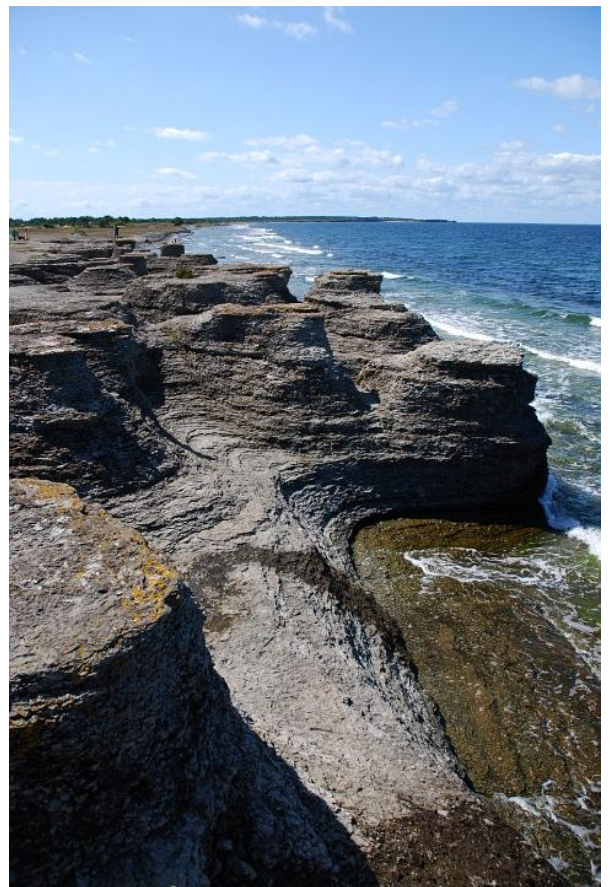
For the return trip from the "Tall Jan," you should take the road on the east coast. After a few kilometers you will come to the refuge fort of Eketorp, which was built and used in three phases between 300 and 1300 A.D. Following careful excavations, the refuge was partially reconstructed as an open-air museum and creates a vivid impression of the lifestyle of the 200 people and their livestock within the ramparts. An additional example of 19 such refuges is located 30 kilometers farther inland near Mockleby: the Graborg, whose circular ramparts, once up to six meters high, measure 640 meters in circumference. This is the largest refuge fort on the island. Presumably, the fort was used from the days of the great migrations up into the Middle Ages. The remains of Knut's chapel, a pilgrimage chapel from the 13th century, are located in front of the fort. An attempt is being made to restore the original vegetation of the surrounding meadows.

The Stormy North

The five old windmills near Lerkaka, like the other 350 on the island, are under historic preservation. In the little town of Himmelsberga, two old Gland farmhouses were joined to establish an open-air museum whose main collection displays the island's beautiful country furnishings. The best-preserved church on the island is from the 12th century and is located in Gardslosa. Kapelludden is where the remains of Saint Birgitta first reached Swedish soil after being brought from Rome and taken to Vadstena in 1374.

The northernmost part of Gland consists of the Boda kronopark, an extensive forest whose pines in the east have been twisted into bizarre shapes by the wind; hence the name Trollskogen (Troll Forest). A grove of arborvitae (thuja pine) lines the sandy beach of Boda. Ferries run from the port of Grankullavik to the island of Gotland in the summer. There is also a lighthouse on the northern tip of the island: Lange Erik, whose tower can be climbed, is open to visitors.

On the way back south, it is worth stopping at Neptuni akrar, "Neptune's Fields," as Carl von Linne dubbed the area: between the scree embankments in June and July, the sea-blue blossoms of viper's bugloss (blue thistle) sway here in great numbers. The beautiful bathing cove of Byerums Sandvik is also worth the detour; its raukar, oddly shaped freestanding lime- and sandstone formations, are unparalleled on Gland.



Bla Jungfrun - The Island of Witches

The island of Bla Jungfrun, located in Kalmar Sound, can be reached in summer by boats running from Byxelkrok (weather permitting). The island has been a national park since 1925. Bla Jungfrun is popularly referred to as the legendary blakulla, where witches dance through the night on Maundy Thursday. Unlike Gland, the island (86 meters above sea level and 66 hectares in area) is composed of granite, similar to the mainland. The island served as a quarry for many years, which unfortunately caused the destruction of numerous grottos.

