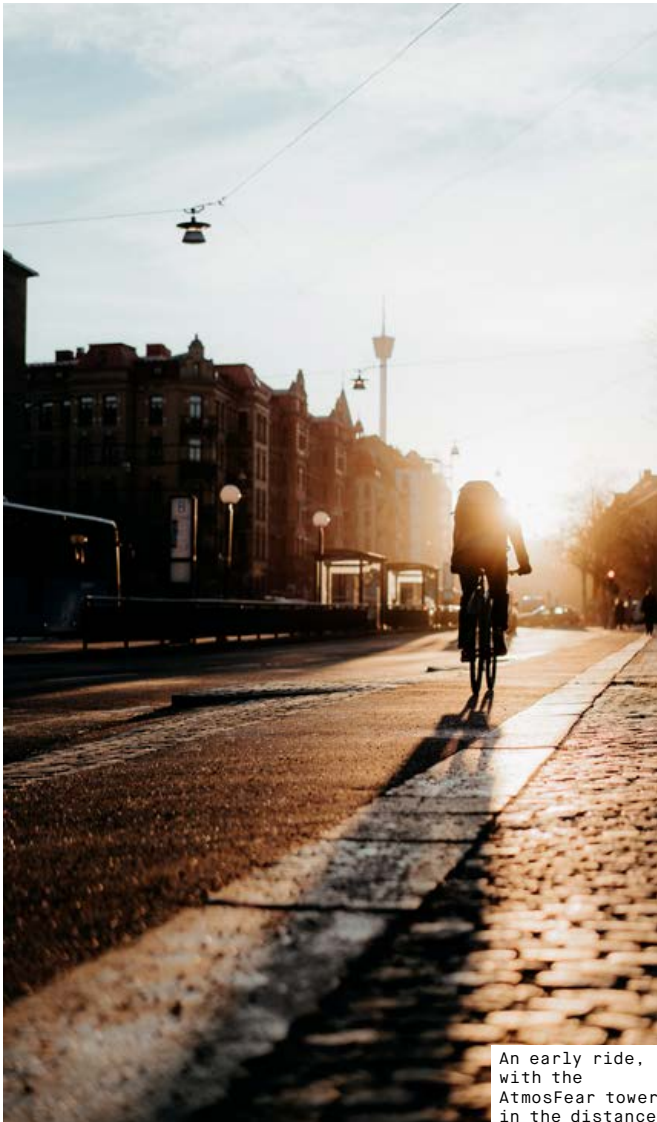


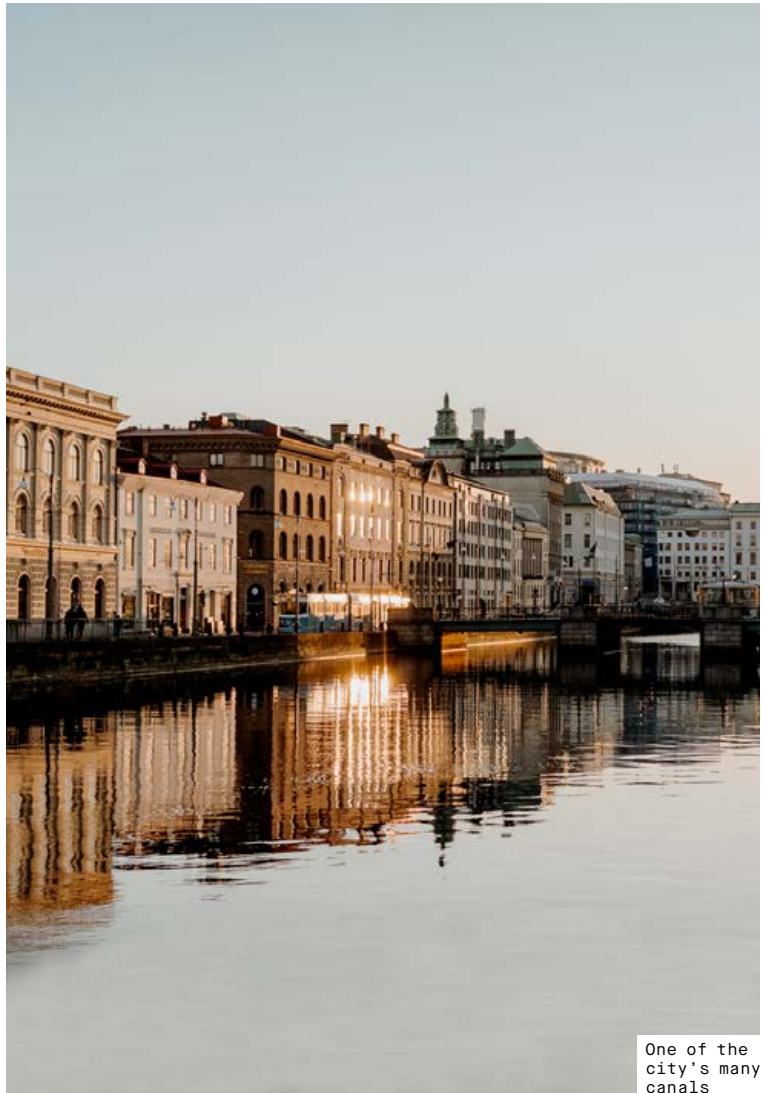
why we travel → urban study

City of Hope

Some call Gothenburg the world's most sustainable destination. Adam H. Graham embarks on a low-carbon journey to explore its ethical-fashion shops and zero-waste restaurants—and find out if Sweden's chief seaport might be the future for us all



