

# 33 sure-fire ways to truly offend a Swede

**If you want to offend a Swede, don't bother burning their flag. Here are 33 more effective strategies to get under their skin.**

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You know you've offended a Swede when they respond with a passive-aggressive note. ("Whoever washed their clothes last night: clean up after yourself!") Photo: Mats Andersson/Scanpix/TT

## 1. Comment on the poor selection of wines at Systembolaget

Whether they approve of the state-owned alcohol monopoly or not, most Swedes praise Systembolaget for its wide range of choices and the expertise of its staff when recommending drinks. Complain about the choices at Systembolaget at your peril.

## 2. Don't put a divider on the conveyor belt at the supermarket

Like with many other items on this list, a Swede probably wouldn't tell you directly that they found this annoying, choosing instead to demonstratively place the divider between their items and yours instead. Perhaps accompanied by a tut.

### **3. Gleefully help yourself to the last piece of cake**

You may think that nobody wants it, and therefore no one will be offended if you take it. This is wrong. The correct thing to do in this situation is cut the last slice into smaller and smaller pieces, never taking the final crumb left on the plate.

### **4. Keep your shoes on indoors**

This makes sense in a country with snow, rain and general damp weather for most of the year. If you wear your shoes indoors, you're forcing your Swedish host to get out their vacuum cleaner and get rid of all the dirt you've traipsed around their house once you're gone. Take them off at the door, and consider bringing a pair of slippers to wear indoors if you're staying with a Swedish friend.

### **3. Eat sweets on a Wednesday**

Unhealthy food like sweets and crisps is reserved strictly for weekends. Don't point out the fact that Swedes consume the same amount of sugar in one day that the residents of most other countries would in an entire week either.



It's called 'lördagsgodis' for a reason. Photo: Johan Nilsson/TT

### **4. Eat fika at the wrong time**

Fika – a coffee break with some kind of cake or pastry – is the one time it's acceptable to eat unhealthy food outside of a weekend. There's still a rule here, though. Fika for breakfast: definitely not. Fika too close to lunch isn't okay either. And fika after dinner is also frowned upon. So basically, you have a small window between about 10.30am and 11.30am, and another between 2.00pm and 4.00pm for socially acceptable fika.

## **5. Say no to fika**

This is akin to a declaration of war in Sweden. Okay, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration. In any case, in a work setting, you're essentially saying no to taking a break with your colleagues, which makes you seem antisocial and like you have a bad work-life balance.

## **6. Leave an office fika too early**

An office fika is one of the rare occasions where you can make small talk with your colleagues, so leaving too early and cutting your break short could make you seem rude and aloof, and also make your colleagues feel pressured to cut their break short, too. Best to read the room and head back when everyone else does.

## **7. Suggest you just split the restaurant bill 50/50**

Swedes aren't stingy, but they do insist on everything being fair, which also extends to eating out. If you ordered a steak and expensive drinks, and they just ordered a salad, don't expect them to split the bill evenly. Why do you think the Swish money transfer app has a built-in calculator?

## **8. Say: "Third place in the World Cup isn't really that good, is it?"**

Sweden's best performance in the World Cup since 1958 was in 1994, when it came third. Needless to say, Swedes probably wouldn't be too happy if you downplayed this. This comment is also best avoided if your country has a worse track record than Sweden.

## **9. Say: "I've never actually seen the Winter Olympics, does Sweden compete?"**

Another source of pride for Swedes in the sporting world is the Winter Olympics, where Sweden regularly takes home more than a few gold medals. Even worse than hinting you've never seen it would be to ask "are you as good as Norway?"

## **10. Tell them you don't care who wins Eurovision**

Staying on the subject of "areas where Sweden excels internationally", a Swede probably wouldn't be very impressed if you told them you didn't watch Eurovision, or even worse, you don't care who wins.

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Måns Zelmerlöw? Never heard of him. Photo: Tore Meek/TT/NTB

### **11. Don't recycle properly**

Swedes are sticklers for recycling, to the extent that Sweden has actually had to import rubbish from other countries to burn in its district heating generators. Putting the wrong items in the wrong bins (or not folding your cardboard boxes properly so they take less space) is bound to spark a passive-aggressive note from your neighbours.

### **12. Put *grovsopor* in your recycling building**

*Grovsopor* is waste which needs to be disposed of at the tip, like dead Christmas trees, large furniture items, or packaging too big to fit in your apartment's normal recycling bins. Dumping these items among your household waste forces your apartment building to pay an expensive fee to get them removed, and also creates a fire hazard – so, unsurprisingly, it would also enrage your Swedish neighbours.

### **13. Tell them that people abroad aren't that interested in what happens in Sweden**

There's a running joke in Sweden that the first question a Swede will ask a foreigner upon meeting them is "what do people think of Sweden in your country?". Swedes are obsessed with their image abroad (even coining the term *sverigebild* to describe said image), so would be very offended if you suggested that most people abroad just... aren't that interested.

### **14. Tell them that Lussekatte are just dry, tasteless buns that have been dyed yellow**

The traditional yellow S-shaped buns eaten in December are often described by foreigners as tasting "dusty", "like an attic smells" or even "like curry", due to their saffron flavour, which Swedes unusually pair with sweet rather than savoury flavours. Maybe keep these opinions to yourself though and politely decline if you're offered one.

### **15. Praise their cuckoo clocks, chocolate or Swiss Army knives**

No, Sweden is not Switzerland. They're both mountainous European countries beginning with 'S' with a cross on their flag, but the similarities end there. In fact, burning [Switzerland's flag by accident](#) is probably more likely to offend a Swede than burning Sweden's flag.

