

Luleaa: A Town That Defies Darkness

by Carol Coghill

TOWN LIFE in a harsh climate must, one imagines, inevitably be drab and dreary. One pictures its architecture as functional but graceless, its inhabitants as worthy but dour.

Luleaa, coastal capital of Sweden's largest county, Norrbotten, is there to prove one wrong. Close to the Arctic Circle and with a winter temperature that makes most southerners shudder even to think of, sometimes down to minus thirty-five degrees centigrade, it is still one of the gayest and most active communities in Sweden.

One of the reasons is doubtless its mushroom growth, for it has trebled its population to the present 30,000 in the last fifteen years and is still expanding. Many of its citizens are first generation immigrants from the wild and desolate Norrbotten countryside and

have not yet acquired a city-dweller's mentality.

If you live in Luleaa you are likely to be working either in the iron ore or timber industries (it has one of the most modern steel mills in the country), in shipping, shipbuilding or engineering. For though Luleaa harbor is icebound five months of the year, the town has since the end of the last century been the main port for shipping the ore from Sweden's richest mining areas, and it also receives much of the timber from her vast northern forests.

Your home may be in one of the century-old red painted wooden houses that give the town such a bright welcoming look, or in the ultra modern blocks of flats that ring the suburbs. In either case you will have a beautiful view free of charge, of the Gulf of Bothnia stretching away on one side and the distant snowcapped mountains on the other. And

being a citizen of Luleaa, you will have a life enriched by colorful tradition as well as by modern invention.

The traditions have deep roots. Until the early Middle Ages, the Lapps roamed alone with their herds of reindeer in the country of Norrbotten.

When the Swedish fur-traders began to settle along the coast they devoted large sums of money to building churches to which people would travel from all over the North. Special housing had to be provided for those who came long distances and thus there grew up communities called "church villages," cottage settlements which were inhabited only sporadically. This is how Luleaa grew up and the old town, "Gammelstad," with its magnificent fifteenth century church, still fulfill's its ancient functions, although Luleaa itself has moved eastwards, as a result of the gradual emergence of land from the sea, an after-effect of the Ice Age.

Though modern communications have largely solved the problem of long-distance travel and secularization has undermined the religious basis of the church villages, people still gather from far and wide on feast days and celebrate weddings, christenings and funerals in this medieval setting.

The fact of inheriting the trappings of a rich past does not prevent the people of Luleaa from living fully and energetically in the present. If you come to the town you are in fact more likely to be shown the ultra-modern Shopping Center before being taken on a visit to the Old Town.

THIS SEVEN-STORY building, covered by an aluminum dome, was built by private enterprise in 1955, and has already caused quite a change in the life of the inhabitants. For it is nothing less than another "town," as unique in its way as "Gammelstad." Built on the lines of an American shopping center, it has been shaped by its architect, an Englishman Ralph Erskine, with an eye to Swedish habits and ideas, one might even say, dreams.

When you walk into "Shopping," as it is fondly called by the locals, you will still find yourself on a "street" with the shops lining it rather in the style of an Oriental Bazaar. But it will be a street with an even temperature of plus eighteen degrees centigrade, and the southern atmosphere will be still further emphasized by soft music and bright lights. You will even be able to discover miniature squares of the piazza type with fountains and cafes. There are none of the es-

calators that give such an effect of hurry and bustle to the most modern shopping emporia; you go upwards by means of staircases of a few steps at a time.

The human gregariousness that was the basis of the creation of Gammelstad today flourishes in "Shopping," where often up to 25,000 visitors are registered in a single day. Some come, of course, for serious shopping among the fifty odd stores, others simply to lounge in a cafe. In the evenings the building is used for political or religious meetings, dances, art shows, mannequin parades. The boys and girls of Luleaa's many schools love the warm, relaxed atmosphere under the big aluminum dome. As a result "Shopping" has had its fair share of the "teddy boy" problem which seems inseparable from modern city life. Different solutions are now being offered in the form of the creation of youth councils and clubs with headquarters in the building.

While Gammelstad provides amusement and interest at the Protestant church festivals the year round, and "Shopping" gives the city a winter Riviera Nature herself also supplies activities and entertainment during a large part of the year. The surrounding archipelago

offers unlimited facilities for boating and swimming, the great Lule river fishing, and the forests and hills of the hinterland marvelous skiing areas.

In Luleaa, for all its up-to-datedness, the winds still carry a taste of the wilderness—it is not, after all so far to the woods where bears and wolves still make rare appearances. Emissaries from these regions — the Lapps in their brilliant blue and red costumes — can often be seen in the streets. Mostly, however these proud nomad people keep to the hills. Anybody who wants to know more about their way of life, without actually following them there, can drop into the Norrbotten museum, which has extensive charts of their wanderings and a remarkable collection of Lapp chattels and costumes.

The strange joy of living in this town bordering on the wilderness is perhaps most poignant on a winter night, when the snow glistens coldly under skies shimmering with the strange radiance of the Northern lights, to which the neon blaze of the town, with the shopping center in the middle, gives out an answering brilliance. You will feel the triumph of defying the cold and the long dark winter days, knowing that the reward,

though far off, is awaiting you: a few hectic weeks of summer when the whole countryside will burst into leaf and flower and you will be able to enjoy the "sunlit nights" of the northern summer with day merging into day, separated only by a few hours of twilight.

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Lilliputian Logic

One evening grandmother was reading to four-year-old Cheryl from a book for little folks. The next evening Cheryl brought the book and laid it on her grandmother's knee with this request: "Talk to it."

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