

STAMPING WITH LOTTA

A workshop retreat in Sweden, complete with saunas and dips in the sea, all while learning a craft from renowned designer Lotta Jansdotter—can a holiday get any better? Journalist Caroline Buijs thinks not.

A small fishing boat brings me to Silverskär, an island between Sweden and Finland that belongs to the archipelago of Åland. An international group of crafters (23 women and a man) have come here for five days to follow a workshop led by pattern designer Lotta Jansdotter. I arrive on the third day, and join the group in learning how to design patterns and use various techniques to print our designs on fabric and paper.

That I'm allowed to take part is a real treat for me, as it soon becomes clear that this is no ordinary workshop. This is, as Lotta calls it, a workshop retreat. We have the entire Silverskär—formerly a fisherman's island whose little red wooden houses have now been turned into a four-star boutique hotel—all to ourselves. Viktor, a keen young chef, holds sway here. Every day, he makes incredibly delicious meals for us with fresh vegetables from his own garden, homemade bread, and meat from animals that graze on a neighboring island. As part of the workshop each day, we do yoga under the morning sun before breakfast, and in the evening, directly after a sauna, we dive into the Gulf of Bothnia. A workshop retreat, indeed.

BACK TO ÅLAND

The participants have come from America, Australia, Scotland, England and the Netherlands: Lotta has fans the world over. Her roots are in Åland; she grew up there before moving to Stockholm. When she was nineteen, she moved to the US and now lives and works in New York, but every summer she returns to Åland for

inspiration. “It’s not as if I draw so much when I’m here, but the distance from my work makes room for new ideas,” she says. “That’s why I come back every year. New York is really hectic and, although many inspiring people live there, I don’t have enough space to retreat into my own bubble from time to time. I’m constantly distracted there.”

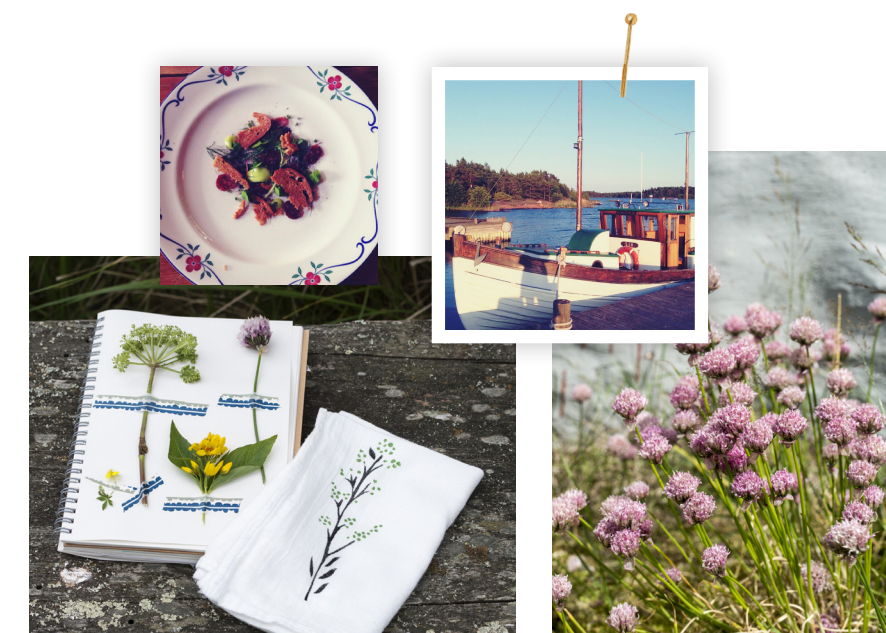
When you wander through Åland’s nature, you understand Lotta’s designs much better. There are beautiful wild flowers in bloom everywhere. You see the colors and shapes of nature reflected in the simplified form of her designs. Lines and circles, especially, are recurring themes. They’ve been inspired by the way people pick raspberries in Scandinavia, the way Lotta used to do when she was a child: you

don’t place the raspberries in the palm of your hand, but string them on a long, sturdy blade of grass, keeping your hands nice and clean, while also making the berries easy to carry.

