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This historical home for widows is a new Scandi hotspot

Stockholm's newest boutique hotel is attracting internationals and locals alike with its retro luxury and fine dining.



Stockholm Stadshotell is in the hip neighbourhood of Södermalm. **Christoph Kallweit**

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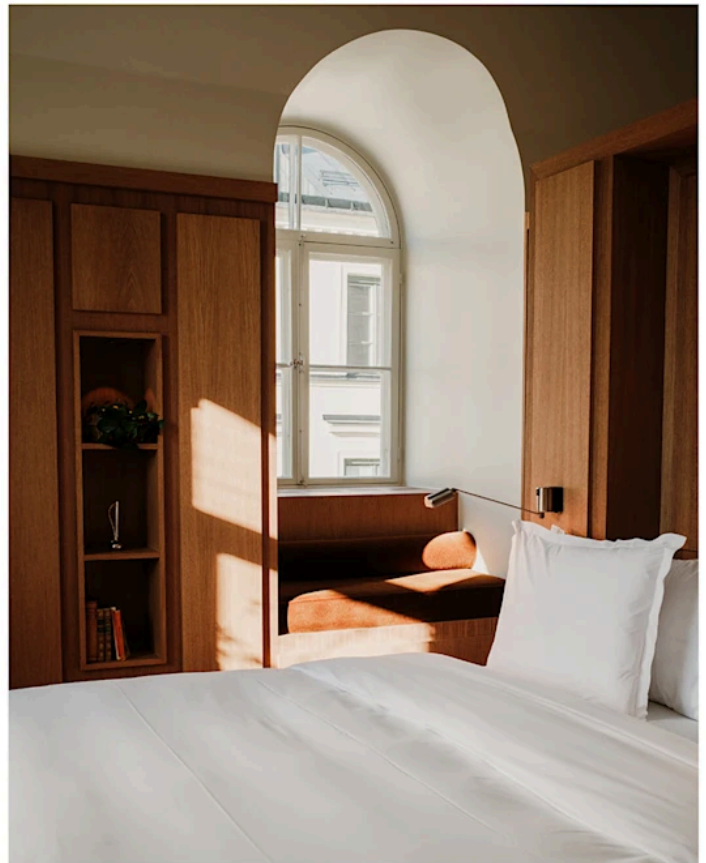
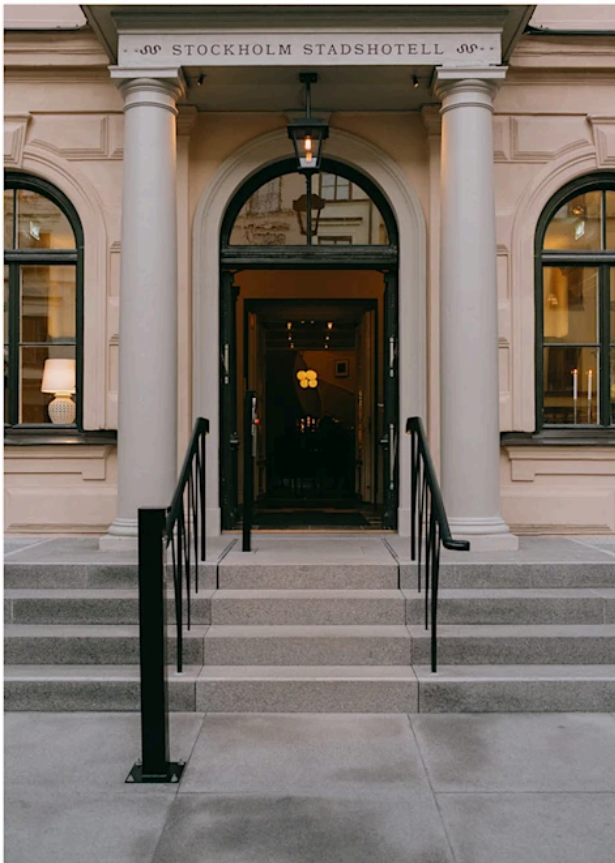
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Hotels in historic buildings are less of a trend these days than a global occupying force.

On one side, you have cities guiltily examining their stock of grand but abandoned buildings, lacking the vision to return them from decrepitude to light-filled beacons on the skyline.

On the other, you have hotel groups with savvy architects on tap, seeking properties with authentic backstories in which to plant their growing portfolios of boutique hotels. A scan of the options, including Marriott's Luxury Collection and Accor's MGallery, proves that no past lives are taboo. From prisons to palaces, warehouses, woolsheds, breweries, nunneries, hospitals and asylums – anything goes if it's got plenty of capital H history.



The Stadshotell building dates back to 1873. **Christoph Kallweit**

Which is to say that a backstory, alone, no longer differentiates a hotel. Something more is needed.

The stately, three-storey stone building, with its generous street-facing courtyard, was commissioned in the 1870s by Sweden and Norway's Queen dowager Josefina in memory of her husband, King Oscar I. It ran as a shelter for widows until 1957 and then became a school, a hospital and offices. It lay dormant for 16 years before the City of Stockholm sold it in 2018 under the proviso it be of public use.



In 2021, firms including Saga Arkitektur & Design, Ateljé Nord and Studio Escapist were recruited by the building's five new owner-operators to begin navigating its strict heritage regulations. Stockholm Stadshotell opened in December last year with 32 rooms and suites, two restaurants, a petite bar and a basement sauna and cold bath. Although many original features remain, such as the granite spiral staircases, and only minimal

alterations could be made to its structure, the hotel's interiors are fresh and contemporary.

