

Have the Øresund bridge's benefits run both ways?

In the 25 years since the rail and road link from Copenhagen to Malmö opened, it seems one side has fared better than the other

DENMARK/
SWEDEN

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After 19 years of commuting to Denmark from Sweden, Helen Sjögren is so used to crossing the bridge, she identifies as Scandinavian rather than Swedish. The researcher at a Danish pharmaceutical company lives in the Swedish university town of Lund with her three children but has become accustomed to Danish working practices, and the idea of working in Sweden is now difficult to imagine.

"Because I'm Swedish, colleagues would expect me to behave like a Swede. So I would be seen as rude - too direct to fit in Sweden," she said. Danes, she has found, are much more direct, while Swedes seek consensus.

"I really like the Danish mentality and way of being." At work, she and her colleagues speak slightly adapted versions of Swedish and Danish so everybody can understand one another. One of her few misgivings is that her taxes go to Copenhagen rather than her own municipality, where her children have gone to school and where she uses the healthcare services.

In the quarter of a century since it opened on 1 July 2000, the bridge - known as Øresundsbron or Øresundsbron depending on whether you are on the Danish or Swedish side

of the strait - has not only opened up Copenhagen's vast job market to largely rural southern Sweden, but changed the prospects and even identities of many who use it. The 16km rail and road link between Copenhagen and Malmö (which includes an 8km bridge, a 4km tunnel and a 4km artificial island) has also transformed the world's perception of the region.

But the trajectory of the two ends of the bridge has been a story of two halves. Copenhagen has become a must-see tourist destination, global fashion and design leader, host to the biggest airport in the Nordics, as well as being home to the maker of Ozempic, Novo Nordisk. Thanks to the weak Swedish krona, it has become a magnet for Swedish workers, bringing in 2bn DKK (\$315bn) a year in tax revenues. Last year 105,000 daily journeys were made by car, train or boat over the strait, but most commuter traffic is travelling towards Denmark.

Meanwhile, Malmö has not thrived to the same extent. Despite being home to the fictional detective Saga Norén of the hit Scandi crime drama *The Bridge* - which catapulted the bridge to fame with its unsolved murders and tense dark drives across Øresund - Malmö has been an observer

on the sidelines of the Danish capital's success story. This is perhaps best captured by the decision by politicians to name the area around the bridge covering southern Sweden and eastern Denmark "Greater Copenhagen".

Of the 21,585 people who commuted regularly across the bridge to work in the final quarter of last year, 96% were people who live in Sweden, according to the Øresund Institute, an independent Swedish-Danish thinktank. By 2030, Greater Copenhagen aims to increase the total to 30,000.

While it was not impossible to commute before the bridge - there were boats - it was significantly more time-consuming and difficult. In 1999, the year before the bridge opened, a total of 2,788 people commuted.

Although there are border controls - every train stops for six to seven minutes at Hyllie station, the first stop coming into Sweden from Denmark - Sjögren does not think of going to

▲ Last year, 105,000 journeys were made over the Øresund strait each day

ALLAN TOFT/
ØRESUNDSBRON

21,585

Number of regular commuters across the bridge in the final quarter of 2024; 96% of travellers live in Sweden

Copenhagen as going to a different country. “For us who live down here, the border is not a big thing,” she said.

But Anders Linde-Laursen, a professor at Malmö University who studies identity, said users of the bridge are “constantly reminded that they are crossing an international border”. This, he said, became abundantly clear when the bridge was temporarily closed in 2015 due to the refugee crisis, leading to the introduction of travelers needing to carry ID. And in 2020, during the pandemic, when the bridge was again closed. “It was made very clear to everyone that there were Danes and Swedes, separated by the [water], and that no bridge would change that,” he said.

Cross-border life is not without problems. Paperwork can get tricky - especially when it comes to property ownership and tax. Demand for the train means it is usually standing-room only at peak times, and trains are often delayed.

Sweden’s ambassador to Denmark, Hans Wallmark, is convinced the benefits of the bridge run in both directions, but added: “You cannot get away from the fact that Copenhagen is a capital city, so it has that attraction.” Citing the life science cluster, known as Medicon Valley, he said Danish successes such as Novo Nordisk have a positive impact on Sweden, too.

The next 25 years, he predicted, will bring even greater connection and focus on the region - especially after the Fehmarnbelt tunnel opens in 2029, connecting the Danish town of Rødbyhavn with Puttgarden in Germany under the Baltic. “Then maybe we will not just be talking about Malmö, Copenhagen or Skåne, but also north Germany,” he said. “Bridges, connections, lead to increased integration, increased prosperity.”

But there are also many in Malmö who don’t use the bridge - either because it is prohibitively expensive (510 DKK or \$80 for the car toll and 160 SEK or \$17 for a single train ticket from Malmö to Copenhagen), or because of train delays.

“It’s too expensive to go over,” said one man on the quayside in Malmö. He recently waited five hours to get a train across the bridge. “It doesn’t work. You can forget about commuting to Copenhagen - unless you have your own boat.”

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