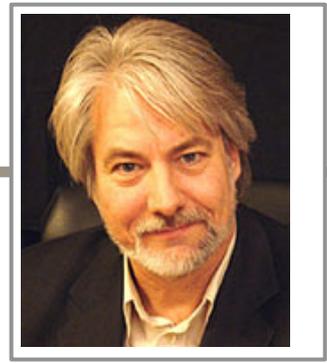


Surviving Globalisation



A Newsletter from John Alexander

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National Culture – Regional Culture

When we talk about cultural differences we most often consider the differences between countries and our perception of national identities. Sometimes neglecting just important other cultural differences can be. Company culture for example, professional cultures, gender culture, generation culture, and regional cultures.

In Australia regional differences are becoming more noticeable – but it has taken over 200 years since the European settlement. In the USA there are clear differences between east coast and west coast, northern states and southern states, the Midwest and the Southeast, and elsewhere.

In European countries quite obvious regional differences are discernible through traditions of food and drink, social customs, history, and dialects. The Netherlands may be small, but like Germany, has a Catholic south and a Protestant north: Even tiny Luxembourg, a local bank director assured me, has a clear north – south divide: ‘In the north we are much more discrete and more reliable’, she claimed; ‘the southerners spend too much time gossiping.’

In this month’s newsletter we take a look at the regional cultures of Sweden...

Sweden – A Country of Little Countries

I was recently at an international leadership seminar in Sweden, with a generous mix of Swedish and international participants. When it came to explaining Swedish cultural priorities the Swedish participants explained how important it is to consider the regional differences. The discussion developed into how Swedish regions can be interpreted as representing characteristics from other countries; Stockholm has more of a US influence, Gothenburg more British...

Stockholm – USA

Stockholm is like the US. It is where trends start and end, life is fast-paced, fashions are hip, and coffee cultures go in and out of favour faster than the seasons. In Stockholm the locals mix Americanisms with their Swedish – it is multi-cultural and the place where trend-conscious entrepreneurs tune into new fads. Stockholm fosters a culture of marketing and for those working in the design bureaus and media industry, if they don’t end their careers in Stockholm, they usually begin them

here. Youth rules and very few people under the age of 30 swear in Swedish – it is hip to use American swear words.

Gothenburg - England

‘Goa grabbar frå Göteborgrrrrg’ is a local expression that tells us Gothenburg folk have a friendly and easy-going disposition. It rains a lot in Gothenburg (like in England), and Gothenburg is famed for its strong pub culture, joke-telling and sense of humour. When Stockholm City announced their new regional slogan as ‘Capital of Scandinavia’, Gothenburg folk quipped: “Really? We never noticed.” The new slogan for Gothenburg (Göteborg in Swedish), is ‘Go:teborg.’ It’s a kind of play on words. Gothenburg humour or English humour?

Skåne - Denmark

Skåne – in the south of Sweden – has its own flag, its own folk heroes, its own very colourful local customs, and – like Danish – a language no-one else can understand. Skåne was once a part of Denmark, and many Swedish people claim that it still is. Even the folk from Skåne consider themselves more a part of the continent than of Sweden. Two cultural signifiers that suggest there may be some truth to this bold claim. Firstly, in Skåne you still find cottages with wooden beams whereas the rest of Sweden is famous for the ‘red cottage with white beams’. Secondly, in the cafes of Skåne you can still get served at the table, whereas in the rest of Sweden self-service (‘gör-det-själv’) is the custom.

Jämtland – Ireland

Jämtland, in the middle of Sweden and close to Norway, is a self-proclaimed republic, with its own President, its own national song, and its own very special dialect. Like the Irish, the folk of Jämtland pride themselves on their rebellious nature, entrepreneurial spirit, and paying little heed as to what happens in the capital. When the rest of Sweden voted to join the EU in the early 1990s, the people of Jämtland voted to join Norway instead. It didn’t happen which gave rise to slogans such as ‘the Republic is bleeding.’ Like Ireland, Jämtland is famous for its folk music, and many local groups sing in the dialect of Jämtland, in homage to the resonance of its tones, and its anti-establishment brogue. Check out for example the music of Harddu Ku Hardda Geit, founded in the 1970s and still coming out to perform on Jämtland’s own ‘national day’ (March 15th) in the ‘national capital’ of Östersund. In the local dialect Harddu Ku Hardda Geit, means ‘half a cow, half a goat’, but only the local people can explain exactly what that means.

