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'At sunrise, light creeps reverently across the Duomo; at sunset, the entire city glows'

Claire Irvin at Florence's luxurious new hillside hotel

ROBERTO MOIOLA / SYSAWORLD/GETTY IMAGES

Godøya island, Alesund, Norway



The best Scandi seaside breaks

Discover Swedish beaches, the Danish riviera and Norway's coast road with this area-by-area guide.
By **Sarah Turner**

Waterfalls thundering down into a perfect Norwegian fjord, the limpid waters of the Baltic, rocky islets dotted with red cabins, white powder sands shared only with seals and North Sea breakers pounding shores into submission... When it comes to Scandinavia, there's a lot of seaside to choose from.

The Scandi summer traditionally starts on midsummer itself, which falls on June 20 this year. The date triggers beach bonfires and conviviality, a celebration that the next few months will have days that last long into the

night, with milky sunsets — especially as you near the Arctic — only kicking in around midnight.

Above all, Scandis head to the shore. Summer in this part of the world is about messing around in boats and at crayfish parties, staying in off-grid beach houses, picking berries. The Scandinavian countries have more than half a million islands, from the tiny ones in the Swedish archipelago that Abba headed to in the 1970s to larger ones (often so cleverly linked by bridges that you wouldn't know that they were islands). It's easy to hop between Scandinavian countries, often without knowing it.



Try the region's seafood

Then there's Finland, not technically part of Scandinavia but sharing all the ethos of immersing yourself in nature during the summer, and with inhabitants who love saunas even more than their neighbours.

Not surprisingly, cycling holidays are popular here. Especially in Denmark and Sweden, the terrain is fairly flat and while distances can be significant, there's no shame in e-biking in this forward-thinking set of nations.

Above all, Scandis seem to know how to summer well. It's

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► about blending the bracing waters with beach saunas, partnering harbour restaurants with wine and sunglasses (and a jumper in case there's a chill in the air). Since there seems to be a word for everything in the Nordic languages, the Norwegian phrase *sommerkos* — summer cosiness — exemplifies that the best way to embrace summer is to relax into it.

Yes, Scandinavia is expensive, but there are ways to cut the cost. In recent years, especially in Sweden and Denmark, 19th-century *badehoteller* (seaside hotels) have been sensitively renovated for a new generation of weekenders. Usually with only a handful of rooms, wooden-framed and set right on the beach, these are a study in very stylish simplicity. To keep their original character intact, many have rooms with shared bathrooms. All the countries have a network of great campsites by the sea too. And since Scandi schools tend to go back in early August, prices usually dip then. If the Scandinavians start their summer early, the British can end it very well.

DENMARK

North Jutland

Jutland is the wildest, most elemental part of Denmark. Klitmøller, on its North Sea coastline, is now known as Cold Hawaii, in a typically Danish juxtaposition of reality and irony. Over the past couple of decades this small fishing village has become one of Scandinavia's coolest holiday destinations, with the winds bringing in every type of surfer, including kite-surfers, windsurfers and SUPers. An annual Cold Hawaii Games each September welcomes professionals and — a rare thing on the surf circuit — beginners (coldhawaiigames.com).

The Viking Surf House combines tuition and basic accommodation, offering surf camps with lessons for a day or more, and transport to the best waves. The biggest swells are in autumn and winter (room-only doubles from £63; vikingsurfhouse.dk).

More upmarket is the Klitmøller Hotel, which ups the comfort levels with quirkily decorated rooms under the eaves: the Jaws suite features a shark's snout sculpture protruding from one wall; the National Park suite has a wall covered in a giant photo of a forest. It also has a good restaurant, Nils Juel, bedecked in marine interiors flotsam, plus it's right on the beach (B&B doubles from £185; klitmollerhotel.com).

At Rabjerg, a vast dune is on the move, heading inland (albeit very, very slowly), and it's a must-see, should-climb experience. In a few decades the First Camp Rabjerg Mile might be engulfed by it but in the meantime it's a very good, very Danish campsite, with cabins as well as motorhome stands plus a swimming pool and easy access to the sea (four nights' self-catering for five from £440; firstcamp.se).

