

Sweden National Day Special

Shared values create lasting ties

MAGNUS ROBACH
AMBASSADOR OF SWEDEN



Sweden is one of Europe's largest countries by area, characterized by diverse environments and climate, culture and traditions. With 97 percent of the land being uninhabited,

Sweden offers untouched nature and much room for creativity.

Creativity and curiosity has helped Sweden establish connections all around the world and has resulted in an open, globalized society. Through partnership and innovation, Sweden is now at the forefront in protecting the environment, in addition to promoting gender equality and human rights. Likewise, a big global presence,

through successful companies and cultural products from meatballs to music and the Lisa Larson ceramics that are so popular in Japan, shows that Swedish culture and design packs a punch.

The Swedes' relationship to nature; reflecting light, serenity and airiness — as well as accessibility and functionality — is not only represented in Swedish design, but also in some of the core values of Swedish society, such as openness and care for the environment.

The Swedish and Japanese share many values, creating long-lasting ties. Over the years, many outstanding people have paved the way for our 150-year history of friendship. Looking forward, a new generation of Japanese and Swedes hold the torch. There is a strong interest in Japanese culture — traditional and modern — among young Swedes. Some of them are currently active in Japan, promoting these friendly bonds in their everyday lives.



Kastellholmen, an island at the center of Stockholm's harbor. OLA ERICSON / IMAGEBANK.SWEDEN.SE

One such pioneer is the manga artist Asa Ekstrom. When she discovered the "Sailor Moon" anime on TV as a teenager, she was immediately hooked. Since then, her dedication to cartoons and drawing has made her a pioneer in Swedish manga. She is currently based in Tokyo, where she is publishing books and cartoons for a Japanese audience. Ekstrom recently released a new book in her series depicting a Scandinavian girl exploring Japan.

Oscar Brekell is the first Northern European in a small and exclusive club of non-Japanese who can call themselves Japanese tea instructors — a position he describes as being a sommelier for Japanese tea. Apart from a number of media appearances in Japan, he travels around the world to speak about Japanese tea.

Lisa Wallin is on a perpetual hunt for what she calls "deep Japan." As a Tokyo-based journalist and TV presenter, she wants to share more than what first meets the eye. Her articles cover a variety of aspects from tatami mat makers to why she finds Japan to be most charming in autumn. She finds her inspiration in things she stumbles upon throughout her travels across the country.

When deciding his life path, Johan Nilsson Bjork, or Sanyutei Jubei as he is known, found himself caught between his passion for acting and his interest in Japan. He discovered *rakugo* (comic storytelling), and it turned out to be the perfect combination of the two — the traditional comedy performance offered both immersion in Japanese culture and a route to the spotlight. Today he is gaining attention as one of the very few *rakugo* apprentices with a non-Japanese background.



Several Swedes with a strong interest in Japanese culture are active in the community. Clockwise from top left: Manga artist Asa Ekstrom; *rakugo* comic storyteller Johan Nilsson Bjork; journalist and TV presenter Lisa Wallin and Japanese tea instructor Oscar Brekell.

Klara Maiko
(BOTTOM left) /
YASUTAKA SANJO
(BOTTOM RIGHT)

Today we are celebrating Swedish National Day. I encourage everyone, Swedish and Japanese, who is a part of this exchange in any way, to celebrate the curiosity, openness and respect that have brought our two nations this close. I am certain that this bond will grow even stronger and that our exchange will bring more economic, scientific and cultural prosperity to both our nations.

This content was compiled in collaboration with the embassy. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the newspaper.

**Congratulations
on Sweden's National Day**

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