



Report on the study tour of Visby

Tomasz Borucki (Poland), Maia Lordkipanidze (Georgia), Ivana Medvedova (Slovakia), Laura Navackaite (Lithuania), Aikaterina Ntizioka (Greece), Inese Sirava (Latvia), Ela Strelezcka (Poland), Anders Tivell (Sweden).

1. The character of the area

Visby is the capital of Gotland. It has a population of about 22 000, which is 38% of the population of the island. This population is growing every year, as people from the mainland move to Gotland.

Visby is centred on a fine mediaeval walled town, which has World Heritage status. It is also the main port on the island, served by large ferry-boats from the Swedish mainland and from other countries around the Baltic. Thus almost all visitors to Gotland arrive and depart through Visby, which gives the town an advantage in attracting visitors to stay in its hotels, guesthouses and other accommodation and to enjoy its attractions and shops etc.

2. The case studies

2.1 The Mediaeval Festival

The Mediaeval Festival in Visby is a major event in the tourist calendar of Gotland. It takes place, each year, in the first or second week of the August, a timing which is chosen in order to prolong the high tourist season. Every year the number of tourists for the festival increases: this year it attracted 150,000 visitors, which is about a quarter of the annual total of visitors to Gotland.

We heard the story of the creation of the Festival from Viveca Schwartz, who was one of the team who initiated it. She came to Gotland in 1967 from Stockholm. At first, she worked in the tourist office as a guide, and also in adult education. Being a "people's educator", she was keen to make the cultural heritage more available to a broader audience. Visby is a spectacular mediaeval city, and yet the local people seemed to lack any knowledge of history. With six others, she started a study circle about mediaeval history. She encouraged people to dress in mediaeval clothes, to eat food from that era, to live the life of mediaeval people.

The Festival grew out of this. It was organised by a Foundation, and based on voluntary work, with a small subsidy from the government. Officials in Stockholm were easier to persuade than the local people, who were afraid of changes and didn't believe that it could work. However it did work, a tradition was set, and the festival has grown continuously since then, with the recent addition of a horse tournament. It is still run largely by volunteers. Decisions are made by a Board of seven people, including Viveca Schwartz. Four employees work on the festival all year round, organising, planning and producing the brochures, while a number of work groups prepare the theatre, tournaments and all the programmed activities. Each year new activities are planned, to attract children and families. They receive a small subsidy from the Gotland municipality.

Viveca Schwartz said that the Festival is still affected by many problems. It depends heavily on work by volunteers, who may get fed up and quit at any time. Some local people still do not trust the Foundation. There is a lack of interest in history. Local people and some

media blame the festival for all its negative aspects. Finance is always a problem : there is no financial support from the Tourist Association, and little support from local entrepreneurs, who don't want to co-operate because they don't see the profit. However, several thousands SKr comes from donations of local people, and half of the stalls in the Medieval Market are run by local people, the other half by people coming from the mainland.

2.2 Kneippbyn, a popular tourist resort

Kneippbyn is a family-based enterprise, which was started at the beginning of the 1990's. It has evolved, through good leadership and personal skills, into a highly profitable tourism business, attracting about 100,000 person-nights per year, which is over 10% of Gotland's total.

The enterprise includes two campsites; a hotel and guesthouse; the Aqua-Park; and an adventure park for children. There are 200 employees, of which about 70% are local inhabitants. The target groups of visitors are families with children, and young people.

The season for visitors is essentially a two-month period, from mid-June to mid-August. Marketing is done through advertisements in the Gotland Guide, in newspapers, and in specialist magazines such as those aimed at motor-cyclists or campers. The enterprise is not a member of the Gotland Tourist Association.

Looking to the future, the company intends to organise special events such as motor-cycle races, and to focus on making the island special for children. They face tough competition from the Baltic States.

2.3 The unit for regional development

We met Carl-Johan Lowenberg, the head of the unit for regional development in Gotland Municipality. This municipality was formed in 1971 through the merger of all the small municipalities on the island. At the same time, the municipality took over the duties of the county council with regard to health care, the residential college for adult education, public transport and regional development. Thus, in Gotland, the municipality is responsible for regional development, whereas in other parts of Sweden this responsibility rests with the county council. There is a small budget for regional development.

