17 easy-breezy twin-centre trips in cool Scandinavia

Pair extraordinary settings: mountains and city or beach and lake with excellent transport links on these breaks across the Nordics



Pair the Lofoten Islands with Bodo in Norway

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Sarah Turner

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Infrastructure: not usually sexy and rarely fun. Until you decide to explore Scandinavia in summer and you're in a place where trains pull in next to harbours, ferries go everywhere and buses mesh their timetables to both train and ferry arrivals.

If you want to tick off several destinations, even different countries, nowhere is easier to get around than this vast corner of northern Europe. Here, you can head into the Arctic and dip into the Baltic all without the need for a car (although the roads in Scandinavia are usually superb).

Scandi cities are definitely at their best in summer too. Hot weather is still something to be cherished, especially when the harbour water is so clean that you can dive straight in (no city does this better than Copenhagen) and the cities tend to have extraordinary settings; especially Oslo, with its metro into the mountains.

A Scandinavian summer is special. Many people will head to the coast for the alchemy created by saltwater, sea air, and giving yourself time to enjoy it. Victorian-era *badehotels* — simple summer hotels set right on the beach — are seeing a revival. New owners have kept their gentle aesthetic but added wine bars and hip restaurants. And then there are cherished red cabins that dot the landscape, often on tiny islands. I've included Finland with the classic Scandi countries of Sweden, Denmark and Norway because it's so easy to include in a trip. And Finland definitely gets the cabin thing.

From this week Scandinavian schools start to go back and prices for accommodation fall, but the days are still long. September brings autumnal fruits and, increasingly in southern Denmark and Sweden, wine harvesting. Late summer also sees some very choice cultural festivals. But lest it all feels a bit too tasteful, Scandinavians love a funfair too and they will still be open into September. It wouldn't be summer in Sweden if you didn't see a teenager trying to wrestle home a metre-long, 2kg bar of Marabou chocolate.

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Yes, a trip to Scandinavia can be expensive. Even though room rates can seem good value — it's traditional, although alas no longer universal to include a stonking buffet breakfast in the price — other meals and especially alcohol bump up the cost. To get around this, be like the Scandinavians themselves: bring duty-free, have picnics and as you explore, go big on the region's glorious free wraparound nature.

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1. Copenhagen and Oslo



Amerikalinjen in Oslo has 122 rooms

FRANCISCO NOGUEIRA

Two of Scandinavia's most expensive cities become more affordable if you take the ferry that runs every night between Oslo and Copenhagen. Go Nordic's ferry docks near Copenhagen's newest district, Nordhavn. Billed as the world's first five-minute city — where everything can be reached within that time frame including shops, cafés and doctors — Nordhavn also has Scandi essentials of a dedicated swimming area in the harbour and a furniture concept store with its own trendy ten-room hotel. The Audo Boutique Hotel is housed in a 19th-century merchant's house (room-only doubles from £298; audocph.com). Standard berths on the overnight ferry start at £115 (gonordiccruiseline.com) and when you arrive in Oslo, there's the Munch Museum (£20; munch.no) which reopened in a new building in 2021 and Amerikalinjen, a 122-room hotel in the former headquarters of the Norwegian America cruise line just off the harbour (B&B doubles £267; amerikalinjen.com). Fly to Copenhagen.

2. Stockholm, Turku and the Aland Islands



Turku sits on the River Aura

ALAMY

The overnight ferries that travel between the Swedish and Finnish capitals are hugely popular and good value, but this route, in use since the Ice Age, is worth exploring in a more leisurely way. After a night in Stockholm, a daytime ferry will bring you to Mariehamn in the Aland Islands. This collection of around 6,000 rocky outcrops are linked by bridges and ferries with orchards, cycling paths and swimming spots. After two nights, another ferry will take you to Turku in Finland. Straddling the River Aura, Turku is a great place to learn about local culture. After this, you'll take a train to Helsinki and then an overnight ferry back to Stockholm. It's worth lingering here too. The Swedish capital is built around its harbour, from the grandeur of the Gamla Stan neighbourhood with the Royal Palace to hip Sodermalm. And you can explore Sweden's seafaring history with a trip to the Vasa Museum, built around a perfectly preserved 17th-century flagship which sank after ten minutes in the water; a low point for Swedish design. Sunvil has nine nights' B&B from £1,376pp, including flights, transfers and ferry travel (sunvil.co.uk).

