



Capital views from Heaven

Stockholm has a swinging new style, reports **Ewen Bell**.

IF you're going to fly all the way to Scandinavia you'll need two things: a really comfortable seat on the plane and a very special city to make the long journey worth the while.

The Swedish capital of Stockholm has been popular with travellers for almost 500 years, but this is an old city full of young people keen to add a touch of chic to the Nordic norms.

Gustav Otterberg is just 26 years old and he's head chef at Leijontornet, in the old town of Stockholm called Gamla Stan.

I generally don't expect cuisine in Sweden to vary greatly from salad and salmon, but my expectations prove woefully inadequate as I am presented with a contemporary version of perch and potatoes that would make Gordon Ramsay bite his tongue.

The new flavours of Scandinavia melt in my mouth and I think to myself: I wonder what the King of Sweden is having for lunch today?

Leijontornet exemplifies the blend of old and new that makes the old town of Stockholm unique.

Downstairs, the kitchen is run by a dynamic culinary prodigy who earned them a Michelin star-rating earlier this year, while upstairs the Victory Hotel is a five-star favourite that retains centuries of heritage as one of Stockholm's oldest buildings.

Stately rooms are influenced by royal themes and nautical tones. Photographs of long-departed sea captains sit above the beds, proudly gazing past the curtains to the cobble-stoned streets below.

The click-clack of horses hoofs once echoed on those streets, but has since been replaced by the clack-click of high-heel shoes.

Fashion on and off the streets of Stockholm is serious business, with designer boutiques and accessories peeking from behind medieval façades. Organic clothing, hand-made glass beads and screenprint textiles top the shopping list of fussy fashion hunters.

Gamla Stan is easily one of Europe's most beautiful old towns, because it's a living town. Residents still walk their dogs to the park every day, carry home the groceries and share a hot chocolate and cake with their neighbours. For every shop window at the street level there are a dozen apartments and studios upstairs.

The stores are not just for tourists, either — a seductive selection of homewares, furniture and other quirky Swedish necessities are art-



fully displayed in shop windows.

Cafes of Gamla Stan are busy with locals who take advantage of lunch specials such as smörgas and kaffe (a sandwich and coffee).

When you choose accommodation on the island of Gamla Stan you are within walking distance of almost everything Stockholm has to offer. Visitors can also use the network of trains, trams and ferries that link Gamla Stan to the wider city and other islands in the Stockholm archipelago.

For \$110, a three-day Stockholm Card gets you riding the rails and water, and includes entrance to more than 75 museums and attractions. Canal tours are included, so you can also see Gamla Stan from the water.

Ferries connect the old town with the islands of Skeppsholmen and Stockholm's Moderna Museet (Museum of Modern Art). The galleries of Gamla Stan are filled with contemporary art of the highest order, but the charm-

ingly antiquated ferries are more recently designed than most exhibits at Moderna Museet.

Expect to be immersed in classical paintings by Europe's masters, sculptures by obscure Nordic artists and a photographic collection exploring 20th-century life in Sweden. The definition of modern in this instance includes any artist born after 1870.

There are some genuinely contemporary elements at Moderna Museet, such as experimental films and the exquisite architecture of the building itself. Rafael Moneo was the winning architect for the design project and, for 10 years, the abstract lanterns that light the interior have been a talking point for visitors — almost as much as the art.

Another ferry connects the esplanades of Skeppsholmen to the crowd-pulling attractions at Djurgården, where your Stockholm Card can get a decent workout. Lined up along the waterfront



Old and new: Clockwise from top, a ferry off Gamla Stan island in Stockholm; a guard of the crown outside the Royal Palace; an artist works while waiting for customers; yellow walls line a Gamla Stan street

label-lust for designer apparel, your reward will be culinary heaven at Ostermalmshallen — an undercover market filled with food stores and specialist seafood cafes.

I must admit to allowing indulgence to get the better of common sense. By the time my lunch was over, I had to take the train back to Gamla Stan instead of walking.

While the trendy shops are located to the north of Gamla Stan, the urban artists are just to the south. Södermalm is a creative enclave and home to the city's best new artists. The design emphasis here is about locals not labels. Alternative culture, bohemian artists and student accommodation all add to the "south of centre" style.

In Södermalm's design district is Kvadrat, a commission store for creations by local designers with an emphasis on home and heart. Materials for their modern masterpieces include glass, porcelain, silver and silk. Designs are typically Swedish, with simple motifs, tasteful use of colour and a touch of modern influence.

The streets surrounding Kvadrat are also alive with talent, dotted with artist studios where fine pottery and timber crafts are displayed, second-hand clothing stores are hidden in basements, and candle-lit cafes sell cupcakes and comics.

Södermalm stores are devilishly tempting, but the nightlife is pure Heaven. That's the name of Stockholm's best bars, called "Himlen". To get to Heaven you simply find office tower at 78 Gotgatan St, the former city tax office. A drab and dour building from the outside, it's divinely decked with cocktails inside.

Heaven is found on the top floor, naturally, offering the best views of Stockholm and only for the price of a vodka and lime. Unlike the Ice Bar across town you don't need a snow jacket to stay warm, and the dinner menu is on par with the scenery.

From the bar I can see the lights of Gamla Stan and the colourful dome of its cathedral. I'm happy the people of Stockholm have preserved so much of their heritage, but it's even better when mixed with a few modern aesthetics.

■ The writer was a guest of Scandinavian Airlines and Small Luxury Hotels.