



Various services are offered by entrepreneurs in the Stockholm Archipelago.



Margareta Stenbock von Rosen on Ornö is investing in an archipelago hotel.



Britt-Marie Ahnell on Utö juggles numerous jobs.



Karin Almlöf on Sandhamn is a fifth-generation business owner.

3 islands — 3 entrepreneurs

Jacks-of-all-trades keep the Stockholm Archipelago alive

For a few hectic weeks each summer, sparsely inhabited islands in the Stockholm Archipelago are transformed into coveted destinations for vacationers. For permanent residents who make their livelihood here, running a businesses in the seaside environment entails great challenges.

We have met three entrepreneurs on three different islands, with diverse conditions but a common vision – keeping the archipelago alive.

by **Susanna Lidström**



With 15 employees, Margareta Stenbock von Rosen's Ornö Sjötrafik is the island's largest employer.

Margareta Stenbock von Rosen on Ornö:

The car ferry is the lifeblood of the island

Now she is investing in an archipelago hotel

The mild morning sun sparkles warmly on the lapping waves as the Ebba ferry docks at the Ornö jetty after a half-hour trip from the mainland on Dalarö. A handful of cars roll down the ramp towards the peace and quiet of the largest island in Stockholm's southern archipelago. Ornö is about 14 kilometers long and up to six kilometers wide.

The road south leads through the forest and fields, past a white wooden church and the venerable Sundby Farm – a manor and former entailed estate¹ that has been in the Stenbock family for six generations, since the middle of the 18th century. A few more kilometers to the west, the gravel road comes to an end at the shore of a protected bay. This is the location of the newly established Ornö Skärgårdshotel. The long red building also houses the offices of Ornö Sjötrafik AB. Margareta Stenbock

von Rosen heads both operations, as well as the company Lindviken Förvaltning, which handles property management, rental and forestry operations on the family's extensive landholdings.

"Running a hotel on Ornö has long been a dream of mine, and a few years ago I thought to myself, 'It's now or never.' It took a bit more time than I imagined, what with all the permits and bureaucracy related to building permits and the like, but last year we opened our doors and couldn't have hoped for a better start than the record-breaking heat of the summer of 2018. We were fully booked all the time, despite the fact that we hadn't had time to market ourselves very much," says Margareta Stenbock von Rosen as she shows *Baltic Worlds* around the premises.

Offices and conference rooms are located on one end of the building, and nine double rooms (each with a tiled shower and toilet) occupy the opposite wing. In the middle are the kitchen and the restaurant, which offers direct access to the communal terrace that runs along the water's edge.



Margareta Stenbock von Rosen.

“There used to be a sawmill here. It was fully operational when I was a child in the 1960s, but after that it fell into disuse for many years. The prior existence of a building on the property was crucial to getting permission to build,” says Margareta Stenbock von Rosen, who thinks that the beach protection rules in the archipelago need to be loosened up to make it easier to build and renovate on the island.

IN HER OPINION, the general ban on building closer less than 100 to 300 meters from the water (depending on the conditions of previously constructed buildings) makes it difficult to attract more people to live and work here.

“The proximity to the sea is the big selling point. Here on Ornö there are also large untouched areas of land and nature reserves, which means that public access to active outdoor life would not be significantly limited by new construction in a few more parts of the island,” says Margareta Stenbock von Rosen.

However, as far as the hotel is concerned, she is grateful for the support that the authorities have been able to provide in allowing her to realize her dream. Through the Swedish Board of Agriculture, she sought and was granted certain financial assistance from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. She also feels that both the municipality and the county administrative board were very helpful in the long process that was required to get all the permits in place – for everything from the construction of the building itself to wastewater technology, water purification, and food handling in the restaurant.

“They saw the need and understood the point of our investment in the tourism industry. Overnight accommodation with a good standard of service creates jobs and opens up the archipelago for more visitors. There have previously been holiday rentals and some bed & breakfasts, but we are Ornö’s first hotel,” says Margareta Stenbock von Rosen.

LIKE HER PARENTS, who saw the number of permanent residents decline from the 1950s onwards, she wants Ornö to be a vibrant place all year round. The ferry connection with the mainland plays an important role, and a young promising politician named Olof Palme² actually played a role in its establishment. In the late 1960s, he was the Minister of Transport and Communications. At a dinner party he bumped into his old classmate Ebba Stenbock – who grew up in the city and moved to Ornö when she married Margareta’s father.