3. Funen and South Zealand, Denmark



Odense is the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen

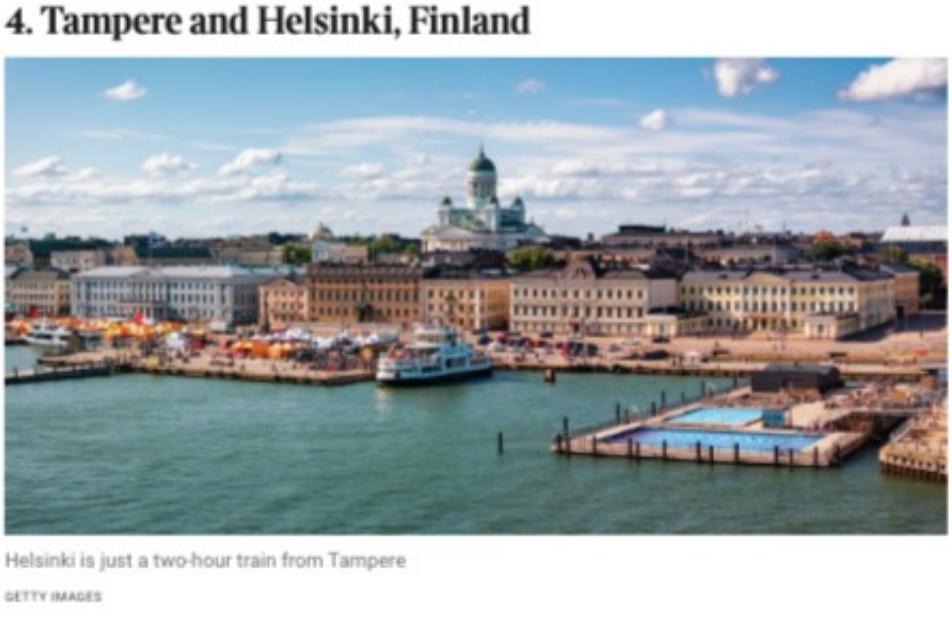
VISITODENSE

Gentle and intensely rural, the centre of Denmark speaks deeply to the Danish soul. On the island of Funen (a two-hour drive from Copenhagen), the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen in Odense is a natural place to start (£24; hcandersenshus.dk). Nearby, the Funen Village is a particularly charming museum of Danish life (£17; denfynskelandsby.dk). Head across the bridge to South Zealand and you arrive in Denmark's nascent wine country. Vesterhave Vingaard is an organic vineyard near Karrebaeksminde; there are tours and accommodation here (room-only doubles from £78; vesterhave-vingaard.dk). A 40-minute drive away, the Frederiksminde in Praesto has a Michelin-starred restaurant and is next to the beach (B&B doubles from £230; frederiksminde.com). Fly to Copenhagen.

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4. Tampere and Helsinki, Finland



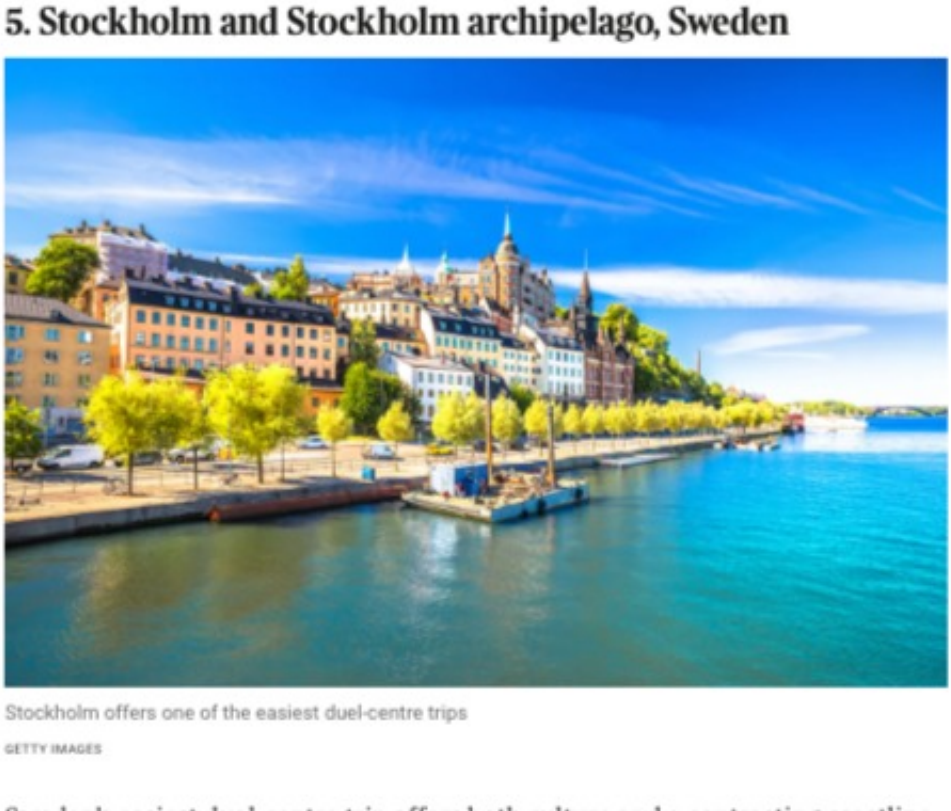
Helsinki is just a two-hour train from Tampere