KINDRED SPIRITS

The first thing that strikes me when I join the workshop is that everyone shares a love for the handmade. In a place like this, you never have to explain why you get so childishly happy with a green hue that you’ve mixed all by yourself. Or why you whisper “yesss” to yourself when a print turns out even better than you expected. At home, some people may roll their eyes at me when I go wild over a new tube of paint, but here on Silverskär, we are all DIY lovers who share a passion for crafting.

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DIY STAMPING

Lotta has written several books:

- * 'Lotta Jansdotter's Everyday Style: Key Pieces to Sew + Accessories, Styling, and Inspiration' (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2015)
- * 'Lotta Jansdotter Stencils: Decorate Your Walls, Furniture, Fabric, and More' (Chronicle Books, 2010)
- * 'Lotta Prints: How to Print with Anything, from Potatoes to Linoleum' (Chronicle Books, 2008)
- * 'Lotta Jansdotter's Simple Sewing: Patterns and How-To for 24 Fresh and Easy Projects' (Chronicle Books, 2007)



Despite coming from different corners of the world, that shared love creates a real family feeling.

At dinner one evening, I sit beside Cynthia from Hawaii, and we discover we share a love for the little things in life that make you happy and we both have a desire to constantly be learning something new. (Cynthia, recently retired, has just taken up knitting, and I'm dabbling in crocheting.) We find that we both love swimming, although Cynthia swims every morning in the Pacific Ocean while I'm in a pool in the center of Amsterdam. Besides improving my craft skills, conversations like this make such a workshop abroad so special. At home, I might get a glimpse into the lives of various crafters via their blogs or Instagram accounts, but here I'm meeting them in person, which makes the experience all the more enriching. And although many participants have some experience at art school, the joke here is that the workshop is designed in such a way that even if you've only held a paintbrush on occasion, you'll find it fun and easy to follow.

Lotta's tips are surprisingly simple. Her approach stems from her Scandinavian roots, where the (unofficial) motto is: 'Can't find what you want? Make it! Don't know how? Learn it!' So we learn how to cut stamps out of potatoes, then from a slice of rubber and eventually how to carve a design for a 'real' stamp with wooden-handled lino cutting tools.

Another participant is a farmer from America who makes her own yoghurt and butter. "Before this course, it would never have occurred to me to

make a stamp," she says. "And after this course, it will never occur to me to buy a factory-made stamp."

Lotta enjoys seeing how happy people are when making something themselves, but she says she also organizes the workshops because, for her, it's a good way to get away from her studio in Brooklyn and hook up with other creatives—that's what inspires her. "Making something together is so nice. At home, I also like my craft nights with friends, and it's actually more enjoyable than going out for dinner. The evening is more varied: you chat and drink wine, but often you're concentrating on your work and everyone is quiet. We recently held a collage salon: a little bit of paper cutting, a little bit of chatting, a little drop of wine. We aren't actually that serious about the work we do, but that makes it really nice."

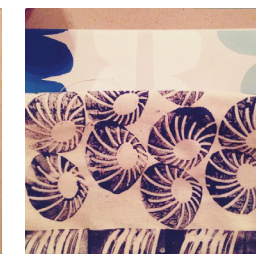
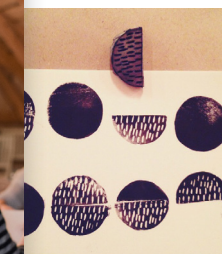
AN HONEST TEACHER

Why do people come from all over the world to take part in Lotta's workshops? In many cases, they're not only craft enthusiasts, but also in love with islands or with Scandinavia in particular. Many participants explain that they like experiencing something more on vacation: they'd rather come home with self-made stuff they can cherish than a suitcase full of purchased souvenirs they don't actually know what to do with.

Jade Suine from Australia, a screenwriter for children's television programs, had to travel 31 hours to get to Åland. She is combining Lotta's workshop with a vacation in Europe. "I've followed Lotta for ten years on

the Internet," she says, "and taking part in this workshop was the perfect reason to come to Sweden. I love Scandinavian design, wildflowers and woods. And the weather also plays a role: In Australia, it never gets really cold, and I really like the cold. This workshop—being with people who see the world in the same way—feels a bit like a dream come true. I'm not worried about what the results of my stamps will be; just making them is what I like the best."