Tourism is as an important industry for Gotland. The number of visitors increases every year. Most of the visitors come from other parts of Sweden, mainly from the Stockholm region. Agriculture is also significant, because most of the island is rural.

The municipality's aim is to transform Gotland into a sustainable society – an advanced 'Eco-municipality'. It has set short-term and long-term goals to achieve this. Environmental awareness is increasing among the island's population. This is evident, for example, in the increasing amount of waste collected for recycling and the decreasing amount of hazardous waste.

The municipality's vision for the future of Gotland embraces the following concepts :

- Increase in population from 58,000 to 65,000
- Creation of 500 new jobs, mainly in private services, information technology, tourism and advanced production based on the natural resources of Gotland
- Preservation of the natural and cultural heritage
- Improved communication
- Increased exchange with surrounding regions
- Gotland as a cultural meeting place in the Baltic Sea
- Educational levels at least at national average

- A balance in development, between Visby and the countryside.

Gotland has a higher percentage of small companies (less than 20 employees) than any other county in Sweden. It wishes to sustain this lead. Entrepreneurs in Gotland can receive help to develop their companies, e.g. 25% grants to rural tourism enterprises, up to 50% for modern equipment for firms based in Visby.

2.4 Gotland Resor travel agency

We met Inger Harlev, owner of the Gotland Resor travel agency. This business was started in 1979 as a small family-based enterprise, renting cottages for tourists and then bus trip excursions around Gotland. After that, the business was extended to making arrangements for private customers and for groups. In 1991 they opened a travel agency, handling reservations for ferries for private and business travels. In 1993, this was extended to serve groups, school groups, and conferences. In 1994, a call centre was opened in the countryside for handling reservations.

The company handles the reservations for many farm tourism enterprises, and for the owners of 380 holiday apartments and cottages in Gotland, all of which meet a fairly high standard set by the company. They also handle bookings for some local restaurants, and for the ferry company and Swedish railways. They put together packages for tourists, both pre-booked and tailor-made, in co-operation with Swedish tour operators. They send many school groups and cyclists to Kneippbyn (see case study 2.2). During the Mediaeval Festival (case study 2.1) they make packages for visitors, including items such as rental of clothes and tournament tickets, and they publicise the event.

They keep statistics on a daily basis, showing the volume of ferry reservations and accommodation bookings, and the demand for their own packages compared to packages of other tour operators. Every quarter, they prepare comparative figures for Swedish and foreign tourists. They also measure the number of visitors, local and foreign, to their homepage. These records show that 80% of visitors to Gotland come from Sweden. Significant numbers come also from Finland and Germany, and the German tourists stay longer than the Swedes on average.

The company's employees are on a fixed monthly salary, and can also earn bonuses of up to 2000 SKr per month related to volumes of reservations above a certain threshold. The company provides training for them.

The company has formal links with four other companies - Gotland Conference and Tourist Service, GTS Bokningsservice AB, Travelnet Gotland and Swedenbooking. It is a member of Travelnet Sweden, which involves 70 companies.

Looking to the future, the company is focusing on the plans to introduce two new larger ferries now being built in China. These fast vessels will offer the advantage that passengers will not have to travel during the night, and will be able to make one-day trips to Gotland or Stockholm. This will help the company to compete with other companies, and to contribute to the goal set by the Gotland municipality to attract 1 million visitors a year within 3 years. Inger Harlev said that the company is aware of the dangers of mass tourism : that is why they take care of carrying capacity. The number of tourists on Gotland will not be higher than 70,000 people at one time. In her opinion, there are more positive than negative impacts of tourism development.

(See the reports on study tours of Fårö (case study 2.1) and North West Gotland (case study 2.2) for descriptions of the farmers' cabins scheme initiated by the Gotland Resor travel agency, working with the farmers' union.)

2.5 Women's cooperative

The Visby Women's Cooperative runs a delightful shop, which offers everything from lambskin to tie-holders, also handicrafts of different kinds including leather, wool, wood, artistic metalwork, textiles and ceramics. It also contains a variety of food products from Gotland, such as jams, fruit drinks and honey.