At Denmark's most northerly point, the shapeshifting Grenen peninsula is where Skagerrak (the North Sea) and Kattegat (the Baltic Sea) waters visibly merge while the tides buffet the spit of

sand at its point into a new configuration every day. Natural phenomena apart, human input has created an arty hinterland to this end-of-the-world destination. Skagen itself is now stuffed with restaurants and boutique hotels, while the 19th-century artists who came here for its light are commemorated at the Skagens Museum (adults £16; skagensmuseum.dk).

Nordic countries dearly love a summer festival and Skagen has a gentle folk-orientated one between July 2 and 4 this year (£196; skagenfestival.dk). Brøndums is Skagen's oldest hotel. Founded in 1859, it played a significant part in creating Skagen's arty heritage and still has some shared bathrooms to go with its classic *badehotellet* vibe (B&B doubles from £125; brondumshotel.com).

To book a package taking in this region try the Natural Adventure's self-guided walking North Sea Trail holiday, which takes in North Jutland's main coastal sights, including Rabjerg, Skagen and a number of lighthouses that stand sentinel en route (seven nights' B&B from £1,180pp, including luggage transfers; thenaturaladventure.com). Fly to Aalborg.

Danish Riviera

The stretch of coast between

Copenhagen and Helsingør has sand and serious Scandi style, from 1930s petrol stations designed by Arne Jacobsen to leading art museums, as well as some decidedly cool fishing villages.

Highlights of the 44km stretch from

Copenhagen to Helsingør on the North Zealand coast include the *Out of Africa* author Karen Blixen's beautiful 17th-century home at Rungsted (£11; blixen.dk), while the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art mixes top-notch exhibitions (*Lucian Freud* runs between June 6 and September 27) with a permanent collection and a sculpture garden that looks out to sea (£17; louisiana.dk).

Helsingør has the castle Shakespeare created *Hamlet* around and 20-minute ferries over to Helsingborg in Sweden. However, for many North Zealand's real jewel lies just beyond in Hornbæk, with a wide sandy beach, exemplary bakeries and, as a bonus, the Hornbækhus hotel. Built in 1904, this 36-room house with carefully restored retro decor is owned by the Danish founders of the Flying Tiger group. Set in a rose-filled garden, it has communal meals each evening for guests to get to know each other (B&B doubles from £162; hornbaekhus.com).

The neighbouring town of Gilleleje is nearly as pretty, also with a working harbour and the sort of restaurants such a lovely spot deserves.

Exploring the Danish Riviera is easy by train or car but the tour operator Inntrevel has a week-long cycling holiday along the coast, leaving from Skovshoved, just outside Copenhagen, riding to Gilleleje through farmland, largely on cycle paths, with luggage transported en route (six nights' B&B from £1,875pp, including cycle hire; inntrevel.co.uk). Fly to Copenhagen.



Skånor-Falsterbo beach, Sweden

Family-friendly island of Als, Jutland

Scandinavia is generally very family-friendly but the more southerly part of Jutland is now taking it to the next level. Last year Center Parcs opened on the island of Als but, unlike the UK variants, it incorporates a beach so you can break out from the dome for some sea swimming and a walk along the sculptural pier (three nights' self-catering for four from £452; centerparcs.dk).

Along with some only-in-Denmark Center Parcs activities, such as a Viking-themed escape room, you're also within walking distance of Universe, a science-made-fun park with virtual reality rollercoasters and hurricane tunnels to test yourself against (£22; universe.dk).

Bonus: the nearest airport is at Billund, the home of Lego and the original Legoland.



SWEDEN

Skåne

With miles of golden rape fields studded with castles and lakes, Skåne's interior is beautiful (both the Swedish and Kenneth Branagh versions of *Wallander* showcase it nicely). The region's coastline is even more extraordinary. If the Danes adore their beaches on the Danish Riviera, the Swedes can afford to be a bit sniffy about those on their side of the Öresund because, where the Swedish coast rounds off towards the Baltic around Malmö, there are some jaw-dropping beaches to choose from. Skånor-Falsterbo has pastel-coloured beach huts slotted between the dunes.

