

Travel and Adventure: 60 years later, the adventures of Pippi Longstocking live on

by Sharon Whitley Larsen

VIMMERBY, Sweden - Anyone with the name Pippi Longstocking has to be an interesting character.

"With such an unusual name, she became an unusual girl," noted the late Swedish author Astrid Lindgren, whose story about the freckle-faced, pigtailed 9-year-old has been loved by children for more than 60 years.

LINDGREN'S WORLD - Sweden's version of a literary Disneyland, Astrid Lindgren's World, attracts 370,000 visitors each year. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. NO LINES - There are no rides, and therefore no long lines, at Astrid Lindgren's World in Vimmerby, Sweden. Yet there are plenty of places to climb and explore. Pippi's lemonade tree and this fort are children's favorites. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. DVD FOR SALE - A billboard displays some of Astrid Lindgren's films available in DVDs. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. EMIL'S FAMILY - 'Emil's Family' and other costumed characters perform throughout the day. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. PIPPI'S HOUSE - Villa Villekulla is the messy yellow house where Pippi Longstocking lives with her pet monkey, Mr. Nilsson, and a horse in the front porch. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. Since "Pippi Longstocking" was first published in 1945 (in the U.S. in 1950), it has sold more than 80 million copies worldwide and has been translated into some 50 languages.

What child hasn't fallen in love with this spunky, fun-loving, independent character, whose official name is Pippilotta Delicatessa Windowshade Mackrelmint Efraim's Daughter Longstocking? She defies convention, to put it mildly, has red pigtails that stick straight out, wears a dress she made (that looks like it), sports one brown stocking, one black, and black shoes twice as long as her feet. And she's strong as a horse, and can even lift one.

Pippi lives by herself in a messy, yellow house called Villa Villekulla. She doesn't have parents telling her what to do. She believes her ship captain father, lost at sea, is a cannibal king, and that her mother's in heaven. She doesn't go to school, has a pet monkey named Mr. Nilsson and a horse that lives on the front porch. And she wants to be a pirate when she grows up.

Oh, and Pippi walks backward now and then, climbs the big oak tree, rolls cookie dough on the kitchen floor

(where there's more room, of course), and has crazy adventures with Tommy and Annika, the perfect children who live next door. And her motto - whether it's creatively dealing with school authorities, policemen or bumbling burglars - is, "I'll always come out on top!"

In this small town (population 14,000) where Lindgren grew up - in the Smaland region about four hours south of Stockholm - the story of zany Pippi comes alive during the summer months at Astrid Lindgren's World, Sweden's largest open-air theme park.

Opened in 1981, Sweden's version of a literary Disneyland features 12 of Lindgren's books (including "Karlsson-on-the-Roof," "The Children of Noisy Village" and "Ronia, the Robber's Daughter") that are depicted by 60 different characters amid story backdrops and re-creations of this area's rural towns. But Pippi is the most well-known, especially in the United States, where it has sold more than 5 million copies.

Although my husband and I didn't understand the Swedish spoken by the actors, we got caught up in the exciting dramatization of the stories, musical performances and puppet shows. We had earlier visited Junibacken - the Children's Museum - in Stockholm, which also has a replica of Pippi's house and the Vimmerby train station, and brings stories by Lindgren and other Scandinavian authors alive for kids of all ages.

"There are no rides here, no long lines," pointed out Nils-Magnus Angantyr, spokesman for Astrid Lindgren's World. "People can see chapters of her books being performed, can meet the characters and play with them; there's a lot of improvisation between performances. We have about 370,000 visitors a year, 30 percent from other countries, mostly Denmark, Germany, Norway and Finland, but few Americans. On a busy day there are about 8,000, at least half of them children."

We began our visit at the Astrid Lindgren's Center, which is open year-round.

"If you want to know Astrid Lindgren as a person, you go to this exhibition," noted Christina Thorstensson of the Vimmerby Tourist Office.

Here visitors learn the story of one of Sweden's most beloved and prolific authors, who died in Stockholm at the age of 94 in 2002. Opened in 1998 on her 91st birthday, this exhibit honors Lindgren with a short film in Swedish, English and German.

She grew up in a farmhouse just outside of town, basing many of her stories on her happy, carefree upbringing. In the film she talks about the "magical, sensual nature, the security and freedom of childhood" and notes that "children can work miracles when they read."

The exhibit's self-guided tour includes family photos, newspaper clippings, manuscripts and letters. There's a replica of Lindgren's childhood farmhouse kitchen, audios of her singing with her mother (she also composed music lyrics) and interesting aspects of her life, which involved working as a secretary, journalist, book editor and on passionate crusades for political issues, including children's and animal rights. According to Thorstensson, Lindgren's books have sold a staggering 130 million copies worldwide and have been translated into 92 languages. Regarded as Sweden's best-selling author, she wrote several dozen children's books, including the Pippi Longstocking series, novels, short stories, poetry and plays.

