

Swedish link: Falsterbo is the country's best-known coastal course.



When you arrive at the Falsterbo Golf Club on the southern tip of Sweden, you're excited to play in what is, they say, one of the world's most golf-crazy countries. The sky's gray and the wind's blowing in as you scan the panorama of a rolling, natural course with long windswept grasses in waste areas separating the holes. There are high-lipped bunkers and a big old stone building overlooking the sea.

Two locals you just met step up and strike long drives into the gale. They are tall and strong fellows, Vikings with golf clubs. You want to get your own good start off the tee. Sadly, your first shot is a sizzling slice, bending toward three o'clock. You hit a provisional ball somewhat farther right. It is discouraging.

Yet, worse things can happen.

For example, when you look for the errant shots, you could find a woman by the open hatch of her car, the laces of her golf shoes untied, her eyes dazed, as she tells you, in Swedish, a language you never knew you understood, that she was just struck in the head by someone's ball. She didn't see you strike it, and you didn't see it strike her, but the odds are somewhat better than even that you are responsible for giving her temple the glow and color of one of those candy Swedish Fish.

"I'm feeling dizzy and nauseous," she says, now in English, lightly patting the high left side of her chest. "Same here," you think, though it seems the wrong moment to express empathy. You're worried about her, and what this could cost, not necessarily in that order.

# Hitting the Swede Spot

Sweden's mad  
for golf—  
who knew?

One of the other two players, Markus, is a club professional. He came for a relaxing round with his brother, Henrik. Markus says to go on playing and he'll attend to the woman. You hesitate. He insists. That she is conscious and upright are good signs.

"Oh, look," you say, "there's my ball." You drop it on the fairway and play on. On the next tee, you try to shake off your worries, and nearly hit a house. Then you

his Swedish wife, Elin Nordegren, was working as a nanny for Jesper Parnevik, he of the funnily upturned cap. More than 600,000 other Swedes also play, men and women, couples and families, and though junior participation has declined sharply of late, not unlike tennis did before it, you see all ages on the nation's courses. These number around 600, among the most per capita of any country in Europe.

Skåne, the southern region, is a popu-

Master's Course, the site of the 2003 Solheim Cup (the women's American-European showdown) and the 2007 Scandinavian TPC, hosted by Annika Sörenstam. The opening holes are flat with a generous lane of fairway, and have turf woven so tightly that yesterday's rain and the morning dew have rolled off like beads on a windshield. The roughs in the early morning are damp but cut low, the greens large and true. The eighth hole begins a stretch of fetching variety, a par-three that carries a pond with a fountain and looks down on a seaside plain. The next three holes continue for a taste of Swedish links. Then you are back on the parklands, with big trees and big bends and doglegs. This time when the rain comes, you brave it out. By #18, you feel you are a hero, and it is like a practical joke the way that barely five minutes after you finish the round a short stroke of wind squeezes off the clouds and the sun appears.

You give a moment's thought to playing Barsebäck's other route, the Donald Steel Course, but in the afternoon you drive up the coast to take in the sights.

