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Flinks reception



Oct. 24, 2010---

FLATON ISLAND, Sweden-- I don't do much planning for a road trip. I like the element of surprise.

Just like my recent trip to Colombia where I had my laptop, tape recorder and Chuck Taylor biography stolen. Or a 1986 honeymoon that resulted in a long night with then-WXRT DJ Bobby Skafish in an Amsterdam "coffee shop" after my bride and I had a minor debate about our hotel accommodations.

I didn't plan that.

So this summer, I was driving my rented Volvo through beautiful West Sweden on the road to Handelsman Flink -- a place that sounds like a Bears offensive tackle with a big moustache.

I took rural road 160 out of Mollosund to a car ferry that took me to the small island of Flaton ("flat island" in Swedish). One of three islands in the Kattegat Sea, Flaton has about 3,000 residents during the summer, 200 in the winter.

I drove up a hill filled with tulips and arrived at the compound that is Handelsman Flink. The first thing I saw was a general store jam-packed with stuff. Of course I stopped. I bought a whimsical color mural of children playing along the sea, a replica of the artwork rural Swedes used to hang in their outhouses.

Next to the 98-year-old store is a hotel with 10 double rooms, two suites and a glass-enclosed restaurant overlooking the two-lane road and the sea.

The seaside bridal suite has its own private jetty. It was featured a couple of years ago as one Europe's best honeymoon spots in the European edition of Conde Nast Traveler magazine. From the resort's ice cream stand, I looked at the quaint single-family suite and thought maybe I will return for a second honeymoon (about \$350 for two; regular hotel rooms are \$175, including a breakfast buffet).

I chatted in the general store with the woman behind the counter, Siv Hjelmer. She never stopped smiling. I saw her husband, Stefan, lurking in the background behind rows of candies, soaps and local arts and crafts. The store features 2,000 items and is clearly not his domain.

Siv and Stefan own Handelsman Flink.

"When we bought this 17 years ago, it was just the old shop," Stefan told me over dinner. "It was empty."



The shop used to be owned by a man named Gustaf Johansson, a good friend of late Swedish troubadour Evert Taube. The men got to know each other while Taube spent the summers of 1942-45 on the island. Doctors in Stockholm recommended Flaton Island as a respite for Taube's occasional hard-drinking ways.

It was like Jimmy Buffett meeting Captain Tony Tarracino in Key West, Fla.

Just like Buffett and Captain Tony, Taube used a colorful island character in his folk songs, nicknaming Johansson "Handelsman Flink." "Flink" means "quick" in English, so the name was an ironic jab at Johansson, who had a reputation for taking his time.

Taube hung out with the locals in the back of the store, writing, drinking, singing and drawing sketches. Margaritas were not on the menu.

The Hjelmers brought life back to the place.

"It grew to the restaurant first, then the hotel," said Stefan, 56. "Then fishing. It's unique we do our own fishing, but then we have things for the restaurant." Those things include shrimp, crawfish, oysters and, in August, herring. Lobsters are caught near the island from the end of September to May.

The resort has a "Lobster Safari" package through December, which includes a night at the hotel. It costs about \$525 a person, based on double occupancy.

"People come from all over Europe," Stefan said. "They call the lobster 'black gold' from the sea. They grow slowly in freshwater, so the taste of the meat is perfect."

Safari-goers start by having some lobster soup before donning safety suits and heading out on the boat.

"They're out for three or four hours and have a picnic," Stefan said. "The lobsters are caught. Catches are fed with herring, because the lobster likes the herring. When they get back on land, the guests have a jacuzzi and prepare the lobster with our chef. We have a three-course lobster dinner."

Siv and Stefan's daughter Maria manages the restaurant and is married to the head chef.

A dinner buffet gets served nightly, using herbs grown at the resort. Cheese is made with organic milk from goats and cows on the adjacent Orust Island. Bottles of bold German-style Flink's Beer are brewed for the resort in Grebbestat, north of the island.

"The beer is suited for seafood," Stefan said, slowly hoisting a glass of Flink's. "It

has about 5 percent alcohol, so it's rather strong for Sweden." I was not driving.

I was burned out on herring after just three days in Sweden. But I enjoyed the fish soup with fennel, salmon and tomato, as well as cod with egg sauce.

The hotel and restaurant are among a handful in Sweden to have the prestigious Svanen green certification for their environmentally friendly features, from recycling and composting to the water heating and filtration system.

During dinner, island troubadour Gake Gunnarsson sings Taube songs tableside.

"All the Swedish children sing his songs," Stefan said. "He wrote about nature and the atmosphere of the island. And a little bit about the beautiful girls we have on the island. That's why he wanted to stay here during the summer."

Stefan also teaches marketing and economics at a university in Bohus, the textile center of Sweden. He used to manage a hotel chain in Norway.

"At the time I was with the hotel, my wife and children lived in Gothenburg about an hour and a half south and I'd pass through here," he said. "I saw the potential here, which is why I bought it.

"Everyone wants to change their lives," he added. "This is a nice way to live."

Sounds like a plan.

HANDELSMAN FLINK: The resort, open year-round, is about 90 minutes north of Gothenburg. Wedding packages include "In Love and Crazy," "In Love and Crazier" and "In Love and Craziest," which comes with a fireworks show;.