The initial idea was to have a shop where a group of women could sell their own home-made products. At first there were 30 women, now the cooperative has 15 members. To be a member, each must have her own business and be from Gotland. Two of them are farmers, offering accommodation to visitors. They have their own rules, including a rota of attendance at the shop; and regular meetings during which they discuss problems, new issues, new products, quality standards, etc. Attendance at these meetings is obligatory : if a member misses a meeting, she must do an extra stint at the shop. 10% of the profits from the shop is spent on rent and maintenance.

The shop is publicised in the Gotland Guide, and also on the Website of the Gotland Tourist Association. They co-operate with the Gotland Association of Shopkeepers and with the skin industry on the mainland. They do not participate as a group at the Mediaeval Festival, but some of them have their own stalls there. The municipality supports the cooperative with a small subsidy, and they receive a small amount of money from the European Union for training. From time to time, the members attend courses in economics, English, business management etc.

The cooperative does not wish to expand, because it would mean more work and the need for paid employees. They do not want to change anything.

2.6 Altingi Arts and Crafts Centre

At Altingi is a monastery, dating from the 11th century, which is now an arts and crafts centre, incorporating a renowned theatre which offers summer plays such as Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in Swedish.

Altingi, the placename, means a meeting point. In mediaeval times, when Gotland was divided into twenty small districts, meetings of people for the whole island were held here four times a year. A contract was then made with France to build a monastery. During the 20th century the buildings were in military use, a secret place which the public could not enter. When the Air Force left, in the 1990s, there was discussion about what to do with the place. It was not easy to find a new use, because the buildings were protected as historic monuments, to which no permanent changes or additions could be made.

After some years of debate, local people made an agreement with the Swedish State to develop it for cultural activities. People were very enthusiastic, and many different activities were organised. Much effort and money went into improving the infrastructure. At first, the municipality gave a grant to cover the rent, but they have ceased to do so now because of pressure on their finances. The buildings are run by an Association, which now has about 150 members, who pay a membership fee of 100 SKr per year. The Board meets once a month to discuss marketing, quality control, problems and ideas. They use public questionnaires to find out what activities people want in the buildings.

The buildings are opened all August and at weekends during September in order to prolong the season. Various courses for children are organised, such as painting classes. Students from the University of Gotland University have prepared studies of the history of the buildings, and the story is told through signs, exhibitions and a CD. Various traditional

activities are organised, like apple days with a chef's competition, sheep days and Christmas markets.

The number of visitors to the buildings is increasing. They are mostly local tourists, also from Scandinavian countries and Germany.

Although it is a well-known place and has many visitors, there is a big problem with the finances of the centre due to the lack of money for maintenance costs. The enterprise depends almost wholly on voluntary work : for this reason, they cannot find easily partners who are really interested in the development of the area.

Looking to the future, the Association is planning to build a permanent theatre and to develop the rest of the site. They would like to build a hotel or guesthouse, but this is difficult due to the strict preservation laws. They will offer more activities for children, such as painting rooms and games.

3. The group's reflections on the study tour

Tourism has become a major sector of Visby's economy. Dynamic changes have been made. Many unique tourism products are offered, including the well-known Medieval Festival.

Our reflection on the Festival is that the organisers are still prisoners of their own ideas of education and learning, they are not profit-makers. We would advise them to try to bring powerful people together and make them feel special.

Tourism entrepreneurs in Visby speak good English. But this is a bit ironic, because their marketing material seems to be aimed mainly at visitors from Sweden, Norway and Germany. There is very little marketing material in English, which is a big disadvantage, particularly for visitors to the Mediaeval Festival.

The people we spoke to seem to be aware of the need to protect the island from mass tourism. This is also understood by the Municipality, whose vision is of Gotland as an Eco-municipality (the leaflet promoting this initiative is one of few in English and is very nice and interesting). The system of financial support for enterprises appears to be well-known and often used by local people.

Some of the enterprises co-operate effectively with each other and synergies do exist. However, we feel that there is lack of communication among Gotlanders in general. We could see that many local people are afraid of changes and of taking action towards providing tourists with modern and fresh alternatives. On the other hand, they are willing to learn, which is very important to gain courage to start an enterprise.

We see the scope for greater education in the field of tourism; for improved communication; for a greater degree of synergy between different enterprises; for efforts to extend the tourism season; for innovation and an open-minded attitude