Travel and Adventure: Swedish designer glass blends artistry, craftsmanship

by Sharon Whitley Larsen

KINGDOM OF CRYSTAL, Sweden - "I love that red plate!" I called out to my husband Carl. "And want to buy it!"

We were strolling the narrow, cobblestone streets of Stockholm's Old Town, and I had spotted a unique Mats Jonasson Maleras face design in a shop window.

CRYSTAL KINGDOM - The Orrefors Shop at the Kingdom of Crystal is in the heart of Sweden's glass industry, and one of its most popular tourist destinations. CNS Photos by Sharon Whitley Larsen.

ORREFORS SHOPPING - A shopper looks over goods at the Orrefors Shop. Each year, more than 1 million visit the Smaland region between Vaxjo and Nybro, seeing where Swedish crystal originated.

GLASS ARTIST - Famed glass artist and master engraver Mats Jonasson shows one of his popular face designs at Maleras glassworks.

GLASS BLOWING - The glass blowers in Sweden's Kingdom of Crystal still use the same technique and tools that have been used for centuries.

COLORFUL GLASS - Sweden's first glassworks appeared in 1742, in the Kosta region. It was begun by workers from Venice, Bohemia and Germany.

"Don't buy it here," Carl admonished me. "We'll be touring the Kingdom of Crystal where they're made, and you can buy them much cheaper." That was an understatement: As we found out, the glassworks shops sell these items, including slight seconds, for 20 percent to 50 percent less than retail, and we ended up purchasing so many of the Maleras designs that we had them shipped home.

For anyone who's a fan of Swedish designer glass sold worldwide in upper-end department stores or displayed in art galleries, then the Kingdom of Crystal - the heart of Sweden's glass industry and one of its most popular tourist destinations - is the place to go. Especially if you're a fan of Kosta Boda (including the well-known colorful tulip and heart designs by Ulrica Hydman-Vallien) and Orrefors, both the country's most popular, it's great to tour the quaint villages in southeastern Sweden's vast forests that are home to these design

meccas. Today more than 1 million visit the Smaland region between Vaxjo and Nybro, seeing where Swedish crystal originated.

In 1742, Kosta, the region's first glassworks, was established, inspired by workers from Venice, Bohemia and Germany who relocated here in Kalmar County. There once were some 100 glassworks in the area. Today 15 remain open for year-round tours. They include Kosta, which still produces handmade glass; Orrefors, with a history over 100 years; and Maleras, world-famous for its realistic full lead crystal animal designs.

It's fascinating, on factory tours, to stand behind the skilled glassblowers, watching them perfect their pieces in unbearably hot conditions.

"It takes 10-15 years to become a master glassblower," explained Linda Svahn, a guide at Kosta. The men (there are few women glassblowers) go to school to learn the skill, and work as a team, generally from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. - and for not a lot of money.

And the glassblowers use the same technique and tools that have been mastered over the centuries: Shaping the syrupy lump against wet newspaper, twirling and blowing, transforming the glowing molten glass into crystal and colorful art, which eventually become elegant vases, candle holders, wine glasses, plates, bowls - ranging from graceful, simplistic Scandinavian designs to colorful, fanciful artwork. Visitors can even have a try at glassblowing for a small fee.

Camilla Rosberg Sandblad, the trade's spokesperson, pointed out that some of the glassworks have recently expanded their outreach to tourists with new hotels, spas and conference centers. "We want to offer visitors more experience and to stay more days," she said.

Many tourists today come to this popular region via cruise ships, which dock in Kalmar, a nearby town of 60,000. Or visitors may do as we did. After taking the train from Stockholm to Kalmar, we rented a car to drive to the various glassworks, which are spread apart and a bit off the beaten path.

"You need a car or need to go on a bus tour," Sandblad pointed out. "Public transportation is not very good here."

It would take several days to tour them all. We saw four in a fast-paced day, purchasing souvenirs at each one.