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Tampere describes itself as Finland's Manchester and yes, it does combine a strong textile heritage with a great music scene. Tampere is regularly voted Finland's nicest city; there are also 70 public saunas, thoughtful museums and a superb lakescape to head into. Even by Finnish standards, nature and this city are inextricably linked. Hotels tend to be good value including the Lapland Hotels Arena (B&B doubles from £115; laplandhotels.com). In Helsinki just two hours away by train, you'll find harbourside saunas and fortresses to explore alongside modernist design at the Arabia museum and outlet store (free; iittala.com) while the Helsinki Festival brings together massed choirs alongside Rufus Wainwright (August 18 to September 5; helsinkifestival.fi). The Folks Hotel has had a certain groove since it opened in 2020; it's housed in a former train repair depot near the Linnanmaki amusement park (room-only doubles from £105; folkshotels.fi). Fly to Helsinki.

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5. Stockholm and Stockholm archipelago, Sweden

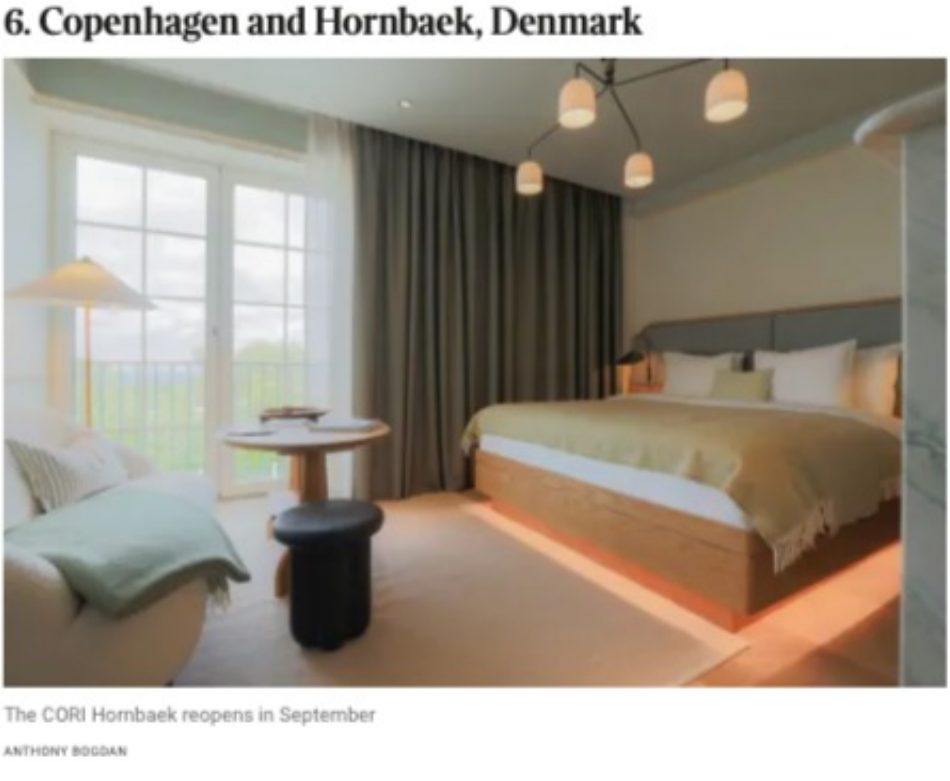


Stockholm offers one of the easiest duel-centre trips

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Sweden's easiest dual-centre trip offers both culture and a contrasting coastline to kayak around, and can be done entirely by public transport. In Stockholm, Djurgarden island contains the Abba museum, the outdoor Skansen museum and the much-loved Grona Lund theme park (you'll also find the Vasa Museum and the Moderna art museum here; royaldjurgarden.se). The Backstage hotel here is an easy walk