Its tagline, however, is modest: A house where you can eat and sleep. It's a homely promise that I stress-test over my Easter long weekend stay. Rattled by an unexpected death in the extended family, and away for two significant birthdays, my sense of 'wrong place, wrong time' is heightened by the Sunday to Tuesday closure of the hotel's lauded fine-diner, Matsalen, in the restored former chapel. Easter, meanwhile, is one of Sweden's most celebrated family get-togethers, marking the end of a long winter.

"Stockholm people are mostly out of the city in summer homes eating herring and painting eggs," says my waitress over an a la carte breakfast in a cheery wing of the bistro that was once a hospital ward. Despite light pouring through arched windows that have the slightly rippled panes synonymous with earlier glassblowing techniques, candles still flicker on tables. Pew-like bench seats, white-tiled walls and embroidered linen napkins complete the scene, as well as iconic bentwood chairs designed by Yngve Ekström in 1956, and reintroduced for the hotel.



Stadshotell has 32 rooms and suites. **Christoph Kallweit**

The waitress continues, looking a little dreamy-eyed. “My family’s summer home is in the Stockholm archipelago. We have a boat; there are no cars on the island.” I comment wryly on her “perfect life” and she fervently agrees. “Is ‘idyllic’ the English word?” she says.

None of Södermalm’s vintage shops or interior design boutiques are open on Easter Sunday, though a smattering of cosy cake-filled cafes are. Yet even when I stop for *fika* (the Swedish tradition of taking a break for a treat and a beverage) at Johan & Nyström cafe, excited by the delivery of a single-origin pour-over coffee, everyone has a vaguely orphaned vibe.



The Bistro is open for service from early breakfast to dinner. **Christoph Kallweit**

The warmth I encounter from the staff at Stockholm Stadshotell, then, from a culture that's not traditionally known for its effusiveness, is not just appreciated but needed. They are grounded and confident, up for a chat when you want one, but gone when you don't.

It's the first hotel by restaurateurs Johan Agrell, Jon Lacotte and Dan Källström, already well-liked in Stockholm for advancing its rather stuffy dining scene from 2015 with the casual excellence of neighbourhood eateries such as Babette, Café Nizza and Schmaltz. The trio paired with creative director Fredrik Carlström and hotelier Ian Nicholson (Chateau Marmont, Soho Grand and The Standard) to launch a hotel that general manager David Bergling describes as "a unique project with lots of passion by people who love what they do".



The hotel has a bar, guest lounge, a courtyard garden restaurant and a sauna and cold plunge.

Christoph Kallweit

It's hardly a rave review, but modesty is the Scandinavian way. Every time I've visited, I have been re-told about Janteloven (The Law of Jante), 10 rules themed around the idea that "You are not to think you're anyone special, or that you're better than us."

Stockholm Stadshotell's art director, Anna Thonon, is French. She's ecstatic about working in a spot so rich in history, with engaged owners on site, and interior design she describes as "quite simple and neutral" making it "easy to build in layers from different places and inspirations".

As an outsider, she's also a student of the Swedish way. When I tell her I'm visiting the niche perfumery collective Stora Skuggan, and say they've warned me, "We rarely shine a light on us as individuals, preferring to let the worlds of our perfumes be the focal point", Thonon exclaims: "That's very Swedish!" She adds: "They like to appear humble but deep down they're very proud people."



The understated yet stylish interiors of the Stadshotell. **Christoph Kallweit**

Stadshotell is the first hotel Stora Skuggan has partnered with on bathroom amenities; an indication of its well-connected owner-operators. Indeed, the hotel acts as a window into old and new artisanship with, for example, its purchase of around 30 faceted glass vessels crafted exclusively by Anne Nilsson at Nybruk, the first design-driven glassworks to open in Sweden in 100 years.

For audiophiles, the excellence of the in-room wireless speakers, by Stockholm-based consumer electronics company Teenage Engineering, have me literally hearing parts of songs I've never heard before.

Yet for all of the hotel's artisanal excellence, owner-operator Carlström is clear about the main ingredient in its special sauce.

"The trend is to spotlight the hotel's designer, but does that really matter?" he says. "The true creators of great urban spaces are restaurateurs and Stockholm Stadshotell is one of the world's rare hotels shaped by them. The whole design and vibe is like a great restaurant with rooms."



The windows have slightly rippled panes, an old glassblowing techniques. **Henrik Lundell**

Indeed, the bistro, bar and restaurant are in the symmetrical centre of the building and are a truly vibrant space, even over Easter, with well-dressed locals coming and going, and consistently excellent food served from 7am until midnight.

The bar is powered by the passion of bar manager Andres Basile Leon for the exceptional gin of local producer Hernö. Here, I meet Anna Brolin, the television anchor on Sweden's largest commercial channel, TV4, and stylist Ann Sköld Wiklund. They're thrilled with their new local haunt and are already planning Brolin's birthday upstairs in Matsalen. "The courtyard will be a hot spot this summer to sit outside," says Wiklund.

The writer was a guest of Stockholm Stadshotell.

Need to know

- ◆ Rates | Cosy rooms from €325 (\$565) a night; penthouse suites (can sleep four) from €2500 (\$4357) a night. Rate includes the use of a private sauna and cold

plunge and access to an external gym.

- ◆ Dining | Room service offers full menu and wine cellar options and can be taken in a guest-only lounge setting. Matsalen is open for dinner Wednesday to Saturday.



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