The Royal Residences of the West Coast

Borgholm, the capital of the island of Gland, has 3,000 inhabitants and lies at the foot of a 40-meter-high cliff called a "land castle." The imposing ruins of the *Borgholm slott tower over the little town. There have been fortresses here since the 12th century - constantly fought over by the Swedes, the Danes and the Hanseatic League. Using the ruins of the Renaissance castle as a tremendous stage setting, open-air events take place here in summer.

Not far from Borgholm is Solliden, the summer residence of the Swedish king. The magnificent *Royal Park, encompassing an Italian-style villa built in 1905, is open a few hours daily to the public even when the Royal Family is present. This is an extraordinary opportunity for royalty enthusiasts to catch a glimpse of the crowned leaders.

Probably more worthwhile is a stop in Halltorps Hage, a grove of thousand-year-old oaks, hornbeams and many other deciduous trees. The cozy country inn Halltorps Kro, the only one in the village, offers a setting for a nice break.

Ismantorps borg, the romantic refuge fort from the Iron and Viking Ages, is the last sight before returning via the Oland bridge.

Useful links:

<http://www.olandsturist.se/en/>



5. Stockholm

Stockholm, one of the most beautiful capitals in the world, is built on 14 islands connected by 57 bridges. The beautiful buildings, the greenery, the fresh air and the proximity to the water are distinctive traits of this city. The Royal National City Park, (the first National City Park in the world), is a green space that breathes for the city, and a constant presence in the crush of the city.



With its 750 year history and rich cultural life, Stockholm offers a wide selection of world-class museums and attractions. Most of the city's attractions can be reached on foot, and there's a good chance of experiencing a lot of things in a short time. Experience big-city life, the history of civilization and natural scenery, all in the course of the same day.

Visit Stockholm City Hall. Climb the City Hall tower for a fantastic view of Stockholm. Don't miss Gamla Stan, Stockholm's oldest attraction and one of the best preserved medieval city centers in the world. Walk through small winding streets lined with stores full of handicrafts, antiques, art galleries and cafés. The Royal Palace and Stockholm Cathedral are also located in Gamla Stan.

The green island of Djurgården is home to some of the city's most popular attractions. Visit the world-famous warship the Vasa, the world's oldest open-air museum Skansen, or Astrid Lindgren's Junibacken. And don't miss the chance to see Stockholm from the water. Naturally a city built on fourteen islands offers marvelous views over the water. There are many different sightseeing tours to choose from. And if fourteen islands aren't enough, Stockholm offers a wonderful archipelago with 30,000 islands, islet rocks and skerries.

Useful links: <http://www.visitstockholm.com/en/>

6. Helsinki

Helsinki is a sea-town par excellence and an exciting, dynamic place. Half the city seems to be water, and the tortured geography of the coastline includes any number of bays, inlets and a speckling of islands. The harbour is the heart of the city, and watching the giant cruise ships glide into port is a defining memory and essential Helsinki experience.



This lively capital in the south of Finland now competes with Antwerp and Stockholm for design know-how and has an instinctive feel for the good life. Once ruled by Sweden, then Russia, Finland has long shaken off its little-brother complex and is getting attention for all the right reasons. Elegant fusion food, sexy minimalist design and cerebral fashion have helped Helsinki become a hip Northern European hangout. The city has been chosen as Design World Capital for 2012 and will this year open its doors to a new music centre designed by local architects. Already voted the world's fifth-most liveable city by Monocle magazine, Helsinki rates highly on criteria such as green spaces, ease of lifestyle and gender equality.

Helsinki is cool without - as yet - being self-consciously so. Unlike other capitals, you sense that people go to places because they enjoy them, not to be seen. Much modern décor is ironic and humorous, and achieves stylishness by daring to differ rather than trying too hard.

While not an ancient place, much of what is loveable in Helsinki is older. The style of its glorious Art Nouveau buildings, the spacious elegance of its cafés, the careful preservation of Finnish heritage in its dozens of museums, restaurants that have changed neither menu nor furnishings since the 1930s are all part of the city's quirky charm.

It has a very different feel to the rest of Finland, partly because before the days of the hi-tech society it was the country's sole point of contact almost with the rest of the world.

Like all of Finland, though, Helsinki has a dual nature. In winter you sometimes wonder where all the people are. In spring and summer they are back again, packing green spaces and outdoor tables to get a piece of blessed sun, whirring around on thousands of bicycles and kicking the city's nightlife into overdrive.

Useful links: <http://www.visithelsinki.fi/en>