from everything (B&B doubles from £132; backstagehotelsthlm.com). The island of Sandhamn is a two-and-a-half-hour ferry ride away (from £20; stromma.com). It's yachty (anyone wearing red trousers is likely to have sailed across the Atlantic) but also deeply charming — and if you get a five-day pass for the Waxholmsbolaget ferry, you'll also be able to explore the surrounding archipelago free of charge, including the neighbouring island of Lokholmen (£46; waxholmsbolaget.se). Sandhamns Vardshus, built in 1672, is the island's oldest hotel; its accommodation also includes a family-friendly villa (B&B doubles from £155; sandhamns-vardshus.se). Fly to Stockholm.

6. Copenhagen and Hornbaek, Denmark

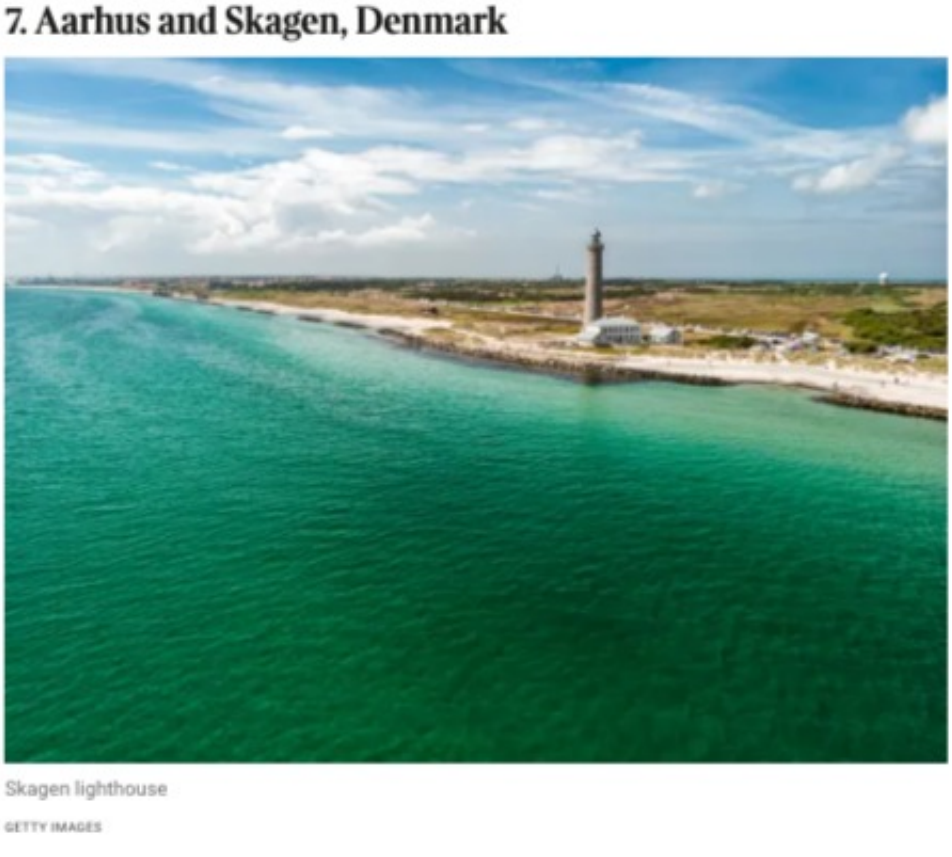


The CORI Hornbaek reopens in September

ANTHONY BOGDAN

Another of Scandinavia's easy wins: trains take about 90 minutes between the two destinations and going against the tide — staying in Hornbaek during the week and heading to Copenhagen over the weekend — will save money. Hornbaek is hugely popular with Ganni-wearing Copenhageners for all sorts of sensible Nordic reasons including harbourside fish and chips, long beach walks and sea swimming. In September the CORI Hornbaek, a 1930s landmark hotel, reopens refreshed and with a spa (room-only doubles from £447; corihotel.dk). Tivoli, the historic funfair and pleasure gardens that is one of Copenhagen's must-sees, is open until September 20 with music at the weekends that's more jazz-based from mid-August. Guests at the Nimb get into Tivoli free. The hotel also has a Copenhagen rarity: a rooftop pool (room-only doubles from £1,087; nimb.dk). Fly to Copenhagen.

