



A slow boat to

Stockholm

Crossing Sweden on a 141-year-old steamship gives Barry Stone plenty of time to admire the scenery and enjoy a slower pace of life.

It was the tiniest space I'd ever been shoehorned into. And this was Bridge Deck! Two metres long and a metre and a bit wide, my cabin had two bunks, a wash basin, a shallow wardrobe and brass wall lamp. Alexander, a Russian-born cruise addict with 50 cruises under his belt told me it was the smallest cabin he'd ever had. But I wasn't complaining. Actually, it was wonderful. Everything was within my grasp, and through my window the farms and paddocks of rural Sweden, illuminated under a sun that was almost always there, drifted by. So close I could almost touch them, too.

I and 50 similarly snug and content

"others" were cruising the 192-kilometre Göta Canal from Gothenburg to Stockholm on *M/S Juno*, launched in 1874 and now Europe's oldest registered steamship still offering sleeping berths. Hans Christian Andersen and playwright Henrik Ibsen slept here. The canal, the jewel in the crown of Swedish engineering ever since it was completed in 1832, has 58 locks and was dug and blasted out of the earth over 22 years by 60,000 soldiers.

Its importance as a "highway" was short-lived due to the expansion of Sweden's railways in the 1850s, but that hardly matters now. What matters is that both

ship and canal have survived. And with few concessions to the passage of time.

The ship is tiny, just over 31 metres long with a beam of 6.6 metres, yet it looms large on this ribbon-like canal, the bottom and sides of which she occasionally scrapes. *Juno's* 29 cabins, all outside, are "1870s functional", my code for toilets and showers being shared. There is no television, internet or mobile reception, either. Blessed relief.

Instead we mingled or read or caught up with travel diaries. Some knitted or sat and slept in the sun on the bow, or under the awning on Shelter Deck. So if you have children, try to leave them at home.

With land excursions, we were spoiled rotten: the gorgeous 16th century town of Soderkoping, Karlsborg Fortress, the UNESCO World Heritage remains of the eighth-century Viking port of Birka, Sweden's oldest town. Every set of locks was a chance to disembark and explore rural communities and back roads. Cycling one of *Juno's* mountain bikes around the idyllic town of Berg, home to a set of eleven locks that nursed *Juno* down a whopping 18.8 metres into Lake Roxen, remains a treasured memory.

What I did most, though, was simply slow down; my mind captive to *Juno's* plodding pace, harnessed to its seductive rhythms.

Cruising the Göta Canal is to Sweden what visiting Uluru is to us. Everyone knows it's there. Everyone you speak to intends to do it. It's at the top of a lot of lists. Give yourself a memorable treat and put it at the top of yours, too. 🚲

PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKE LOUJAGE

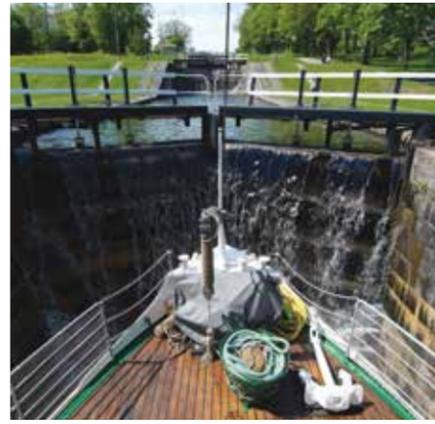


FACT FILE

CRUISE LINE: Göta Canal Steamship Company
VESSEL: *M/S Juno*
PASSENGER CAPACITY: 58
TOTAL CREW: 12
PASSENGER DECKS: 3
ENTERED SERVICE: 1874
TONNAGE: 254
FACILITIES: Dining room and lounge, covered aft deck with a view, shared toilet facilities and showers on each deck.
BOOKINGS: Four-day Göta Canal Classic Cruise, June to August 2016, is priced from \$2,507. Contact Melbourne-based tour company Fifty Degrees North on 1300 422821 or see fiftydegreesnorth.com

the VERDICT

Highs: Food was superb and sitting at the same table for each meal meant I quickly made friends.
Lows: Cabins are tiny – cramped even – with space for cases at a premium.
Best suited to: Easy independent voyage suitable for singles and couples.



Clockwise from top left: *M/V Juno* on the Göta Canal; dining on board; navigating one of the many locks along the route; cabin; cycling along the canal