On a sunny summer day, we started out at Pukeberg Glassworks, site of the University of Kalmar's Design program, then toured Orrefors and Maleras.

The highlight was having coffee with Maleras' famed glass artist and master engraver Mats Jonasson, a native of the area (who still lives nearby). A primary school star art student, he started working as an engraver when he was 14. Today he has a worldwide following, and when I told him his face designs were my favorite, he commented, via an interpreter, that they're the most popular, saying that he first made them for galleries in the late 1980s. Although the Asian market, he noted, "doesn't even look at the faces; they want the animal designs."

"He's invited to speak all over the world, but he prefers to stay here, he doesn't like to travel," said Sandblad with a smile.

Jacque Lynn Foltyn, a resident of San Diego - who had always wanted to visit the Kingdom of Crystal - was touring Maleras with her Swedish husband Henry Pressfeldt on their first visit to the area. She was thrilled when "glassmaker Ronne Fagerstrom blew us a huge glass bubble until it burst into a thousand glittering pieces and floated like fairy dust around us. It was magical!" He then presented them with tiny glass swans for souvenirs.

After Carl and I purchased several items in the Maleras shop to ship home, we stopped to have an

alfresco lunch at Hedsveds, a diner run out of a charming couple's country home.

Later at the Kosta Glassworks that evening, we had a "Hyttsill" (hot-shop herring) dinner, a popular stop during the summer months. In days gone by, the glassworks were the villages' focal point, and it was the custom for the warm factory building to be a meeting place for locals to gather. After work, townsfolk would sit by the furnaces to gossip with friends, neighbors, co-workers - even with passing vagabonds who would bring news from a neighboring village - listening to guitar, fiddle and accordion music. They would sing and enjoy a traditional dinner of herring, baked potatoes, Smaland sausage, bread and butter, and Swedish cheesecake served with strawberry jam and cream.

Today the herring is still crisply baked on the glassmaker's rod, the potatoes baked in the hot furnace ashes, placed in a special glassmaker's tool which can be shaken at regular intervals. We served ourselves buffet-style, then sat at long tables among locals and visitors from Germany and The Netherlands (we were the only Americans), chatting and singing songs, sipping coffee, beer or wine - followed, of course, with a toast ("skol!") of the national drink, Aquavit.

IF YOU GOFor information on the glasswork tours, as well music festivals, places to stay or dine contact: www.glasriket.se or e-mail info@glasriket.se

The Kingdom of Crystal Pass is a special card offering discounts at area glassworks and free guided tours. It can be purchased at the region's tourist offices and at all glassworks.

Hedsveds is a charming home bistro in the Smaland countryside that is open April to August at various times; highly recommended for lunch or dinner. Hos Hedsveds Fiskesjo 140; 011-46-471-420-86; e-mail is info@hedsved.com

Jacque Lynn Foltyn recommends the small, newly renovated Kosta Hotell across from Kosta Glassworks, which "has room furniture made of glass - headboard, nightstands, curtain rod, chandeliers, desk, with pillows of Ulrika Hydman-Vallien's colorful Kosta Boda designs; fantasy animals and fairies on the modern painted glass and crystal; as well as Kosta Boda sculptures and Atoll candle holders in the windows. The dining room has beautiful Orrefors chandeliers made of wine goblets." Kosta Hotell & Restaurang Stora vagen 75SE 360 52 Kosta; 011-46-478-500-06. The Kosta Glassworks Web site is www.kostaboda.se/

We stayed at the waterfront Hotel Packhuset in Kalmar, about a 30-minute drive from Kingdom of Crystal: Clarion Collection Hotel Packhuset; Skeppsbrogatan 26, SE-392 31 Kalmar; 011-46-480-570-00; www.hotelpackhuset.se.

For more information, go to www.smaland-oland.se; Kalmar Tourist Office is at www.kalmar.se/turism; e-mail is info@turistbyra.kalmar.se.

The Smalands Museum (Swedish Glass Museum) is at www.smalandsmuseum.se.

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