

Following Greta: joining the Swedes on their no-fly holidays

For a father and his two young children, taking the train – rather than the plane – from Malmö to London, meant more quality time, and fun. Richard Orange, Thursday 13 June 2019, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

5 At Hamburg central station it felt like the whole of Sweden was taking the train to somewhere else in Europe. You could hear snatches of Swedish everywhere. When we queued up to buy water, both couples ahead of us were Swedes. An entire handball team from Gothenburg was going by rail to a tournament in Austria.

“Sweden is trend-oriented: if there’s a new trend, everyone will follow it,” said Anna Maria Hilborn, an art teacher I met when my five-year-old son started spinning around a signpost on the platform with hers.

10 Sweden’s *flygskam*, or flight shame, movement first came to notice in the summer of 2017 when the singer-songwriter Staffan Lindberg wrote an article co-signed by five of his famous friends, in which they announced their decision to give up flying. Among them were the popular ski commentator Björn Ferry, opera-singer Malena Ernman (the mother of climate activist Greta Thunberg), and Heidi Andersson, the eleven-times world champion arm-wrestler.

15 However, it was last summer that flygskam really gained momentum. Passenger numbers at Sweden’s 10 busiest airports fell 8% from January to April this year, following a 3% fall in 2018, according to Swedavia, which operates them. The number of journeys on Sweden’s national rail network increased by 5% last year and 8% in the first quarter of this year, according to Swedish Railways. Meanwhile, sales of Interrail tickets to Swedes increased by 45% in 2018 – and are expected to rise again this year.

20 “The big thing, of course, was the very warm summer last year,” Hilborn told me once we were on the train to the Rhineland city of Duisburg, the German countryside rattling by outside. “I think it affected people because it usually isn’t that hot in Sweden. It had an impact on farmers: they had to slaughter some of their animals early. And people felt it, too, of course.”

Seeing the effects of climate change in the here and now made Hilborn decide that next time she took her annual trip to visit her brother in Innsbruck, Austria, she would go by train.

25 “My personal impact won’t change a lot,” she said. “But when a percentage of people start doing something it creates a new norm. So, just by being a part of that movement and sharing it, I’m doing something.”

30 After nearly eight years living in Malmö, I’m perhaps Swedish enough to start following national trends such as flygskam, which made the official list of new Swedish words for 2018. I signed up to the country’s Flygfritt 2019 (Flight Free 2019) campaign in February – even though, strictly speaking, I had already failed, as I’d flown to the UK at the start of January.

35 Using the calculator on the International Railways Union’s EcoPassenger site, I realised that by taking the train, rather than flying, on my four annual visits back to the UK would cut my annual CO₂ emissions by about 1.8 tonnes, if you adjust for the impact of emitting at height. That is close to half the total annual carbon emissions, excluding flights, of the average person living in Sweden. To me it seemed crazy to pass up that kind of reduction to save a few days and a few hundred pounds.

40 “Your poor children,” my stepmother said after I announced my plan to travel overland from Malmö to my parents’ home in Surrey. My wife, while supportive, had nightmare visions of me and the children stranded on a cold station platform for the night. Though the truth is that seven-year-old Eira and five-year-old Finn loved it. In each direction, they got more than 24 hours of nearly non-stop parental attention, unlimited screen time, and Lego sets and craft equipment bought by their Swedish mum.

There was the excitement of passing through five countries – Denmark, Germany, Belgium and France on the way out, plus the Netherlands on the way back – and the thrill of racing through the French countryside at 186 mph on Eurostar. At the good-value A&O hostel we stayed at in Hamburg, Eira was inexplicably reduced to

45 hysterical laughter by the large selection of goodies you could sprinkle on top of your yoghurt at the breakfast buffet.

50 On the train to Duisburg, at 3½ hours the longest single leg of the journey, I also met Elin Persson and her husband Morgon, on their way to Málaga with their four children. Like Hilborn, Morgon is an artist: a glass-blower who transforms used wine and beer bottles into vases. Elin Persson conceded that many of the Swedes she had seen travelling fitted a particular demographic. And it is true that the success of the flygskam movement has generated a backlash, with politicians and columnists in Sweden attacking it as a form of one-upmanship: one where middle-class Swedes sneer at their working-class compatriots for taking charter flights to Thailand or the Canary Islands.

“Mostly, it is now middle-class, but hopefully it will spread,” said Susanna Elfors, co-founder of the Tågsemester (Train Holiday) Facebook group which over the last year has gained 90,000 members.

55 In the days before I left Malmö, I’d regretted not making more of a holiday of it. Aside from an hour and a bit in Brussels, our only stop longer than 20 minutes was the hour and a half we had in Osnabrück on the return leg. We did manage to entertain ourselves, however.

60 Although no one said anything, German travellers seemed less indulgent of small children than those back home in Sweden. But the comfortable table seats we had booked on the German ICE trains were perfect for drawing, playing Lego and making wool pom-poms. The short trips we had on standing-only overcrowded local trains in Germany and the Netherlands were more difficult.

We stayed away from the decent-looking ICE restaurant cars selling German food, such as currywurst and beef gulasch, but indulged ourselves whenever the trolley selling drinks and pretzel breads passed by (although coming from cash-free Sweden, I was astonished they didn’t take cards).

65 In Brussels, we visited an overpriced restaurant outside the station to try the national dish – some of the worst mussels I have ever eaten. I made up for the disappointment on the return leg, by gorging on deep-fried mussels from Hoekse Vishandel outside the Hook of Holland ferry terminal.

“Are there places like this all over the Netherlands?” I asked the owner. “There are,” he said. “But we’re the best.”

70 In Osnabrück, a city in north-west Germany, we missed the medieval centre and renowned zoo but met an engineering student in Burger King who kept the children spellbound as he explained the workings of his self-built electric skateboard.

75 On the 45-minute ferry from Germany to the Danish island of Lolland, the children threw themselves around in the wind so wildly on deck that they fell asleep as soon as we got onto the rail replacement bus to Copenhagen. Indeed, Finn was so exhausted that when, an hour later, he threw up half-digested spaghetti bolognese over his sister, he didn’t even wake up. By that time all we had left was a hop over the Öresund Straits, and a short cycle home to our apartment where, at well past midnight, the children were greeted by their relieved mother.

80 The trip took two more days than it would have if we’d flown, but they weren’t days wasted. They might even be the best I’ve spent with Eira and Finn all year.

Journey times from Malmö to London By train: from 18hrs 52minutes with four changes (source Loco2) – but factor in more time if you want a less tiring journey. For example Richard and family spent a night in Hamburg. By air: from 4hrs 25 minutes, with one stop (SAS).

Carbon emissions from Malmö to London By train: 53.9kg. By air: 269.8kg (source: ecopassenger.org)