“Palme joked that he’d heard that Mom had ended up on an uninhabited island, and Mom responded that a state-run car ferry was needed to increase access. She told him about how difficult it was to get functional communications, and Palme, who

was a man of action, said ‘Call me tomorrow morning and we’ll see what we can do,’” says Margareta Stenbock von Rosen, who was ten years old at the time and remembers it all as a fun hula-laloo.

OLOF PALME URGED Ebba Stenbock to bring some islanders and summer guests to an official lobby meeting at the offices of the Swedish Parliament, where they presented their case to the minister and a number of expert ferry specialists. In the opinion of the experts, the distance was too great to justify a state-run ferry. Instead, another idea came to fruition a few years later.

All the property owners on the island established a community association which acted as the responsible authority for ferry traffic, and the government subsequently granted subsidies covering 80 percent of the costs of running the ferries. The remainder was financed with fees for vehicles and passengers.

“Ornö Sjötrafik was started in 1970. Mom and Dad became entrepreneurs, bought two car ferries and managed the traffic on behalf of the community association. A few years earlier, Dad managed to get permission to parcel out and sell 350 vacation home properties from their landholdings, which provided the necessary initial capital for the ferry business. All the other assets were locked into the entailed estate,” explains Margareta Stenbock von Rosen.

The risk of a reduction in state aid to the community association is constantly imminent. Yet so far the ferry services are still run according to the same arrangement, and with 15 employees Ornö Sjötrafik is the island’s largest employer.

The frequency of services has increased significantly since the 1970s, and the ferry now makes ten to twelve crossings a day, all year round.

“We transport just over 70,000 cars and 150,000 passengers a year. The employees do a fantastic job ensuring that the ferry service runs smoothly, even during the tough winter months. Our vision has always been to make it easier for people to live on Ornö, and the ferry is essential to making that work,” says Margareta Stenbock von Rosen. She points out that it only takes an hour and a half to get here by car from central Stockholm.

TODAY, ORNÖ HAS about 300 residents, and up to ten times as many when the summertime visitors take up residence in their vacation homes. The island has a school, a district museum, and a minibus service, as well as a burgeoning business community with handicraft and service industries including a petrol station, a bakery, a beachfront cafe and electric mini taxis.

As a major property owner on the island, Margareta Stenbock von Rosen has felt a particular responsibility to contribute to the



The ferry makes ten to twelve crossings a day all year round and transports 150,000 passengers and 70,000 cars a year.

island's development and persuade more people to move here, preferably families with children who will breathe life into the school, which both Margareta and her two children (now adults) attended.

However, attractive locations for building vacation homes are in short supply and property prices are high, making it virtually impossible for a young family with a normal income to buy a house on Ornö. Since Margareta Stenbock von Rosen wants the island to be a bustling place all year round, she began to examine the options. Through Lindviken Förvaltning AB, she and her husband Ulric von Rosen have renovated about 20 old summer cottages in their housing stock in recent decades, upgrading them to a permanent home standard that allows them to be rented to year-round residents. This has led to a slight increase in the number of inhabitants on the island.

"Some of the families commute to jobs on the mainland, while others have found employment here. With a growing visitor industry, there's an opportunity for more people to start their own businesses here, but you also have to dare to take that leap. Thanks to the car ferry, you can try to combine life here on the island with a job in the city," says Margareta Stenbock von Rosen. She stresses how important it is to establish a functional everyday life for the whole family when one chooses to settle here.

"Personally, I was fortunate enough to marry a man who understands that Ornö is the center of the world," she adds with a smile.

MARGARETA'S COMMITMENT to the local community is clear, and in all her businesses she exclusively employs people from the island. In addition to the 15 who work with the ferry, the hotel has a year-round staff and five extra employees during the summer season. The main criteria for recruiting staff is that they must be both flexible and humble:

"You have to be prepared to chip in wherever you're needed. I make beds and help in the kitchen to make sure that our guests always get the best possible service. It's also that variety that makes the job and life as a business owner so much fun. I seldom sit still," declares Margareta Stenbock von Rosen. ✕

references

- 1 An entailed estate is a decree, usually enshrined in a will, which stipulates that certain property must be handed down through a family or group of people, without being divested, and in a certain specified order (usually according to birthright, with a preference for male offspring). Nowadays, most countries do not allow the creation of entailed estates, and in several countries the existing ones have been done away with, or will soon be abolished. The primary purpose of the formation of an entailed estate was to ensure that the property was transferred to the next generation without being divided and thereby reduced.
- 2 Olof Palme led the Social Democratic Party and was the Prime Minister of Sweden until his death. He was murdered in central Stockholm 1986.

