I am back from Stockholm, Sweden, and I feel charged up, confident, and view my world through a set of different glasses. The four months spent away from home, experiencing life in a totally different country, being part of the Swedish way of life, has indeed enriched me.

The first sight that struck me on my arrival was the charming Stockholm city landscape. Buildings situated along rivers and lakes, separated by bridges, exude a sense of tranquility that I have not experienced anywhere else in Europe. I never fail to marvel at the landscape, no matter the season, or the time of day.

Sweden is renowned for its comprehensive social welfare system, a system of providing for the elderly and the sick. It was incredible witnessing the pervasiveness of such a system, totally different from Singapore’s concept of self-providence. “Baby-friendly, kids-friendly, elderly-considerate, cyclists-friendly and environmental-friendly” are some words that I use to describe how the entire country has been organized, in terms of its education system, transport system as well as other aspects of daily life. The transport system would be a good aspect of daily life that reflects the high quality of life, the orderliness and the importance of punctuality in Sweden. I was particularly struck and amazed by the bio-gas public buses that would adjust its height by tilting downwards for passengers to board the bus, and then reverting back to its original height when the door closes. Thus making it easy for elderly people and for parents with baby-prams, to board the buses. This is in contrast to Singapore’s public buses where I recall seeing elderly people struggling to board or alight from buses because of the height difference between the bus and the ground. In addition, all modes of public transport are extremely punctual. If the timetable displays “12:51”, it truly means “12:51”, not a minute more or less, which explains why I can often be seen dashing out of the door at 12:50. Also, the streets and roads are designed with paths demarcated for cyclists, so that they are able to commute conveniently and safely.

Sweden is a costly place to live in. Consumption taxes can go up to 25% while taxes on income of a whooping 30% are a norm! Even though the cost of living is high, citizens do enjoy a high standard of living. Due to the high costs of dining out, most students cooked and ate at home. And that included me. At home, I never had to cook. But over in Sweden, I had no choice but to learn. Learning how to cook is perhaps one of the most valuable skills learnt during my time spent away from home. However, I soon noticed people starting to invite each other for meals and parties. The kitchen turned out to be a gathering place – to cook dinners, to chat, to have large corridor parties or dinner parties. Potluck dinners, otherwise known as “kitchen parties” became a norm. Friends began to surf the Internet for recipes of food that they had a craving for. Thus, although miles away from home, I have had many steamboat dinners, eaten Chinese dumplings, pineapple tarts, “roti-prata” and yes, even “goreng pisang” right in my own kitchen. Furthermore if one were to walk along the streets in Lappkärrsberget on a Friday or Saturday night, there was bound to be at least one corridor party being held. Anyone who wanted to join was more than welcomed to join in the fun. All they had to do was to bring their own beer or wine. The weekend dinner parties were the highlight of my week. I have not had a single dinner party where I left feeling disappointed and bored. With such great company, it was impossible to feel bored.
In my opinion, the Swedes’ are diligent and well groomed people, and may come across as a tad boring, reserved and too trusting. However, this surface appearance is shed when one comes to know them better, revealing a party-loving, fun-loving and high-spirited people. From my observation, the Swedes are a nature-loving lot. During my walks through the woods in the autumn, I saw people horse-riding, strolling through the woods, fishing and picnicking along the lake.

The Swedish nature and scenery is an aspect of Sweden I will have fond memories of. Plucking berries and other fruits are a norm as well. I derived great pleasure from the long commuter train rides and public buses rides that travel in the suburbs. The scenery in the suburbs and the numerous archipelagoes is serene, still and almost undisturbed; a sight which is rare back in Singapore. I cherished the long jogs through the woods, taking in the scent of the woods, watching the sunrays shine through the foliage, gazing at the sheep or the hot air balloon in the sky. With an abundance of nature, it is little wonder that people want to be so close to nature.

