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Itinerary

Stockholm Sweden is a city of contrasts. Unspoiled architecture dating back centuries is complemented by the best in modern Scandinavian design. Stockholm's appreciation of its culture and heritage shows in its theaters, concert halls and galleries, which showcase a rich variety of artistic innovations. The seasons provide a sharp distinction, too. Stockholm in summer is green and blue, with its attention on the water. In winter, Stockholm is white and frozen, with a sense of stillness and calm, the afternoon darkness punctuated by candlelit cafes and bars. The waterways surrounding Stockholm's islands clearly define the city's various quarters. From the bohemian cliff-top cafes of Sodermalm and the 17th-century cobbled streets of Gamla Stan to the luxury boutiques of Ostermalm and the parkland calm of Djurgarden, you're never more than a bridge away from a completely different city experience. Flecked with sailboats and ferries in summer, Stockholm's great tree-fringed waterways are often iced over, snow-covered and misty in winter, creating the illusion of a city in the clouds—the perfect setting for the Nobel Prize ceremonies that take place in the city every year.

Mariehamn The autonomous Finnish Aaland Islands are made up of more than 6,500 islands and are a demilitarized region. Mariehamn is the capital of the islands, representing an interesting blend of Finnish, Swedish and Russian culture. The islands have popular beaches, a mild climate and more hours of sunlight than other Scandinavian countries. Because of increased numbers of tourists, Mariehamn has a surprising selection of restaurants and cafes for its size.

Helsinki Finland's capital, is one of Europe's most interesting and enjoyable cities. Many first-time visitors associate Finland with extreme cold, but the summers—especially in the south—can be magically warm and flooded with light. Even in the depths of winter, daylight is short but present. Although sometimes the skies may be overcast, there are clear, sunny days when the city is illuminated by the sparkle of snow and the dazzling, frozen Baltic Sea. In recent decades, many inhabitants of Finland's rural regions have migrated to the Helsinki metropolitan area, which has been growing at an amazing rate since the mid-1990s. Helsinki's citizens may have close ties to their rural roots, but they also have fallen in step with the urban beat. Their sense of style, innovation and design is evident throughout the city. Visitors can stroll through any local park or square and will probably stumble upon an impressive piece of contemporary sculpture. Helsinki's sparkling nightlife and lively cafe culture add much to its travel appeal. Its terrace cafes are often packed with Finns and visitors alike. Although not generally a city that wears its history on its sleeve, Helsinki offers fine examples of neoclassical architecture in the historic center around Senate Square. Although the city was founded in the 16th century, most of its architecture dates from the 19th century or later. The Helsinki skyline is still evolving as striking buildings emerge downtown. Helsinki's bold architecture mirrors a national willingness to adopt new technologies and innovations. The head office of Nokia, the mobile-communications giant, is housed in a gleaming glass palace in Espoo, just west of Helsinki. But Finland's traditional roots are never far away. Finns, including Helsinki residents, regard cell phones and other wireless-based technologies simply as what they are: tools. For relaxation, Helsinki residents and visitors turn to cross-country skiing, ice fishing, sailing and relaxing in the sun by the lake. Finns love fresh air and, even in winter, can be found stepping briskly through Helsinki's parks, around the islands and across the frozen harbor and lakes. And after a brisk walk, what could be better than a hot *glogg* (spiced wine) in one of the city's many bars? (Some even provide blankets for customers who wish to sit outdoors, though it is more common to find propane heaters—especially as smoking is not allowed indoors.) Visitors to Helsinki shouldn't miss out on the national pastime—a sauna. It is usually followed by a jump into a nearby (chilly) lake to help keep the blood flowing.

St. Petersburg has had three names in less than 100 years, changes that mirror the shifting political winds of Mother Russia. The names of its places and people are a roll call of Russian history of the 19th and 20th centuries: the Winter Palace, the czars, Dostoyevsky, the Catherine Palace, Tchaikovsky, Lenin. As the former official—some still say cultural—capital, St. Petersburg is the most westernized of Russia's cities. Its grand architecture echoes the great cities of Europe, and there are seemingly endless museums full of staggering quantities of treasure. St. Petersburg sprawls along the banks of the Neva River and was once known as the Venice of the North for the many canals there. For visitors who want to understand what came before, and what is happening now in Russia, St. Petersburg is essential.

Tallinn the capital of Estonia, is considered one of the best-preserved medieval cities in northern Europe. Its charming Old Town survived the Soviets, as well as the country's earlier occupations by the Danish and Swedish empires (among others). Today, this city 115 mi/185 km northwest of Tartu is an important port on the Gulf of Finland and a popular stop for cruise ships. Nearby Pirita Beach has nice views of the Gulf of Finland, but we especially like the view of Tallinn and environs from atop the ruins of the Pirita Cloister (convent, church and monastery).

Copenhagen Denmark, is a city with historical charm and a contemporary style that feels effortless. It is an old merchants' town overlooking the entrance to the Baltic Sea with so many architectural treasures that it's known as the "City of Beautiful Spires."

This socially progressive and tolerant metropolis manages to run efficiently yet feel relaxed. And given the Danes' highly tuned environmental awareness, Copenhagen can be enjoyed on foot or on a bicycle.