Britt-Marie Ahnell on Utö:

Holiday rentals, conferences, tourist offices, and postal contracts

To manage the seasonal variations, she juggles numerous jobs

The contrasts are clear. On a frosty February day, the guest harbor is peaceful and quiet. Yet on sunny summer days, Utö's largest jetty (where the passenger ferries from the mainland dock) absolutely bubbles with entrepreneurship. Cafes, restaurants, bakeries and activity organizers present their enticing offers to the approximately 200,000 seasonal visitors who come to the island every year.

Most of the people who step off the boats swing by the little red shed that houses the Utö Tourist Office, which is privately operated by Britt-Marie Ahnell. From May to mid-September, she is here almost every day to answer questions and provide tips on what visitors can discover on the island. In addition to beaches and the natural beauty of the archipelago, Utö boasts a rich cultural history as an old mining community, with traces of that industry dating back to the 12th century.

"The fact is that digitalization should make these kinds of personal information services redundant, especially for the younger generation that has grown up with the Internet. But we have lots of young people who come here and say, 'Now that we're here, what can we do?' People want a map and a brochure in their hand," says Britt-Marie Ahnell, who also rents bicycles to those seeking an easy way to explore a little more of the island than the nearby mining village.

HOWEVER, SHE CANNOT make her living running the tourist office. It is operated with the help of a business grant from the municipality of SEK 200,000 per year, which covers the cost of its summer staff.

"So far, the municipality has considered tourist information to be a service for which they should bear the costs, and have therefore awarded the subsidy every three years, following a public procurement process. I've been involved since the very beginning, 25 years ago, and I still think it's just as fun as ever – especially meeting all the people who come here. As long as we win the procurement and the municipality provides the funds, I'll keep this up," says Britt-Marie Ahnell.

Initially it was the Utö Business Association that ran the tourist office. Britt-Marie was engaged to manage the finances and developed the business to include commission-based vacation rental services. After a few years as an employee, she took over the operation of the tourist office and has gradually tacked on



Britt-Marie Ahnell runs, among other things, a tourist information, a hostel and a pharmacy agent.

PHOTO: PRIVATE



Britt-Marie Ahnell runs Gula Villan, which comprises conference services, a hostel and a party room. A lot of logistics has to function in order to live on an island and run a business. Finding staff accommodations for the seasonal workers who come from the mainland is another problem.

more and more parts, giving her more means by which to support her business.

For example, a few years ago she started to serve as a pharmacy agent on the island, and she also has a postal contract that ensures mail delivery for the residents of Utö. The same umbrella company also includes a carpentry business, where her husband works. Britt-Marie also has a separate company through which she runs Gula Villan, which comprises conference services, a hostel and a party room.

“We small business owners who live here year round are used to piecing together various business endeavors to make ends meet. Cooperation between companies is important for developing the island and offering various activities to tourists, and we help make sure that everyone who visits the island feels welcome. We also have common challenges to which we must find solutions. A lot of logistics have to function in order to live here and run a business,” says Britt-Marie Ahnell.

HUBS FOR SMOOTHER transport to and from the mainland are among the issues that have long been discussed among the island’s entrepreneurs. Finding staff accommodations for the seasonal workers who come from the mainland is another problem with which many of them grapple.

“Right now we’re getting by with a variety of solutions – the subletting of summer cottages and the like. I have a small staff accommodation that I rent from Skärgårdsstiftelsen [The archipelago foundation], which I pay for year round even though it’s only used from June to September. The winter season is dead for

us,” says Britt-Marie Ahnell.

Skärgårdsstiftelsen owns a large part of the land and the old buildings on Utö, and rents them out to both private persons (as vacation homes or permanent residences) and companies that operate business such as restaurants and hotels.

“The foundation contributes a great deal by providing land for our operations and collaborating on matters related to the hospitality industry, such as the renting of cottages to short-term residents. But there’s also a constant discussion about how the agreements are drawn up, what should be included in internal and external maintenance of buildings, and the like. The shortage of staff accommodations is another issue we have

been raising with Skärgårdsstiftelsen for quite some time, but so far we haven’t found any sustainable solutions,” says Britt-Marie Ahnell.