#### **16. Tell them your meatballs are better**

You may have a great recipe for meatballs (and it may actually be a better recipe), but that won't stop your Swedish friend or partner from using their family recipe passed down through the generations.

#### **17. Tell them ketchup on pasta is not a valid dish**

A common quick family meal in Sweden is spaghetti or macaroni with meatballs, but not the way you're thinking. Forget the rich tomato sauce you'd be served in Italy, this meal consists of plain pasta, fried meatballs and dots of ketchup on top. And no, it's not just for picky kids: adults eat it too.



Italians, look away now... Photo: Fredrik Sandberg/TT

#### **18. Complain that their coffee is too weak**

Swedes pride themselves on drinking strong coffee, and it's not unusual for a Swede to drink a cup of coffee just before bed either. Somehow, they can sleep despite the caffeine. Saying their coffee is too weak is almost an attack on their Swedishness.

#### **19. Say you don't like coffee**

Even worse than disliking strong Swedish coffee is not drinking coffee at all. Actually, no, there IS something worse...

#### **20. Ask for decaffeinated coffee**

Good luck finding this in any Swedish restaurant or supermarket. See above: Swedes are superhuman and immune to the effects of caffeine, so have no need for decaf.

#### **21. Attempt to make small talk**

Swedes are famously private, with neighbours offering no more than a quick *hej hej* in the hallway if they're unluckily enough to pass by at the same time. Small talk, known as *kallprat* (cold talk) or even *dödprat* (dead talk) makes them very uncomfortable.

## 22. Honestly replying when someone asks 'how are you?'

The only correct response to "how are you?" or *hur går det?* is *bra tack, själv?* (good thanks, you?). Replying with anything more than this will quickly have a Swede squirming at the sudden intimacy of the conversation. If you really want to ask how someone is, you can ask *hur mår du?*, which is a little bit closer to "how are you doing?" or "how are you feeling?", where a more in-depth answer is more acceptable.

## 23. Don't make small talk when your dog meets their dog

This is one of the rare occasions where you really *should* make small talk if you don't want to appear rude. While your dog is sniffing their dog's bum, you should ask something like *hur gammal är din hund?* (how old is your dog?) or *vad är det för ras?* (which breed is it?), and offer some compliment on how cute or well-behaved their dog is.



'Oh your dog is so cute, what breed is she?' 'She's an octopus, can't you tell?' Photo: Jonas Ekströmer/TT

## 24. Arrive late with no explanation

Swedes take punctuality seriously, so they won't appreciate you arriving late without letting them know in advance that you're delayed. This applies even if you're only going to be 5 minutes late: make sure to send them a quick text as soon as you know you're running late so they're prepared.

## 25. Arrive early with no explanation

They don't just take punctuality seriously, they take predictability seriously too. Arriving early will make them feel like they need to rush to get there so you're not left waiting for too long, and will make them feel like they were rude for being late even if they arrived right on time.

## 26. Walk in the bike lane

Bike lane etiquette is no laughing matter either. That applies to pedestrians, who should never walk in the bike lane, and also to cyclists, who should never bike on the pavement. Rules are rules, and don't expect Swedes to turn a blind eye if they spot you breaking them.

## 27. Don't let them get off public transport before you get on

Swedish public transport runs on a *first out, then in* principle, meaning you wait for the people on the bus, train or metro carriage to get off before you step on. Not doing this will result in disapproving tuts from the Swedes around you.

## 28. Cut in front of them in a queue

Again, Swedes value fairness highly. Queues in Sweden can be hard to recognise, as Swedes have been socially distancing since well before Covid, but what may look like a loose grouping of people around a bus stop is in fact a carefully organised queue, where each person has memorised precisely who was there before they arrived and who came later. Make sure you hold your position in this queue unless you want to face their wrath.

## 29. Ask them the location of their *svampställe*

A Swede's *svampställe* or mushroom-foraging spot is a closely guarded secret, which is passed down within families, if you're lucky. Asking a Swede the location of their *svampställe* is a deeply personal question, and many family members keep their foraging spot secret even from their own relatives.



We can only assume this photographer was forced to sign a non-disclosure agreement when shown this man's 'svampställe'. Photo: Gorm Kallestad/NTB scanpix/TT

## 30. Reveal the location of their *svampställe*

If you by some miracle are ushered into the secret circle of “people who know where the *svampställe* is”, don’t reveal it under any circumstances. This is probably more likely to cause a divorce in Sweden than cheating on your partner. Swedes are more secretive and protective of their mushroom spots than magicians are of the secrets behind their tricks.

### **31. Take their *tvättstugetid***

Swedish apartment buildings usually have a shared laundry room or *tvättstuga* in the cellar which can be booked for residents. The slots in after-work hours book up fast, meaning many people working normal hours book their *tvättstugetid* days or even weeks in advance. Taking their slot would make you very unpopular. Erik Helmersson from Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter [even suggested that](#) the best way for a foreign power to provoke Sweden would be to send secret agents to *tvättstugor* across Sweden just to steal laundry spots.

### **32. Failing to empty the fluff from the dryer**

There’s a lot of potential for causing offence in your apartment’s *tvättstuga*. You’re expected to clean up after yourself, which includes wiping out the detergent slot of the washing machine and removing your fluff from the dryer. Remember: your neighbours can see which apartment booked the laundry room, so they’ll know it was you.

### **33. Failing to return the key for the *tvättstuga***

This is perhaps the worst possible thing you can do to annoy your Swedish neighbours. They will find out where you live, they will knock on your door, and they will be angry.

**Thank you to everyone who submitted their responses when The Local’s editor Emma Löfgren reached out on Twitter, and feel free to reply to her tweet or in the comments below if you have any more tips. We received so many that we couldn’t include them all, but may do a follow-up in the future.**



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