

## **An Introduction to Scandinavia**

The three Scandinavian Kingdoms -- Denmark, Norway, and Sweden -- together with Finland and Iceland make up a region whose inhabitants call it "Norden", meaning simply "The North."

Located as far north in the Old World as Alaska is in the New, Norden experiences a seasonal cycle which is marked by exuberant summers of unending day but whose long, dark winters can be brightened only by moments of warmth and light kindled by the human spirit. The annual turnings of the sun in the heavens were first witnessed in the monuments of Stone Age farmers and later commemorated in the bonfires of Viking voyagers. So long had Norden been held in the icy embrace of the glaciers that time-dimmed folk memories of woolly mammoths may have lived on in myths of large, shaggy-haired trolls with long noses. So remote lay these northern lands that the church of Rome did not reach them with the story of Christmas for more than ten centuries -- and when it did, its own imperfect calendar had slipped so badly that it placed the winter solstice on December 13th. Small wonder then that these northern folk blended the legend of a virtuous Sicilian maid with the return of the sun to create the festival of lights that we know today as Sankta Lucia. And hardly less surprising was their adoption of Mediterranean food and drink with which to celebrate -- mulled wine with spices and fruit and plump saffron rolls rich with raisins.

The Nordic countries today are working models of economic, social, and political democracy whose traditions of personal liberty and representative government reach back beyond the Vikings. Although their environment is marginal and their resources are limited, their arduous labor on farms, in forests and mines, and upon the seas that surround them has produced one of the highest and most uniform standards of living enjoyed by any people on earth. The annual awarding of the Nobel prizes is but one token of their commitment to international peace and intellectual achievement, and their financial aid to developing nations and disaster-stricken regions is unmatched within the global community. The countries of Norden are truly a manifestation of the human spirit at its best!

(Written as a foreword to the program for the Christmas Revels, 1999.)

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