Yes, this part of Sweden can feel like a very idyllic version of the English coastline. The 10km-long sandy beach shelves gently into the water and the summer restaurant scene is predictably excellent. Head for Rogeriet, a delicatessen, wine bar and lunch restaurant just off the beach that's

CAROLINA ROMARE, PETER JYRGENSEN, ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES



Den Tilsandede Kirke, Skagen, Denmark



Ytri Island Retreat, Norway



Alesund, Norway

beloved by locals, for fish soup, meatballs or smoked salmon (mains from £12; rogeriet.se).

If you head along Skane's Baltic coastline, cliffs start to appear. There are also Iron Age remains, none more perplexing than Ale's Stones near Kaseberga. Forming the outline of a ship, it's an unexpected touch of drama. You'll also find Sandhammaren a ten-minute drive away. Often considered Sweden's best beach, it's an exercise in simplicity: there's limited parking and few facilities, but it's a gorgeous stretch of dune-backed white sand — and very popular in summer. There are regular buses from Ystad, which also has its own very fun beach hotel, Ystad Saltsjobad, which hosts summer crayfish parties, has a spa and pool and a Nordic Hamptons feel (half-board doubles from £288; ysb.se).

Even more than the rest of Sweden, Skane is blessed with a network of walking trails that allow you to explore this richly resonant landscape. An easy way to tackle them is on a Macs Adventure tour. The company has a five-

night self-guided trip along the coastal Osterlen Way between Ystad and Kivik, with stays in small hotels and inns and your luggage transported between them. Five nights' B&B is from £830pp, including luggage transfers (macsadventure.com). Fly to Malmo or Copenhagen.

Fjallbacka

Fans of the crime novelist Camilla Lackberg will know Fjallbacka for the scores of gory (fictional) murders that occur here, but in real life, this well-heeled harbour town generally feels very serene, especially in summer. This part of the country doesn't really do sandy beaches but like most Swedish coastal towns, Fjallbacka has swimming areas with diving boards into the sea. Yes, the water will be bracing, but you'll easily find a sauna to warm up in.

This part of West Sweden, close to the border with Norway, is also the gateway to a series of little islands, all reached by very cute ferries. Restaurants are usually

simple in this part of the world, often in the same russet-coloured cabins that families aim to own for generations. Head for Salt & Sill, which lies on the water in the hamlet of Kladesholmen. Created by a fishing family over several generations, it has guest cabins along the shoreline, all with steps into the water. There are four restaurants too, including a simple oh-so-Scandi kiosk for snacks (B&B doubles from £203; saltosill.se).

For families, this year the tour operator Stubborn Mule has introduced a self-drive holiday that starts in Gothenburg and includes kayaking, cycling on the car-free Koster island, outings on crab-fishing boats and, just inland, meeting moose at Dalslands. Ten days' B&B is from £1,940pp, including flights, car hire, activities, entrance fees and some other meals (stubbornmuletravel.com). Fly to Gothenburg.

Gotland

This island in the Baltic Sea often feels like a modern-day, very mellow Valhalla for Swedes. Those coming for Stockholmsveckan, Gotland's wildly popular party week (July 13-19 this year) will find a Scandi Ibiza with DJ sets amid the dunes. Kallis is one of the key beach clubs, with restaurants, outdoor lounges and a pool; you may want to book your cabana now (entry from £28; kallvisby.se). A rather different party prospect is Medieval Week, which brings up to 40,000 wimple-wearing enthusiasts for jousting and mead-drinking to augment the 12th-century architecture of Gotland's capital of Visby (August 2-9; medeltidsveckan.se).

Reached either by ferry from just outside Stockholm or flying to the island's airport near Visby, Gotland is big, over 3,000 square km of reed-fringed lakes and gold sand beaches with weathered sea stacks along the way. Its satellite island Faro, loved by the film director Ingmar Bergman, lies to the north of Gotland, and there's also another small island, Gotska Sandön, which is a staggeringly beautiful nature reserve and has powdery beaches and wild grey seals; there are ferries from Nynashamn or Färosund. In the southern end of Gotland, working farms don't get much more beautiful than

Sibbjans, where a series of low-slung buildings surrounded by wildflowers, thatched barns and paddocks with horses is now a fully realised rural idyll. The food grown here goes into its restaurant and there's a natural swimming pool and an outdoor gym. B&B doubles are from £360 (sibbjans.se). Fly to Stockholm or Gotland.