Norrland - Finland

The folk of Norrland are known for short sentences, long silences and mistrust of anyone from Stockholm. Like the Finns across the border, Norrlanders are respected for their no-nonsense style and down-to-earth direct communication. Norrland celebrities are the scourge of journalists as they never answer a question

with more than one word, two when pressed. Most famous example is world champion skier, Ingemar Stenmark, when pushed by Stockholm journalists to explain the secret of his success, replied; 'I ski, I just ski.' Like the landscape of Finland, Norrland is a wilderness of forest and lakes, populated by bears and moose. Visiting someone for a cup of coffee might involve a journey of several hundred kilometres, and during the coffee, conversation might be considered impolite, although a glass of home brewed vodka is socially acceptable.

Värmland - Norway

Värmland is the home of Sven-Göran Eriksson, who once quipped; 'maybe we're not too good at showing our feelings in this part of Sweden, but we still have strong feelings.' Värmland is the region of the 'skröna' – tall-stories that test the boundaries of credibility, an influence from across the border, and the Norwegian folk-tale. It is the region of Selma Lagerlöf, Gustaf Fröding and a host of Swedish writers, with a knack of expressing feelings in literature, if not in person. The dialect of Värmland remind many Swedes that they are approaching the Norwegian border, and these days, with Norway being home to the highest cost of living in Europe, the small towns of Värmland are flourishing with Norwegian shoppers in search of discount price groceries, and most important, cheap beer.

Småland - Scotland

Småland is the home of IKEA, and its founder Ingvar Kamprad, famous for frugal living, self-reliance and 'the common sense of the farmer' ('bondförnuft' as it is called in Småland). During the famines of the late 1800s it was the Småland farmers and their families that emigrated en masse to the USA, which also says something of the local entrepreneurial spirit. As the Scots say, it was the Scots that built the British empire, and it was the farmers of Småland that created the Swedish enclave in the US. Just as the English make jokes of Scottish 'pragmatism' when it comes to money matters, so it is with the Swedes and quips about 'economically-minded' Smålanders. Another expression from Småland is Gnosjö-sprit – the spirit of the entrepreneur, and throughout the region independent companies, like IKEA, prepare to take on the markets of China, the USA and the rest of the world.

Västernorrland - Canada

This is the northern region of Sweden with its wide rivers and logging camps – where the locals drink beer in abundance, are passionately devoted to ice-hockey, and try at least – to keep alive the traditions of log rolling, and lumberjacking. The rivers and lakes have not been filled with logs since the 1970s, but the era survives in log camps, river watchtowers, and popular Swedish movies from the 1930s. Like Canada there is a strong tradition of social welfare and it was here in 1931 that the police and army fought with striking workers in Ådalen – in a small town called

Lunde, which marked the end of overclass excesses and the beginning of the Swedish model of socialism.

Dalarna - Sweden

So in a country of small countries, where do you go to find Sweden? The answer is Dalarna, home of the 'Dalarhäst' – the little red horse that is synonymous with Swedish tourism, and of Carl Larsson prints, and most important of all, home of the traditions of midsummer. The midsummer celebrations are broadcast throughout Sweden from Dalarna, as well as a piece of famous Swedish history – the Vasaloppet, the largest ski-race in the world. Every year more than 15,000 participants retrace the historical journey of the man who rallied the local farmers against the invading Danish army in 1520, to become Gustav Wasa, one of Swedens most famous kings.

The towns of Dalarna are celebrated for different reasons – Mora for the Vasaloppet, Falun for the famous copper mines and home of the Falu red paint which colours the Swedish cottages north of Orkelljunga in Skåne, and home of the famous red Falukorv – the Swedish sausage. Orsa is the host of annual folk music festival and the home of Benny (Abba) Andersson's folk music orchestra. On a trip to Dalarna I asked several people that if Dalarna is the most Swedish of all the Swedish provinces, which town then is the most Swedish of towns? The answer is apparently Rättvik – the most Swedish town in the most Swedish province.

Haparanda - EU

And there's a place in Sweden that boasts to be the centre of the EU. Their town slogans include 'no borders' 'Yes to Europe', and together with twin town, Tornio – 'the international meeting place.' It is one place in Sweden where residents can shop in Swedish kronor or in Euros, and when the local pubs close, can walk over the border to the Finnish twin town of Tornio, and drink for another hour. It is also one of the largest towns in Sweden with a municipal area of 1,000 square kilometres. (Only Kiruna, also in the north, is larger). The co-operation between the townsfolk of Swedish Haparanda and Finnish Tornio extends to the fire department, the police and other municipal services. As one local official told me. 'we are not Swedish, we are not Finns – we are true Europeans!'

[See the Sweden entry in www.lagomsisu.com] which also includes, as a result of a nationwide survey, the music that most Swedish people say best defines 'Swedishness.'