She explains that several initiatives have been undertaken. For example, a few years ago the foundation decided to offer a piece of land where the island’s business association was offered the opportunity to construct staff housing for rent, but no one was interested in investing in this because of uncertainties related to the terms of the contract and long-term financing. The companies were afraid that they would be unable to make a return on their financial investment within the allotted time frame.

REGARDLESS OF THE operator and the business, the discussion always returns to the root of the archipelago’s problems: major contrasts between the summer and winter seasons. From a business perspective, it is difficult to justify sitting on expensive premises that are scarcely used for six months out of the year.

“The seasonal variations pose a constant challenge. Most people want to visit the archipelago in the summer, but it’s hard to find folks who want to head out here in the winter,” says Britt-Marie Ahnell. Nonetheless, she notes that matters have improved in recent years.

“When I started at the tourist office, the season was over as soon as the schools started up again after summer vacation. Now there are a lot of events that attract guests well into the fall, at least on weekends.” ❌

Skärgårdsstiftelsen

With the mission of maintaining and developing the archipelago

Opening up to visitors creates opportunities for residents

Utö is the island where Skärgårdsstiftelsen has the most buildings, and many people are concerned about how the island will develop when lease agreements are rewritten and rents are raised. According to the statutes, the mission of the foundation is to “work to preserve the Stockholm Archipelago’s uniqueness, natural values and landscapes while promoting the development of outdoor life, culture, recreation and tourism, taking into account the interests of the resident population”.

This is a complex task, and sometimes it leads to conflicts.

“Our primary mission is to both preserve and develop the lands we own. One clear aim is to safeguard the public’s access to the archipelago. On the other hand, it is not Skärgårdsstiftelsen’s primary mission to ensure the existence of businesses, employment and housing. Yet when we open ourselves up for visitors and provide rental properties, that also creates opportunities for residents,” says Petter Lundgren, Skärgårdsstiftelsen’s regional manager for the southern archipelago and Utö.

THE SPECIAL THING about Utö compared to other foundation-owned areas in the archipelago is that there are so many old heritage buildings in the property portfolio. Several of the houses date from the 18th century and require careful renovation.

“One of the challenges we face is the renovation of our properties. Another is that we must achieve a greater degree of self-



The hostel *Skärgården* on the island Utö.

PHOTO: CHRISTOFFER THURESSON-BJÖRN/SKÄRGÅRDSSTIFTELSEN

financing through reasonable, market-based rents and leases. We can’t give precedence to any particular type of accommodation and must ensure that all development of the island occurs within the framework of what the nature reserve allows. For example, the construction of new buildings is forbidden, except in instances where an exception to the nature reserve regulations has been applied for and granted by the county administrative board,” explains Petter Lundgren.

He emphasizes that there are several reasons why the lack of staff housing in connection with the tourism-related businesses of the archipelago’s entrepreneurs is a difficult nut to crack.

“Our statutes state that we may not divest ourselves of land or buildings unless doing so is supported by a government decision. However, we can grant the use of land for construction, provided that it is in line with our objectives and that the county administrative board gives its approval.

Even so, often no one wants to make investments on our land. The basic problem is that the season is too short. Many of our entrepreneurs have to pull in a year’s worth of profits in just a few labor-intensive summer months, and can’t be stuck with buildings that are not needed the rest of the year,” says Petter Lundgren. ❌

A large landowner co-financed with public funds

Skärgårdsstiftelsen was established in 1959 at a time when the population of the islands was decreasing dramatically at the same time that interest in the archipelago as a destination for outdoor recreation increased. The basic idea was to safeguard the public’s access to the archipelago’s natural environments, and the foundation gradually bought up new areas. In 1998, the City of Stockholm gifted all its lands in the archipelago to the foundation, doubling its holdings.

Today the foundation owns and manages about 12 percent of the land in the archipelago, including some 40 nature reserves, from the north to the south. In total, Skärgårdsstiftelsen has around 2,000 buildings to take care of, many of which are of major cultural-historical value.

The foundation does not conduct its own commercial activities on its properties. Instead, hostels, pubs, vacation villages, shops and guest harbors are leased to contractors who rent the buildings and run businesses there.

Today 50 percent of the financing for Skärgårdsstiftelsen’s operations is provided through public funds from the county council, but self-financing through leases and rental agreements remains crucial. Private businesses also contribute through sponsorships, and the public provides support through a 16,000-member booster club.