Hoga Kusten

One for your serious coastal geomorphologist. At 286m above sea level, Angermanland on the Gulf of Bothnia has the world's highest coastline, formed by the face of the Skuleberget mountain. Some of Sweden's most dramatic coastal scenery is here and it's very popular with the active type of Scandi (and the birthplace of the very practical Fjallraven brand). As well as hiking the 135km Hoga Kusten (High Coast) path, you can take advantage of the country's wild camping laws (it is permitted) and perhaps combine with a kayak. Nature Travel's self-guided trip goes from Solleftea to the mouth of the Baltic and you can take either three or six days to paddle through it. It's a good trip for beginners — even though you're heading to the sea and the river widens, because the Baltic doesn't have strong tides it's a gentle affair. Two nights' camping starts at £233pp, including kayaks and tents (naturetravels.co.uk).

Whether you get here by water, hiking or even by car, you'll want to bed down at Bjorkudden eventually. A former school, built with bricks brought over from Britain in the 1890s, it's now a small, very delightful hotel overlooking the water that still retains some single rooms (B&B doubles from £160; bjorkudden.se). Fly to Stockholm.



NORWAY

Arctic Traena region

You want remote with a side order of striking architecture? Ytri Island Retreat, which opened this month, is in the very far-flung (even for Arctic Norway) Traena archipelago. Created by the Oslo-based Vardehaugen architecture firm, there are 38 low-slung rooms, all pared-back wood and facing an expanse of water that looks towards Greenland, interrupted by a few rocky outcrops. SUP, hiking and kayaking are available and it's all about relaxing in the great outdoors, as well as the sauna. Traena's 450 inhabitants mostly rely on fishing as their way of life and Ytri's restaurant heads into 12-course tasting menu territory that looks out to sea for inspiration, with fresh seafood a must (B&B doubles from £476; ytri.no).

There are gentler parts of the Arctic coast to visit in the summer and you don't always need a car or to be part of a group holiday to access them. Senja island, carpeted with wildflowers in summer, is a convivial place, filled with pubs and cafés and a rather nice Electronic Festival in August (myinnerisland.no). The Arctic bus runs



Sibbjans farm, Gotland, Sweden

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► regularly here from Tromsø, where it's best to fly to, stopping in front of the Medfjord Brygge hotel. You can also arrive and leave on the Havila ferry that runs along the coastline.

Here you can be as active or relaxed as you want to be, whether hiking to Hesten for the views of Segla Peak, fishing or hanging out on Ersfjordstranda with its pristine white sand and — more randomly — a gold-coloured public toilet. Five nights' B&B is from £1,445pp, including flights and transport (regent-holidays.co.uk).

West Norway

Of all the Scandinavian countries, Norway, with its serious mountains and gorges, merits the full road-trip experience. A car makes it easier to cover more of its main sites and there are some fantastic coastal roads, especially the Atlantic Ocean Road (Atlanterhavsveien), which runs between Kristiansund and Molde. Electric car owners or hirers can be assured there are plenty of charging points en route.

Norway has all those enticing fjords, including Norangsfjorden, where you'll find one of the country's oldest and most luxurious hotels, the Victorian Union Oye. It has 27 rooms, a conservatory for less clement weather and a floating sauna in the fjord looking towards the Sunnmore alps (B&B doubles from £474; unionoye.no). Car ferries link the mainland with islands including Geiranger, home to hairpin bends and the staggering Geirangerfjord, while West Norway's hub is the Wes Anderson-esque city of Alesund, rebuilt in 1904 after a devastating fire and now one of the country's most attractive cities with art nouveau buildings in cheery colours surrounding the harbour.

To book an organised trip to see this area, try Best-Served Scandinavia's Best of the West self-drive holiday, which includes Norangsfjorden as well as Geiranger. Five nights' B&B is from £2,150pp, including flights, transfers, car hire and ferries (best-served.co.uk).