An early ride, with the AtmosFear tower in the distance



One of the city's many canals

I'm dipping day-old bread into spicy hummus made of leftover cauliflower at Garveriet, a former tannery on the woody River Säreån, several miles outside of Gothenburg. It's one of the area's many converted industrial spaces, in this case to a zero-waste café, brewery, and event hub. It's raining, as it often does in Sweden's Seattle, and upstairs a gang of Ikea employees await their *fika* (coffee break) during a workshop on sustainable management. To some the scene might sound like a Dickensian punishment. But for travelers like me who've made sustainability a priority, this is mecca.

I arrived in Gothenburg on the same overcast October day that the city won the prestigious European Capital of Smart Tourism award. Like its sister green metropolises Copenhagen and Zurich, this port on Sweden's scenic southwestern coast has long been lauded for its ethical-fashion shops, renewable-energy programs, low-impact architecture projects, and innovative recycling schemes.

According to the Global Destination Sustainability Index, Gothenburg has been the world's most sustainable city four years running. Over half of its public transport energy comes from renewable sources. All meat served within Gothenburg must be organically raised. It has recently become a model Water-Wise City, a designation for high-precipitation urban areas employing new ways to harvest excessive rainwater runoff, one of many climate change challenges expected in the coming years. A slew of new developments promises to further increase the city's appeal as it ramps up to its 400th birthday in 2021. I was eager to see what it feels like to be a tourist in such a future-focused place.

I've visited the Nordic countries often, but previous trips to Sweden, the region's middle child, left me lukewarm. I found it lacks Iceland and Norway's fantasy →

PHOTOGRAPHS: JONAS JACOBSSON

why we travel → urban study

landscape and doesn't have quite the culinary prowess of Denmark or the less-traveled appeal of Finland. This time I channeled Greta Thunberg by traveling there as sustainably as I could from my home in Switzerland, hopping on an electric Deutsche Bahn train for the nine-hour journey from Zurich to Kiel, Germany. On board I had a rich pumpkin soup served in a porcelain bowl with a metal spoon; nary a plastic wrap or disposable cutlery in sight. In Kiel I boarded the MS *Stena Germanica*, a hybrid vessel running on diesel and methanol, and had line-caught cod for dinner in the ship's restaurant before retiring to my cabin (with an ergonomic Swedish Dux mattress) for my North Sea night crossing. Standing on the upper deck as we slid into the Gothenburg harbor, the morning sun haloing the cherry red lighthouses, I felt optimistic that this visit to Sweden would be different.

Modern Gothenburg hugs both banks of the Göta River, which empties into the Kattegat Sea. It is sliced into by several old canals, earning it the nickname Little Amsterdam. Locals ride bikes and walk, though trams are everywhere, many running on grass-lined tracks. But I learned quickly that ferry service is usually the most sensible way to get around. The waterways here connect more than they separate.

First stop: an ethical-shopping spree in Haga, a cobblestone neighborhood watched over by the 17th-century fortress, Skansen Kronan. Nudie Jeans—Gothenburg's first and most famous ethical-fashion shop—kick-started the eco-fashion industry when it was cofounded here in 2001 by Maria Erixon. The jeans, now made of 100 percent organic material, are still sold in the original brick warehouse on Vallgatan. Nearby is the local shoe company Icebug, founded by mother and son Eliza Törnqvist and David Ekelund. Outdoor sportswear, typically made with synthetic materials that leach into the landscapes where they're worn, has become an ecological disaster. But Icebug's hiking boots and walking shoes are constructed with recycled materials and natural wool using techniques like water-saving solution dyeing and leather sourced from responsible tanneries. In 2019, Icebug became the world's first footwear company to go climate-positive.

