

A whole new world

Relocating from Auckland to Stockholm with three young children? Great move

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THIS PAGE Mel and Guillaume Chesneau and their children choose a real tree every year for their Stockholm apartment; the traditional straw goat underneath was bought at the markets in Gamla Stan (the old town) not long after their arrival in the city.

OPPOSITE "It was a very fresh -10°C the day we took this photo. This park is only a couple of minutes from home and it's where we take the children tobogganing. Behind us is the Stockholm City Hall," says Mel.



THIS PAGE The navy and white contemporary Aboriginal artwork on the wall is by the late Minnie Pwerle; the Water Lilies cushion on the right is by Swedish design company Fine Little Day; Mel bought the navy jute Nodi rug just before leaving New Zealand.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) Daughter Lou with a decorated ginger snap called pepparkakor. An adventljusstake, an Advent candelabra, lit in the window. Guillaume and Mel Chesneau with Lou, seven, Noam, nine, and Paolo, 11; "We have taken to fika, effectively a Swedish coffee break - the Swedes take it very seriously and workplaces break twice a day to socialise over coffee or tea," says Mel; it was Guillaume's idea to hang a collection of Bollard lamps by Menu over the table.



I didn't need any convincing when my husband Guillaume called to say that he'd been offered a transfer from Auckland to Stockholm. As a writer with a focus on interiors, Scandinavia certainly sounded appealing.

We flew into our new city in late September 2016 and spent our first evening at Haymarket, a glamorous art deco-inspired hotel in the heart of the downtown area. Gold Atollo lamps sat on tables in the foyer lounge; our room was decorated with a Gräshoppa floor lamp by Greta Grossman and Gubi Beetle chairs. It was a great introduction to Scandinavian interiors.

We settled into a big old apartment with high ceilings in the central island of Södermalm, an area that *Vogue* named a few years ago as one of the coolest neighbourhoods in the world.

The city of Stockholm is made up of 14 islands connected by bridges. It's an incredibly beautiful place that constantly takes my breath away.

We live on the fourth floor with huge windows, a blessing for the light. Nobody covers their windows here and we've grown used to seeing people across the street living their lives, knowing that they also see us.

Our dining room is huge, so we decided to make use of the bay window and create a sitting area. I love the wall panelling and the herringbone floor in this room. It has that old-world grand feeling. Redecorating your home is a national sport here, which has been great for us as we've found a lot of timeless design pieces to fill this spot at a very good price. Scouring auction sites, along with the endless travel possibilities, are our biggest temptations.

Swedish winters are known to be harsh and long, but I didn't quite grasp how bitterly cold they could get - reality hit not long after we arrived, in early November. It had snowed lightly a few days before, which people told me was rather early, however one morning we awoke to an enormous dump of snow. >

Mel's Swedish Christmas

One of my favourite Swedish traditions is Saint Lucia on 13 December. They say she brings light during the darkest days, along with saffron buns (there's a bun of some sort to celebrate almost anything here). There are processions in ancient churches around the country with choirs and candles. Then comes Lucia in a white dress with a red sash, with long blonde hair and a crown of real candles. The acoustics are something else and the richness and history will stay with me forever.



THIS PAGE Much of the furniture in the seating area in the bay window was found online; Mel's favourites are the Arne Norell Sirocco chair and the Eames LCM chair, next to each other under the windows; the green bowl on the table and hanging planter are by New Zealand ceramicist Gidon Bing. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left) Noam and Paolo in Paolo's bedroom. Amaryllis is Sweden's Christmas flower, says Mel; it's what you might give the host of a traditional glögg gathering during the Advent, when friends gather to drink mulled wine, served with saffron buns and ginger snaps with blue cheese; most homes here will have at least one Advent star lighting a window. "These buildings are typical of the houses and apartments you see around Stockholm, and the colour palette looks so pretty against the snow," says Mel.



The children were delighted. They put on their ski clothes and snow boots – something that all children wear here in the winter – and we set off early to school so that they could have a play. Halfway there, we received a message that school was cancelled. Then we learned that transport was out too, and the only way home was by walking over a long bridge through a blizzard. It was quite surreal and I did wonder what we were in for during the rest of the winter. It turns out that while it does mostly sit well below zero, a storm like that is rare.

In Stockholm, at the summer solstice, the sun begins to set around 11pm and rises at 3am, and it never truly gets dark. At this time, the Swedes celebrate the light with midsummer and crayfish parties. This past summer, Guillaume and I hiked along the Kungsleden above the Arctic Circle for four days under 24 hours of daylight. It was an unforgettable experience.

But of course in winter we get the opposite. The sun rises at 8.45am and sets at 2.45pm. Living here I've truly begun to understand why the Swedes are obsessed with decorating homes. Quite simply, they spend a great deal of time inside. While the word *hygge* is claimed by the Danes, it is put into practice throughout Scandinavia.

When I arrive home with the children after school, it's dark, so, like most people, as well as switching on the table and floor lamps dotted around the apartment, I've got into the habit of lighting candles and turning on the fairy lights on our balcony. It's quite lovely to see the twinkling lights in the neighbourhood; it's almost like a joint agreement to celebrate the season. I thought that I would find the dark difficult, but it's these rituals that make it quite special. ■

Q&A

This Christmas we'll be: Visiting the Christmas markets, tobogganing at our local park and ice-skating outdoors under fairy lights.

My decorating style: The French call it *bobo*, which is short for bourgeois bohemian.

Best walk: Along the northern shore of Södermalm island overlooking Kungsholmen. You get to see the Town Hall where they hold Nobel Prize dinners plus there's a high point along the way, famous for Instagram selfies under the midnight sun during the summer.

Best place for coffee: Kaffebar in Södermalm, which was the setting for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Mel Chesneau