7. Aarhus and Skagen, Denmark



Skagen lighthouse

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Aarhus in Jutland is Denmark's second biggest city and has direct flights from the UK. From the ARoS art museum (£23; aros.dk) to its shopping, it's every bit as design-minded as Copenhagen and its four Michelin-starred restaurants point to an equally strong food scene. Between August 28 and September 6, the Aarhus Festival brings together art, discussion and music (aarhusfestuge.dk). The stylish 211-room Belle Guldsmeden opened this year near the harbour (B&B doubles from £152; guldsmedenhotels.com). Hiring a car will also allow you to explore one of Scandinavia's most extraordinary landscapes. At Grenen you can see where North Sea and Baltic Sea merge (there is a distinct line because the two seas have different saline levels) but there's also the ever-moving Rabjerg sand dune and, as a base, the village of Skagen with its harbour, restaurants and butter-yellow houses is an understandable draw. Brondums is its most famous hotel. Headquarters to the Skagen artistic movement in the 19th century, it now has 16 double rooms and five singles (B&B doubles from £173; brondumshotel.com). Fly to Aarhus.

8. Stockholm to Copenhagen

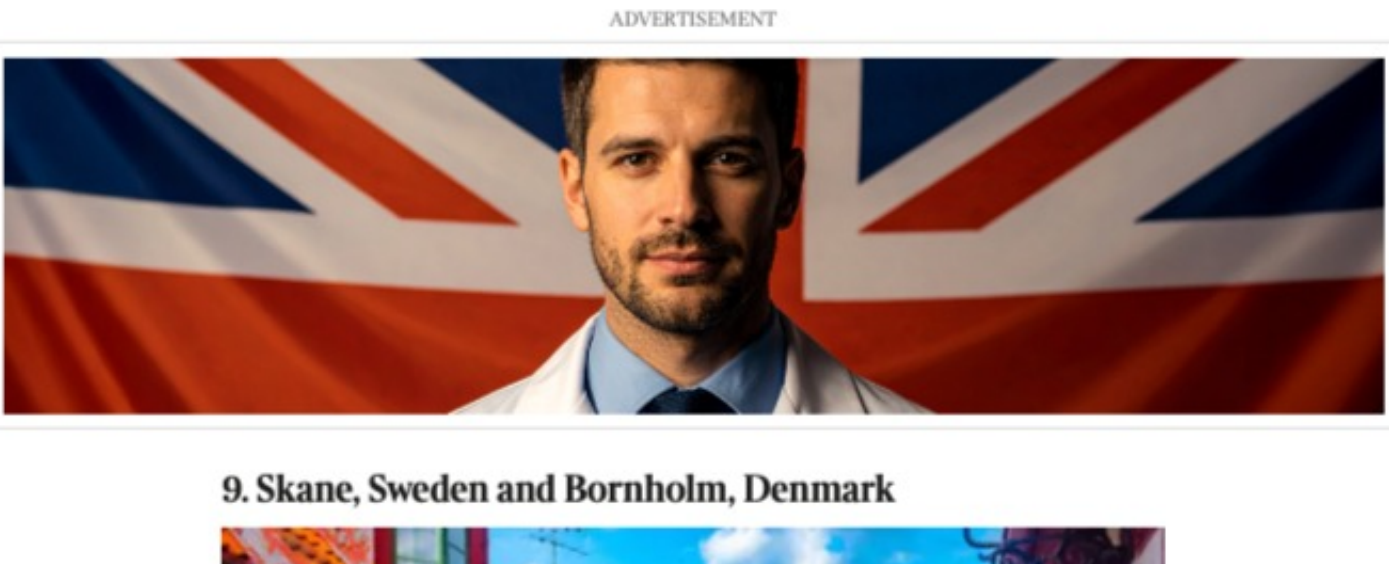


Kronborg Castle in Helsingor, Denmark

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This week-long self-guided trip mixes in a bit of train travel — including a three-hour journey between Stockholm and Gothenburg — before starting on the 180-mile Kattegat route, Sweden's first cycle trail. It travels along the west coast, taking in the chic resort of Saro and plenty of seafood before a 20-minute ferry takes you to Helsingor in Denmark and its Kronborg Castle (which inspired Shakespeare to write *Hamlet*). The 33-mile path to Copenhagen is even easier (this bit of Denmark has a fairly flat landscape, especially compared with its neighbours) and ebikes are available. Headwater has seven nights' B&B from £1,809pp, including bicycle hire and luggage transfers (headwater.com). Fly to Stockholm.