On the warm, sunny day that we visited Astrid Lindgren's World, children swarmed about the costumed characters from the books, watched performances with their parents, climbed through Pippi's house, strolled the tiny streets, played on swing sets, slides and in favorite replica storybook scenes.

One small girl intently read one of Lindgren's books as she sat in a wagon, pulled by her mom and dad. Another girl, about 3, was dressed like Pippi, red, braided wig and all, as she walked hand-in-hand with her mother.

When the "real" Pippi appeared, children immediately flocked around her. One little girl stepped up to hand her a drawing she had done. Parents - many who had come here themselves as youngsters - clamored to take photos of their children with Pippi. Even grandparents toured the area with their grandchildren, as Lindgren's children's stories cross several generations of book lovers.

"It's interesting to see German and Swedish children playing here together," observed Thorstensson. "They don't speak each other's language, but they all know the stories and characters."

Thorstensson once met Lindgren (who had lived her adult years in Stockholm, but is buried in the local churchyard), recalling her as "a very nice, ordinary, simple person, humble, very kind to the kids. She was a humanitarian and ahead of her time."

Visitors to Vimmerby - one of Sweden's oldest towns, dating to the 12th century - can also see the 18th century red farmhouse in nearby Nas where Lindgren was born, and the yellow house next door where she later spent happy childhood years (and which resembles Pippi's Villa Villekulla). There's also the huge elm tree that Lindgren climbed as a child, immortalized as Pippi's lemonade tree.

The Astrid Lindgren Museum, with a cultural center, library and archives, and historic exhibits related to her life and work, is slated to open here in 2007, the 100th anniversary of her birth. Also planned is Astrid Lindgren's Children's Village, which will assist 120 orphans in the Central African Republic.

"I grew up with Astrid Lindgren and her stories," noted Anne-Charlotte Harvey, professor emeritus of theater at San Diego State University, and a native of Sweden. "I remember well when 'Pippi' came out. We thought she was super, witty and crazy!"

"Astrid Lindgren's other books were also very popular; she captured the spirit of childhood for us and subsequent generations: camaraderie, inventiveness, discovery, adventurousness, tolerance of adults, kindness, simple toys and homemade, clever games. All of Sweden looks to Vimmerby and Astrid Lindgren's memory for guidance, sanity and humanity. She was truly loved by the entire country, regardless of political color, and was a wise woman with a sense of humor."

Lindgren was the recipient of many prestigious awards and honors, including the coveted Hans Christian Andersen Medal, UNESCO'S International Book Award and three honorary doctorate degrees. Many of her books have been made into plays, TV shows, films and DVDs.

"I am writing in order to amuse the child within myself," Lindgren once said, "and I hope that by doing so other children will have some fun. If I have been able to bring some sunshine into a single child's life, then I am satisfied."

IF YOU GO

- Astrid Lindgren's World can be reached at www.astridlindgrensworld.com It is open from mid-May to early September, with an Autumn Crafts Market for several days in November. That includes 60 stalls of handicrafts and food, as well as performances by Pippi and her friends. Check the Web site for 2007 details and prices.

Gift shops sell Lindgren's books (some in English) and souvenirs, including children's clothing, Pippi dolls, and the must-have red wigs. Candy stores carry the distinctive red and white peppermint rock sticks called polkagrisar.

Cafes serve traditional Swedish food, and visitors may also picnic under the trees.

Camping, chalets, cottages, and hotel accommodations are nearby.

It's easy to take the train to nearby Vimmerby Station. From mid-June to mid-August the train stops right at the Astrid Lindgren's World Station. See www.eurail.com.

For additional information please see www.resplus.se

OTHER SITES

For information on Astrid Lindgren's other book adventure sites, visit the Vimmerby Tourist Office's Web site at www.turism.vimmerby.se, or e-mail turistbyra@vimmerby.se.

Other sites to visit are www.smaland-oland.com and www.visitsweden.com.

The Astrid Lindgren Center is open year-round. Visit www.alg.se.

The Hotel Ronja is at www.hotellronja.se; e-mail is info@hotellronja.se.

Pippi's Sommarhotell is at www.pippishotel.se.

A delightful English and German pub, Brygghuset Restaurang and Pub (connected to the brewery), is at Abrovagen 13; www.brygghuset.nu/.

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

Junibacken (Children's Museum), Stockholm, is at www.junibacken.se; e-mail is info@junibacken.se.

Opened since 1996, this is one of Sweden's popular children's sites, with more than 300,000 annual visitors. In the heart of Stockholm, it features the works of popular Scandinavian authors, especially Astrid Lindgren. There's a replica of Villa Villekulla and Vimmerby Station, where the Disneyland-type Story Train (with headsets available in English and other languages) departs, taking riders on a journey that dramatizes her well-known books. It is open year-round. Check the Web site for daily schedules, performances and admission prices.

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