I was thrilled to see so many young children and babies everywhere! It was refreshing seeing so many pregnant ladies, as well as parents pushing prams everywhere. Dads in swanky business suit pushing prams, or taking their children to school was very common. These sights that I had to get used to, is testimony of the importance and effectiveness of gender equality measures. At company presentations, students often wanted to know the male-female employee ratio. I later learnt from a research paper that Swedish men did the most household chores in comparison to their male counterparts in other countries.

I attended a Chinese church in Stockholm, thus having the opportunity to interact with the Asians who had settled down in Sweden, outside SSE or the Lappis community. It was a chance to see how the Chinese immigrants were attracted by the quality of life in the Nordics, especially Sweden, and had settled and now call Sweden home. I was invited to a few Chinese homes for Chinese festivals such as the Mid-Autumn Festival and even for Christmas. I have been touched by their hospitality and warmth.

Where food is concerned, there seems to be a nation-wide obsession with eating healthy food. One did not have to feel awkward about ordering a salad or a sandwich during a meal, something that is quite different from Singapore, where to do so would be seen as being too health-conscious. Snacking on apples, bananas and other fruits are a norm. I found it extremely intriguing that bananas was the preferred snack in exams. The period that I was in Sweden gave me a chance to experience the Crayfish Party, Santa Lucia and Christmas. All had typical Swedish fare – Crayfish, Pepparkakor, Glogg and of course, Snapps.

Swedish is definitely an interesting language. I liken it to having a singsong
melody. Most people are effectively bilingual even though Swedish is used predominantly in conversations. At supermarkets, it was fun and interesting, to say the least, trying to decipher the contents inside packages, tins and boxes. It did not help that nearly everything was in Swedish, resulting in me buying weird smelling and tasting food. We gradually learnt through trial and error, as well as by relying on pictures to figure out the contents of packages. One initial difficulty encountered was in attempting to use Internet Banking. Useful information on websites was often in Swedish, which was quite frustrating in the beginning. However, after some exposure to the language, it was possible to make intelligent guesses as to what was being written.

I loved the school I attended – Handelshögskolan i Stockholm, otherwise known as Stockholm School of Economics. It is a relatively small private university but nonetheless dynamic and fun-filled. The students are driven and ambitious, which showed in their attitude towards group projects and lectures. I remember particularly a Management Consulting project where our task was to come up with a proposal within 24 hours. Our group began the discussion at 1pm, resting only to take occasional breaks and a dinner and wrapped up at near midnight when we completed everything. Even though everyone was mentally and physically exhausted, each person was extremely motivated to produce a logical and well thought-through proposal. I was impressed by the way my fellow group members drew on their areas of specialization – Economics, Marketing and Finance to contribute towards a well-rounded proposal. When working in projects, rarely did I have to worry about group members producing substandard work, or shirking their responsibility, which made project work a tremendous joy.

Another aspect of the curricula at Handelshögskolan I enjoyed was the way theory was combined with real-life situations. Guest speakers from the industry, or from other universities within, or outside of Sweden were often invited to speak to us. I have had the opportunity to hear from personnel from Booz Allen Hamilton, Arkwright, SAS, Malmo Aviation, American Airlines, SKF and Agria, amongst the many others. Hearing from figures in the industry brought a dimension of realism into what was being taught and learnt in class. Furthermore, students were uninhibited in voicing their opinions or in asking questions. The close links between the business community and the student population, as well as the current students and alumni, was something that impressed me. I appreciated the company presentations, and Career Placement feature on the school’s website where international internship and employment opportunities for the students and alumni were provided.

I had the opportunity to travel to Gotland, Norway, Czech Republic as well as Frankfurt during my time away from Singapore. Each time I headed back to Stockholm from these countries, I think “Hurray! I am going home!” and “home” meant Sweden. Indeed, Sweden will always hold special meaning to me – the natural beauty, the city landscape, Swedish way of life, Handels, and above all, the people. Välkommen till Sweden!