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9. Skane, Sweden and Bornholm, Denmark



Ystad's distinctive houses

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Geographically closer to Copenhagen than to Stockholm, the Swedish region of Skane in the far south of Sweden is a hugely popular holiday destination. Ystad, the town at its heart surrounded by both hollyhocks and hip restaurants, has a harbour and extensive beaches. In one of Ystad's distinctive mustard-coloured houses, the Sekel Garden hotel dates from 1793 (B&B doubles from £101; sekelgarden.se). From here you can get a ferry (roughly 80 minutes) to the foodie, arty island of Bornholm in Denmark, which has a similar hold on the Danish imagination with 227 square miles of its own dune-filled coastline alongside ceramic studios and farms. Allinge Badehotel, open only between May and the end of September, continues to adhere to the sense of simplicity that originally defined the *badehotel* movement in the 19th century; there is no swimming pool, spa or room service but it has a superb beachfront setting and a wine bar (B&B doubles from £101; allingebadehotel.dk). Fly to Copenhagen.

10. Bodo and the Lofoten Islands, Norway



One of the traditional Nordic cabins at Nusfjord Arctic Resort

Just inside the Arctic Circle, the town of Bodo still has long summer days in August and by late September there's a chance of seeing the northern lights. It's got a fun outdoorsy vibe, with Rib trips to a nearby maelstrom, a craft brewery and a Cold War-era bunker that's now an aviation museum. A fly-drive holiday here allows you to combine a trip staying at the traditional Nordic cabins of Nusfjord Arctic Resort, along with three nights at the Svinoya Rorbuer hotel in Svolvaer. This harbour town is the gateway to the Lofoten islands with easy fjord cruises and hiking. Best Served Scandinavia has six nights' B&B from £1,570pp, including flights and car hire (best-served.co.uk).

11. Stockholm and Are, Sweden



Are is verdant in the summer

In winter, Are becomes Sweden's largest ski resort and the sleeper train from Stockholm can turn into one big party (from £25; sj.se). In summer though, this part of Sweden's Norrland region should be in verdant, berry-picking mode and to make it easy to access, its chairlifts stay open throughout August and at the weekends in September (returns from £18; skistar.com). Copperhill Mountain Lodge is elevated in all sorts of ways (B&B doubles from £110; copperhill.se). An innovative, largely timber building 730m above sea level, it has an ethos of gently encouraging you to head into the countryside with organised hikes, including ones with picnics. But there is also the opportunity to mellow into the sunsets with cocktails and Ibiza-style beats. The Lodge's main restaurant Niesti focuses on food from the region, so expect dishes such as moose tartare and Arctic char. Meanwhile the spa, with swimming pools and plenty of LED-led treatments, will also deliver a thorough Swedish massage (50-minute treatments from £78). Fly to Stockholm.

12. Oslo and Flam Railway, Norway



The Flam Railway between Flam and Myrdal in Aurland

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This self-guided Norway in a Nutshell trip from Baltic Travel Company offers the chance to do a classic Norway circuit. You'll get a couple of days to soak up Oslo's decidedly cool restaurant-lined waterfront — time your visit for September 11 and you'll be there for Culture Night when the city's museums open late into the evening (oslokulturnatt.no). The five-hour train journey to Myrdal has plenty of fjords en route to admire, but the next leg on the Flam Railway has switchbacks past waterfalls before it makes a dramatic 900m descent to Sognefjord. After this, the trip uses a combo of boats and buses to bring the wildly scenic Naeroyfjord Valley into focus. The trip ends in Bergen, which has frontier town energy and is surrounded by rugged Norwegian scenery, although Mount Floyen does have a funicular railway. Seven nights' B&B from £1,295pp, including flights (balticttravelcompany.com).