Karin Almlöf on Sandhamn:

A fifth-generation business owner

She works to foster sustainable tourism with a reduced footprint in sensitive marine environments

As the great-great-granddaughter of her namesake Karin Westerberg, who started a general store on Sandhamn in Stockholm's outer archipelago in the late 19th century, becoming a business owner was no major leap for islander Karin Almlöf.

"We grew up in Mom's grocery store, or aboard Dad's cargo boat, so we never saw running one's own business as something special. It's more of a prerequisite for living on an island where there aren't so many employers to choose from. To make a living, you start a company or two. It's a matter of having several legs to stand on when demand varies so much over the course of the year," says Karin Almlöf.

Together with her two sisters, she now continues the family tradition in various company formations. Her older sister Caroline Wedberg has taken over the grocery store and in the summer season her little sister Catharina Almlöf combines work as a sailor with running a kiosk and café in the island's bustling guest harbor, while Karin Almlöf runs a new incarnation of the family's shipping company. The business no longer has its own boats; instead, she arranges sea transport by renting fully outfitted boats – complete with crew – from other entrepreneurs.

"It allows me to operate throughout the archipelago in a more efficient way, for example by choosing the boat that is closest to the customer and coordinating several transports on the same journey. Smart logistics allow me to keep prices down, and now that I'm no longer aboard the boats, I am also able to devote more time to other things," says Karin Almlöf.

IN PARALLEL WITH the shipping business, she also runs the company Greenoffshore, where the goal is to develop solutions for more sustainable tourism, for example through BioDriving. This concept has to do with operating a boat in a manner that is more considerate of the underwater environment and which does not interfere vegetation and wildlife.

"A lot of it has to do with becoming aware of the footprint left by ships and boats when they operate sensitive areas. By changing behavior, it's possible to make a big difference to the marine environment," says Karin Almlöf. She emphasizes that sustainability is a crucial issue for the future of the entire archipelago and its nature-dependent tourism industry.

"When it comes to attracting visitors, the lovely aquatic environment is our special advantage. If we fail to take care of it and ensure that the sea continues to thrive, we will have nothing to live on. Even now we've seen that reports of algal blooms make people hesitant to visit the affected areas. So if there are many such situations or other environmental threats, it will have major consequences for all of us who live and work in the archipelago."



Despite the difficulties, Karin Almlöf sees great potential and many new business opportunities linked to the archipelago's tourism industry.

PHOTO: PRIVATE

Issues related to sustainable tourism are an area Karin Almlöf also works with as chairwoman of the Skärgårdsföretagarna, a business association with just over 200 member companies, all of which are grappling with similar challenges.

"The tourists are necessary to maintaining a living archipelago, but we must free ourselves from the idea that all visitors are good visitors. Sometimes they don't contribute as much as they burden the islands, for example by littering. Guided tours of the outer archipelago in the spring,

when the birds are nesting, aren't a good idea either. That isn't sustainable in any way. To maintain our attractiveness, we need to think more long-term," says Karin Almlöf. She is calling for better support from government authorities and politicians to help keep the archipelago alive.

Communication, infrastructure and competition on equal terms are priority areas in which Skärgårdsföretagarna sees major shortcomings that affect ability of entrepreneurs to run businesses and dare to expand their enterprises in the archipelago.

"We lack many basic functions, such as broadband Internet access, reliable mail and parcel delivery, regular boat services with timetables adapted to the prevailing needs – be they the needs of the hospitality industry or possibilities for commuting to the mainland for us residents. From here on Sandhamn, there's no public transport to the capital between 9 am and 5 pm on regular weekdays without having to spend the night. That creates further obstacles to commuting for work or education," says Karin Almlöf.

DESPITE THE DIFFICULTIES, she sees great potential and many new business opportunities linked to the archipelago's tourism industry. She endeavors to also relay information about these positive developments at network meetings with other entrepreneurs based on the islands, including within the context of the Archipelago Business Development project.

"Digitalization entails better ways to reach out to specific target groups with marketing and targeted activities. We've also noted that interest in the sea is increasing, not least among young people who want to learn more about this important resource. Growing climate anxiety is also leading environmentally conscious city dwellers to reduce their air travel and opt for "staycations", which means that more people are coming here to enjoy what we have to offer in their immediate vicinity," concludes Karin Almlöf. ✖