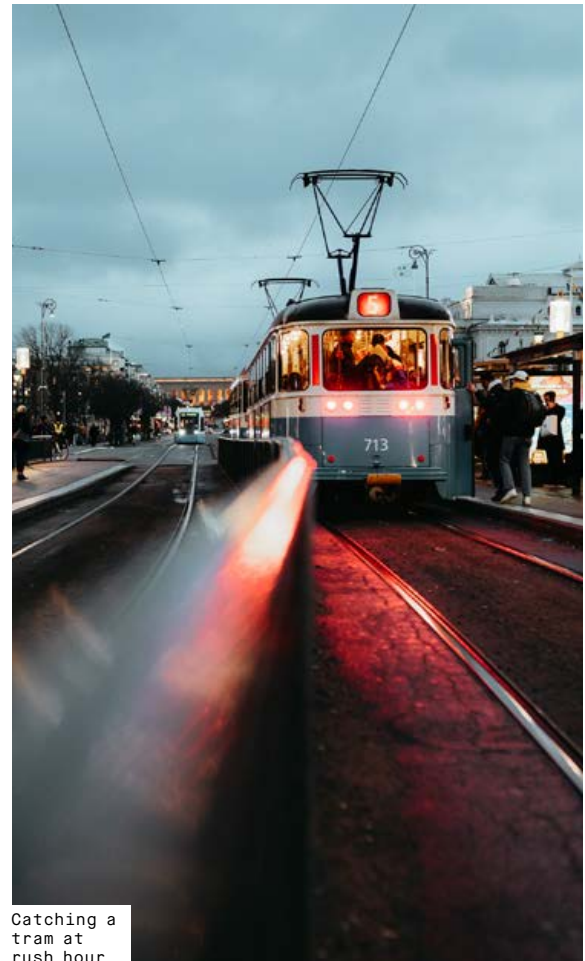
Across the river there's Atacac, a tiny green atelier turning out wild gender-neutral couture ranging from flamboyant caftans and collared wool coats to body stockings and floral 1970s-inspired jumpsuits. But my favorite shop is Thrive. A walk along its creaky floors reveals a selection of unisex clothes from sustainability-



Black currant sorbet with elderberry flowers at Koka



Koka spotlights local growers and producers



Catching a tram at rush hour

The café,
roastery,
and bakery
Da Matteo



mindful designers, as well as vegan accessories like cork wallets alongside Guppyfriend laundry bags that trap microplastics.

About two miles away is the much-buzzed-about Upper House. The city's newest five-star hotel, occupying several floors of Gothia Tower 2 (one of three boxy glass giants connected by sky bridges that stand sentinel over the city's evolving Event District), supposedly has serious eco-chops. The exteriors turned out to be those of a run-of-the-mill modern office building, but the interiors were alive with stylish young Swedes and expats enjoying the bars, cafés, and sunken pop-up shops inside the tower's vast public lobby. The hotel is 100 percent wind-powered, recycles 95 percent of its waste, and has a rooftop aviary. However, I was disappointed to see single-use plastics used throughout the hotel and its spa. And while the food at its Michelin-starred restaurant, Heaven 23, was delicious, when I was there the menu included a few locally sourced dishes like char in nettle velouté but went heavy on high-carbon food like dairy and beef. What's more, the hotel has a sprawling adults-only glass-bottom "Champagne pool" cradled into an outdoor ledge on the tower's 19th floor and overlooking Liseberg theme park's roller coasters and Ferris wheels (these do happen to be powered by wind).

So the hotel is muddled in its messaging; it feels like a strange island of extravagance in a sea of sustainability. A common retort

from luxury hospitality is "We can't limit guests' options," a line that's used to justify everything from plastic mini shampoo and water bottles to diesel generators and suspect labor practices. As I soaked in the curious pool, I wondered why hotels are consistently let off the hook while my train and ferry were able to make adjustments without it feeling like I was giving anything up.

Fortunately, Gothenburg's restaurants, like many in Sweden, are ahead of the curve. The fact that there are at least five eco-restaurant certification organizations in the country says a lot. Koka, a cozy one-Michelin-starred eatery in the artsy neighborhood of Vasastan, pays serious homage to waste-free cooking with local dishes like langoustines in a nest of agretti, a local succulent. Blackbird, one of several scruffy vegan restaurants in the even artsier and scruffier neighborhood of Majorna, churns out tom yum fries, seitan kebabs, vegan cheese trays, and noodle bowls. It's run by five members of the local punk scene, all animal-rights activists, who relied on crowdfunding to open the restaurant.

The highlight for many sustainability pilgrims is Gothenburg's Jubileumsparken, a waterfront park in Frihamnen made from reclaimed industrial land. It has hyperlocal urban vegetable gardens, sand beaches, a floating pool, and a children's playground, but the most popular amenity is a hulking three-level sauna on legs, designed by Berlin-based architecture collective Raumlaborberlin. It overlooks Gothenburg Harbor like a giant Transformer. The exteriors are made from recycled sheets of corrugated steel, the interiors are lined with regional larch wood, and the walls of the gender-neutral changing cabin and shower are made from 12,000 recycled bottles. And it is free, to all who wish to use it.

The Swedes, as I learned on this trip, have a word that captures the idea of sustainability: *lagom*. It means "not too little and not too much," in keeping with the national impulse toward moderation. When faced with too much of a good thing, Swedes self-correct. This concept of self-regulation evaded me as an American. And I can see how the idea of *lagom*, especially when traveling for vacation, might seem a bitter pill to swallow. We want that second dessert. We deserve the Champagne pool! *Lagom* is for Monday back in the office. But *lagom* isn't about being a killjoy; it's about balance and compromise. Gothenburg, it seems, is not really a "sustainability destination." It's a city of normal people using common sense to self-patrol their own indulgences—which, in my view, is downright revolutionary.