The Lofoten islands

This cluster of islands facing the Norwegian Sea, with Greenland to the west, is a hugely popular summer destination. However, its mix of white sand beaches and hikes — easy or as challenging as you like — and, above all, the views, make it one of Europe's most spectacular seaside destinations. It's tempting to head south to the beautiful villages of A or Reine, but there are more hidden corners to discover. The village of Henningsvaer, spread over several small islands, is a particular delight. And there are some great beaches nearby, including the white crescent stunner Rorvikstranda, where, if the clouds clear, the waters turn turquoise. Henningsvaer also has Trevarefabrikken, a former cod liver oil factory that now has a much more pleasant purpose. Norway's most remote hipster hotel has kept the concrete walls and old tanks, but strung fairy lights around them and installed pizza ovens and a community ethos. It hosts regular music nights, and there are ten rooms, ranging from women-only dorms to family-friendly ones sleeping up to six people (B&B doubles from £203; trevarefabrikken.no).

Most people come to the Lofotens to be active, especially in the long summer days when the sun doesn't really set, and choosing an arranged walking holiday will ensure you escape the coach travellers. Following a path built by

sheperas hired from Nepal, the 448m Reinebringen hike rewards with staggering views of dramatic coastal features. On Adventure Norrona's group holiday, there are walks to Kvaløya beach, coastal paths, but also hikes up Himmeltindan mountain. It includes a stay in one of the nice hotels common in this part of the islands: Nustfjord Arctic Resort, which has a harbourside location with a wood-fired hot tub and sauna. Seven nights' full-board is from £3,482pp. Fly to Bodø.

FINLAND

Aland Islands

Technically, despite all the pine trees and general wholesomeness, Finland isn't

part of Scandinavia but it's a very close Nordic neighbour, so we've included a couple of ideas here. Between the Finnish mainland and Sweden are the Aland Islands, which are part of Finland but where inhabitants tend to speak Swedish (and, of course, excellent English). The ferries that go between Stockholm and Helsinki all stop here so that they can operate duty-free shops on board, but this archipelago is a delight to explore, from the capital of Mariehamn to a multitude of little islands, linked with bridges and ferries, all with bathing spots, all easy to reach by bicycle. Baltic Travel Company has a break to see it all, with eight nights' B&B from £1,295pp, including flights and overnight ferries (balticttravelcompany.com).

Hanko, Uusimaa region

At the end of the 19th century, when Finland was part of Imperial Russia, the fishing village of Hanko became a favourite summer destination for wealthy families. A 90-minute drive southwest from Helsinki (and also reachable by public transport), today it's the Polzeath of Finland. Its historic villas are now owned by the country's tech magnates, but its forests still give way to a series of sandy crescent beaches and rocky coves. The 13-room Villa Solgarden is a beautifully renovated 1904 badehotellet with plenty of carefully restored charm and an exceedingly

generous breakfast, served in the garden in good weather (B&B doubles from £148; villasolgarden.fi). It's close to both pine-fringed Bellevue — regularly considered to be one of Finland's best beaches — and Plagen, particularly shallow and family-friendly.

However, in egalitarian Finland, nothing is too inaccessible. A beach club called Plagen eschews Ibiza-style cool for bouncy castles and loaded fries by day, before taking on a more adult feel later on with beach parties (mains from £16; plagen.fi). Fly to Helsinki.

Gulf of Bothnia

At the top of the Gulf of Bothnia, Oulu is currently European Capital of Culture, which means that there's a smorgasbord of festivals to choose from this summer, including a sauna festival, Tuira Sauna, between June 5 and 9, culminating in the opening of a new public sauna on the beach of the same name (oulu2026.eu). There are also midnight sun runs and public art work installations in the landscape. Oulu is a treat of a city anyway, with the island of Pikisaari's wooden houses, cool shops and waterfront restaurants among the highlights. The tour operator Discover the World combines it with a visit to Gammelstad in Sweden and the Kvarken archipelago on a six-night trip. B&B, which starts from £726pp, including car hire (discover-the-world.com). Fly to Oulu.



Helsinki, Finland



The Victorian Union Oye hotel, Norangsfjorden, Norway