

Pieter in Stockholm (350 words)

I grew up in New England, but for the last 20 years I have lived in California. Most Christmases find me visiting family in Vermont, suffering the dual abuse of the freezing weather and their amusement with my discomfort at the temperature. These visits are frequently stretched to include New Year's Eve, in my family always enjoyed at home and not in public celebration. We eat ourselves into a happy stupor, consume too much champagne, watch the ball (or whatever) drop in Times Square, congratulate ourselves on being inside near the fireplace and not out there with those crazy people, then toddle along to our beds. Last year, however, the seed of discontent was sown.

Circumstances having dictated that I spend both Christmas and New Year's in California, I was happily sitting on my couch, sipping a good wine and reading a book when the stroke of midnight hit. Now, this has much to recommend it, but as a celebration, it is rather less than raucous. Embarrassed with myself, I was determined in the future to slip off the coils of restraint and pursue more excitement. As a young man, this might have raised multiple wild possibilities, but as a now wiser man in his 50s, the thought that sprang to mind was travel. December 31, 2004, would find me in one of the world's capital cities. For reasons buried in my subconscious, but probably related to youthful fantasies of the Swedish Women's Bikini Volleyball team, I decided that Stockholm should host this event. Concerns with Stockholm in winter and six hours of daylight were easily outweighed by visions of Swedish blonde womanhood in ridiculously inadequate bikinis.

Once again at home, I proclaim Stockholm a first-rate destination. I failed to find the Volleyball team, and there is no denying the absence of extended daylight at this time of year. But because of its citizens, Stockholm shines year-round. Was this the best New Year's Eve ever? No, those were spent years ago with family, but this one was excellent. Next year in London? Buenos Aires? Moscow? Rome? I'll let you know.