13. Umea and Grano Beckasin, Sweden



Umea is a charming university town

ALAMY

Vasterbotten, the part of Sweden that faces Finland across the Gulf of Bothnia, is green and pleasant in summer even by Scandi standards and a nice left-field choice for a trip if you're happy to do a little driving. Start in the coastal city of Umea, once an important trading port and part of the Sapmi region, which covers the northern areas of Norway, Russia and Finland and is central to the Lappish nomadic lifestyle. Today it's also a university town that has more than just academic charm. Stora Hotellet is a beautifully restored 1895 seaman's mission turned boutique hotel with its own deli and cinema (B&B doubles from £84; storahotelletumea.se). Then, 90 minutes' drive northwest at Grano Beckasin Lodge, you can sleep in your very own russet-coloured cabin, eat the best of the region in its organic restaurant and relax in pristine nature. And if you are feeling particularly outdoorsy, you can build a raft on the banks of the River Ume (room-only doubles from £128; granobeckasin.com). Fly to Umea via Stockholm.

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14. Malmo and Ven, Sweden



Malmo is packed with museums and design stores

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In southern Sweden, the city of Malmo has long prided itself on its diversity and is packed with museums and design stores. There's an airport too, although it's usually cheaper to fly to Copenhagen; direct trains from its airport cost about £10 and take 20 minutes. The Story Hotel is central and cool and walking distance from the train station and Malmo's 16th-century core (B&B doubles from £151). In the Oresund, the stretch of water between Denmark and Sweden, the island of Ven is easy to reach by train, followed by a short ferry. Visitors can get around the three square miles of sand-fringed simplicity on its bright yellow rental bikes. The island's distillery has four rooms and an acclaimed restaurant, serving produce from the island (half-board doubles from £265; houseofven.com). Fly to Malmo or Copenhagen.

15. Gothenburg and Lake Vanern, Sweden

As you come in to land at Gothenburg, you'll see drama-filled inlets and islands amid a flurry of boats and small ferries. The whole of Scandinavia works as a family break, but this city on Sweden's west coast should suit every generation. Starting a trip here brings sea swimming (Harbour bath in Jubileumsparken with three different areas is the most fun), the longstanding Liseberg funfair, the World of Volvo museum and boat trips into the archipelago. This Regent trip combines the city with a stay on Lake Vanern, Scandinavia's largest lake. Covering 2,160 square miles, it's a freshwater haven for sea eagles, otters and salmon. Naturum Vanerskargarden Victoriahuset in Vastergotland is a nature centre and a 15-room hotel. In the grounds of Lacko Castle, there are hikes, kayaking and a chance to explore Lake Vanern's own little islands. Six nights' B&B from £1,215pp, including flights and car hire (regent-holidays.co.uk).

Book now

16. Iitti and Lake Saimaa, Finland



The Sahanlahti Resort lies on the shores of Lake Saimaa

JONNE VAAHTERA

Sweden may have a bigger lake (see Lake Vanern above), but Finland has roughly 187,000 freshwater lakes across the country. Discover the World's Taste of Finnish Lakeland twin-centre trip will help you to navigate them in southeast Finland. At the Radalla Resort, two hours' drive northeast of Helsinki, alongside the tried and tested sauna and swim options, there's also the five-mile Radansuu hiking trail and cycling along the historic Kimola Canal, the breathtaking landscapes of Repovesi National Park and the thrills of Tykkimaki amusement park. A couple of hours' drive east, Sahanlahti Resort lies on the shores of Lake Saimaa with atmospheric little red cabins and a restaurant that keeps food determinedly local — summer favourites include smoked ham and organic barley porridge. That should set you up nicely to explore the prehistoric Astuvansalmi rock paintings, the largest rock art site in northern Europe, dating back about 5,000 years, and Kummakivi, a peculiar balancing rock from the Ice Age. Five nights' B&B from £454pp, including car hire (discover-the-world.com). Fly to Helsinki.

17. Bergen and Hardangerfjord, Norway



Hardangerfjord is known as the orchard of Norway

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For a gentle take on Norway's fjord country, this Macs Adventures walking holiday heads from Bergen to Hardangerfjord, known as the orchard of Norway, using ferries, buses and trains to notch up overnight stays in the fjordside village of Ulvik before arriving in Lofthus for three nights. None of the walks is more than 12 miles and options include hiking to the four waterfalls of the Husedalen valley or climbing the 616 stone steps used by monks in medieval times to access the Hardangervidda mountain plateau. Head there this month and you could catch the Hardanger Music Festival (August 26 to 30; hardangermusikkfest.no). Seven nights' B&B from £1,835pp (macsadventure.com). Fly to Bergen.