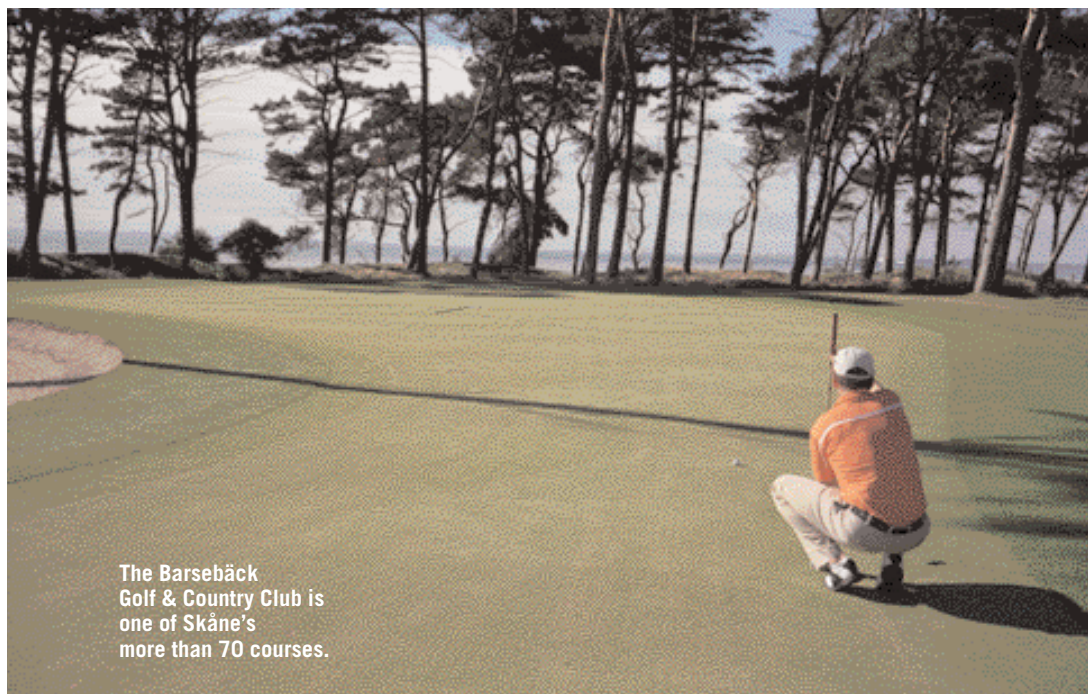
Inland, you see tracts of farms; the shore has fishing villages with old but well-kept A-frame houses

and privacy gardens thick with bright, sturdy flowers. The few people you see are often strikingly beautiful.

You arrive in Molle. Its nature preserve is famed as the first beach in Europe that permitted mixed-sex bathing, and it developed a reputation as a den of vice. This was great marketing, and soon there was a direct train from Berlin. Visitors would send postcards from the next village to avoid bearing the Molle postmark.

And there in the reserve...Could it be? Yes, it is! A golf course. It has steep elevations and 360-degree sea vistas, and a lighthouse erected atop boulders on a precipice at the tip of the peninsula. Men and women are making good on the area's original sin by playing golf together.

You continue another hour to the Halmstad Golf Club Tylösand, recommended because it hosted the Solheim Cup last September. The parkland course



The Barsebäck Golf & Country Club is one of Skåne's more than 70 courses.

skull a ball and almost provide a local chef with a nearby goose. Perhaps it would be wiser just to use a putter the rest of the way.

"Don't worry," Henrik says, "in Sweden everyone is automatically insured." A mind reader. "People here don't sue."

Hard heads, soft hearts. You give your driver another try.

Almost two decades ago, Swedes swapped national passions, fuzzy yellow balls for hard, dimpled ones, and the years of tennis glory—Borg, Wilander and Edberg—gave way to golf. Annika Sörenstam is probably the greatest woman golfer ever. Henrik Stenson, the world #6 as of this writing, is a new darling. More than two dozen other Swedes play in the PGA and the LPGA, and the European tour, men and women, has another 60-odd Swedes, according to the Swedish Golf Federation.

Even Tiger Woods has a connection—

lar vacation spot. A bridge connecting Skåne to Denmark opened in 2000, making it an efficient 40-minute commute to Copenhagen, and the Danes, who once ruled the area, are returning, attracted by a charming countryside of coastlines, castles and about 75 golf courses. The climate isn't Scottsdale, but it's temperate enough for Falsterbo to be open all year.

Your ambitions are as modest as ever: Keep the ball in play and do no harm. Usually the harm is to your ego. Yet here, in one swing, as it were, you killed both birds with one stone. Normally the biggest risk of golf in Sweden is rain. Alas, that gets you too. The campaign has barely started, and Falsterbo is your Waterloo. You run for cover after just nine holes. Call yourself tourist. The Swedes, accustomed to being pelted, play on.