So, the fun is supposed to be in the process, rather than the outcome, yet I'm not totally convinced of that when the handle of the bag I'm printing accidentally falls into a pot of paint. Or when the paint on my stamps smudges and spreads through onto the back of my bag. But there is always a clean bag waiting for you to start again. Such 'failures' are part of the process when you make something yourself. As Lotta explains to us, the art is, perhaps, to embrace our mistakes and work with them. Fortunately, you can set the level of the workshop for yourself: you can also see it as encouragement to continue at home. Some people make simple patterns, like semicircles; others make intricate cutouts of flowers. And at 7 a.m., some participants are already hard at work in the barn (a converted wooden shed where we work at long tables). Some, lacking inspiration, decide to skip a morning session and go for a walk on the island instead; others keep on printing until late in the evening (while the rest of us push the tables to one side and dance to—who else?—Abba). >



1. Corina de Vette (center) with Lotta in the barn.
2. Jade Suine from Australia.
3. Lotta wears an apron she designed herself.
4. One of the fishermen's houses that has been converted into the hotel.

"For days after the workshop, I see patterns everywhere: in the rocks that are covered with such pretty moss; in the way the raspberries are arranged on my slice of cream cake"

At home in Colorado, US, Sara Sanderson also takes part in creative workshops, but what makes this course special for her is the lack of distraction. "Usually I do short workshops in the city, but here you can really focus, because of all the nature around you and the fact that this workshop lasts five days." Sarah works in a fabric store—she sells Lotta's fabrics and that's how she got to know her work—and she also gives drawing, painting and sewing classes at a high school. She thinks it's great that Lotta told her own life story, including the failures, at the start of the workshop. "That makes her an honest teacher," she says, "and I like that."

For Lotta, sharing your failures is as important as sharing your successes. "Being creative is a process," she says,

"and we often have high expectations of ourselves. I do, too. Sometimes everything comes together nicely and the process runs perfectly, but sometimes not. It comes with the territory. I think there is only one solution: try and try again."

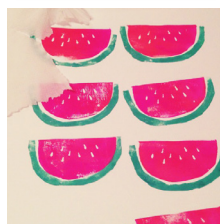
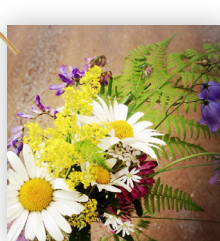
Bookbinder Corina de Vette from Rotterdam, the Netherlands, has been a follower of Lotta since she bought one of Lotta's notebooks in a museum shop. Attending the workshop is a gift to herself for the hard work she's done in recent years, and because she's been a fan of Sweden for a long time. Each participant has their own style, which has gotten Corina thinking differently about her own work. And she's gained inspiration in other areas as well. "Running your own business is a hard slog for anyone, no matter

where you live, be it the Netherlands or America," she says. "It's nice to chat between bouts of stamping; you learn things by doing that, such as what channels others use to sell their work, or whether it's a good or bad idea to invest in a stand at tradeshow or conferences."

INSPIRATION IS EVERYWHERE

But above all, I find working without distraction (we interrupt our stamping sessions only for lunch) such a relief. I'm going to do more of that at home: spend the whole day playing around on the kitchen table with fabrics, paper or ink and just leave the mess instead of clearing it up right away.

On the boat back to Stockholm, I realize that Lotta's story about her craft nights has sparked something in me. I decide I'm also going to organize such evenings at my home. I know plenty of people with cupboards full of unfinished DIY projects and I now know how much fun it is to work on things together. For days after the workshop, when I'm camping with my family in Sweden, I see patterns everywhere: in the rocks that are covered with such pretty moss; in the way the raspberries are arranged on my slice of cream cake; in how crooked the slats of a wooden stool are. It was the catchphrase of the workshop, but it's true: Inspiration is everywhere. You just need to look for it. And doing a workshop on your vacation certainly helps you do that. ●



1. Bagarstugan Café & Vin: Lotta's favorite coffee shop in Mariefhamn, the capital of Åland.

Read more about Lotta Jansdotter on jansdotter.com.