On day two, you get off to a better start at the Barsebäck Golf & Country Club's

is impeccably groomed, with long, lovely, curving holes that are a challenge for players much better than you. Golf is certainly the reason they come, since the area is otherwise very boring and leaves you too much time for more negative swing thoughts. The club's 2,000 members pay just \$700 a year.

"Do you have to be Swedish?" you ask.

"No, but there is a waiting list now of 15 or 20."

"Is that people or families?"

"Years."

Fortunately, as with all courses here, you can show up and just pay the daily fee of \$90.

It is a five-hour train ride to Stock-

and colorfully plastered old buildings, and too many tourists and shops that sell them postcards, so you continue walking to the formerly working-class southern sector that has become fashionable à la New York's SoHo. It is called SoFo. There are no tourists. There are men pushing strollers and sitting in espresso bars with other men with strollers. You hear that Sweden offers 480 days of parental leave. You wonder why they are not out playing golf at the state's expense.

By morning, your appetite is whetted for more golf, with a final round at Kunsängen Golf Club, which you still cannot pronounce, and which, 45 minutes from Stockholm, with its 60-plus golf

of contempt for the system, Sweden's appeal only grows.

Back in Stockholm, there is one more thing to see: the Vasa Museum. In 1625 King Gustavus Adolphus commissioned the greatest ship of this seafaring people. As his nobles and subjects gathered for its maiden voyage, the ship set sail and promptly sank. When word reached poor Gustavus, who was in Poland at the time, he must have felt the king of failure. (It was finally brought up in 1961, remarkably well-preserved thanks to the cold, brackish water.)

You are sensitive to the notion of dashed hopes and victims. Talk about getting off to a bad start off the tee.



How Sweden it is: the seaside town of Mölle

holm, where you set up camp at the Grand Hotel, which opened in 1874 across from the Palace. This is a prime location in Sweden's capital, a metropolitan area of 1.9 million people that stretches out across an archipelago, much of which is connected by bridges. The Stockholm skyline has filigreed cast-iron spires, brick bell towers and copper roofs that have oxidized to a pale green. You spend a morning with a guide who takes you to City Hall, an imposing Renaissance-style building whose Blue Hall provides the setting for the Nobel Prize Banquet. The walls of its Golden Hall glow with a mosaic of 18 million pieces of glass and gold, with scenes that tell the history, hopes and myths of Sweden, plus a picture of New York's Statue of Liberty.

The old town has narrow cobble streets

courses, you are relieved just to find. There are two courses, the King's and the Queen's. The King's stretches and recedes, widens and narrows. There are trees; there is water. There is no threat of rain; despite sun, you hear thunder.

"No, that's just the military training," you are told. You are careful not to shoot the ball out of bounds; here, they might shoot back.

The green on the 11th hole overlooks an immense field of wildflowers. The flagsticks on the course bear the blue and yellow of the Swedish flag. You pause to enjoy the scene.

"The European Community pays you not to develop," says a retiree with a mean game of golf. "If you work and have initiative, you lose money. If you do nothing, you get rich." Although you detect a note

You feel a kinship across centuries. From the hotel, you pick up the phone.

"Is Gunilla home? I'm the guy who hit her in the head with the golf ball."

She thanks you for calling. You thank God she answers. She's fine. She even played the next day. "I hope it didn't ruin your round," she says. As if you didn't feel bad enough. "Maybe a guardian angel saved me," she says.

Or me, you are inclined to say.

Fine folks, the Swedes. •

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*SAS flies to Copenhagen, the nearest point to Skåne, and to Stockholm. To make reservations at the Radisson-SAS Malmö: (888) 201-1718, [www.radissonsas.com](http://www.radissonsas.com). The Grand Hotel is at [www.grandhotel.se](http://www.grandhotel.se). For golf, go to [www.skanegolf.com](http://www.skanegolf.com) and [www.visitsweden.com](http://www.visitsweden.com).*