

Helena Niskanen

# Making Cool Scandinavia Hot Amongst American Travelers

## *How the Nordic Countries' Lore is Utilized in Marketing*

In the American mind, Scandinavia sits in a faraway nook, perched atop Europe, and carries a special lore – its culture, lifestyle, cosy sweaters and socks, clean design, and sense of well-being appeals to Americans. In the US, both “Scandinavia” and “Nordic(s)” are used virtually interchangeably. In the marketing communication directed towards Americans, it has, however, turned out to be more attractive to use the word “Scandinavia”. Indeed, for years, the slogan in the joint branding communication between the Nordic countries was “Only in Scandinavia”. This was because the word “Scandinavia” resonated powerfully among the tour operators and media, while the term “Nordics” could sometimes cause confusion with regard to which countries were actually included. In this article, I will reflect upon my experiences.

In general, Americans are consistently curious about new cultures, foods, and destinations, with which they lack familiarity – increasingly, this interest is driving a desire to learn, and experience, more about the Nordic region. Nordic brands such as IKEA, Marimekko, H&M, and Lego have infiltrated American fashion, design, and lifestyle. All of this has fostered an unprecedented awareness of a Nordic culture that embraces, upholds, and vindicates values such as openness and sustainability.

During my career, spanning over twenty years, in marketing Finland and Scandinavia

as a travel destination in North America, I have witnessed the changes in the US travel industry, shared wonderful experiences with my tourist board colleagues, and witnessed growing interest in the magical destination of Scandinavia, or, to be more exact, the Nordic countries of Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Nordic Countries (Nordiska Turistrådet, NT) have worked in close cooperation for years. The benefits of this cooperation manifested themselves in the form the Scandinavian Tourist Boards in New York. The office was originally located at the legendary Rockefeller Center, at 75 Rock. My former colleagues told stories of spotting a Hollywood star or two, (Paul Newman and Robert Redford) in the building's elevators, since Warner Communications had their NY offices at the same building. The lobby was occasionally mobbed with screaming fans. In late 80's, our offices moved to Third Avenue in Midtown – in the shadow of another legendary skyscraper, the Chrysler Building. I started working for the Scandinavian Tourist Board shortly thereafter.

---

**Helena Niskanen** is a destination travel marketing professional with more than 20 years of experience. She is the founder and CEO of Polar Star Marketing and a member of the Board of Directors of FinnFest USA. She ran Visit Finland operations in USA in 1997-2018 and prior to that, in 1993-2007, she served as a marketing coordinator. She has also served as a volunteer on several boards, such as the American Scandinavian Society of New York and Finland Center Foundation. She has resided in Jersey City, New Jersey, for the last 30 years.



“Only in Scandinavia” – the Scandinavian Tourist Boards representatives hosted an educational evening for the US tour operators at an annual USTOA Conference (US Tour Operator Association) in Boca Raton, Florida in December 2014. From left Helena Niskanen from Visit Finland.

After years of cooperation, an official company, Scandinavian Tourism Inc. was incorporated in 1996 to serve as an umbrella organization for the then-five tourist boards of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Iceland split from the cooperation in 2012 as they started handling the US market remotely from Iceland.

Scandinavian Tourism Inc. was long responsible for handling all travel trade and consumer inquiries for the four Nordic countries, as well as running the joint office and call centre. The company was also responsible for coordinating joint activities as well as maintaining the joint Goscandinavia.com website and social media channels. A project manager was hired to coordinate the travel trade work, and an information officer handled our information requests as well as social media.

The presidency for the corporation was a rotating two-year term shared by the di-

rectors of the individual tourist boards. My term spanned from 2012-2014. At the time of writing this article, the company has been dissolved, but joint collaboration to some extent will continue with activities geared towards the travel trade. My position in New York at Visit Finland was terminated in the spring.

The industry has changed a lot over these 20 years. When I first started in the early 90's, our joint Scandinavian call centre would traditionally be inundated with calls and brochure requests starting in early February. To stem the flood, we had three to four people, daily, handling phone calls.

At that time American, travellers had a tendency to plan and book their European vacations months ahead of time.

Contemporarily, the planning period is shorter, and most American travellers tediously research destinations over the Internet prior to booking. The last four years have seen

a significant drop in brochure orders, as well as phone and email inquiries.

However, our social media channels attracted more and more visitors, which in turn increased engagement and social sharing. We did particularly well with fun and quirky stories, about “Nordic oddities: salt licorice and dipping into icy water after a sauna”. Summer is still the most popular time for overseas travel, but long weekends are gaining popularity all year round, especially with airline promotions and flash sales. Americans get an average of 20 vacation days a year. Some examples, which carry a compelling appeal for tourists heading to Scandinavia, include fairy-tale castles, unique snow- and ice-accommodations, Northern Lights, fjords, archipelagos, Nordic cuisine, capital cities, small towns, history, culture, art, and design.

### **Why to join forces – the power of four**

In 2013, the Scandinavian Tourist Boards in the US - VisitDenmark, VisitFinland, VisitNorway and Visit Sweden - formed a Scandinavian Trade Partnership programme in order to build greater awareness of Scandinavia as a desirable and competitive travel destination in the North American market. We, the Scandinavian Tourist Boards, recognized the importance of working with the tour operators and travel agents in joint collaboration with Scandinavian travel industry partners to enhance existing tour packages to Scandinavia and inspire tour operators to create new tour packages to the region. We realized that by working in a partnership, we could further enhance Scandinavia’s visibility in the US market.

The key focus of our trade partnership programme was to take part in major travel industry conferences to meet face-to-face with high-ranking decision makers, CEOs, presidents, VPs, and product development managers of the most important tour operators in the US, with the aim of getting more tour packages to include Scandinavia. Our activities included hosting events geared for the operators with fun quizzes and an interac-

tive breakfast seminar themed “Around Scandinavia”, which highlighted the best of each country with strong visuals. As a Finn, it was fun watching the operators - with varying degrees of success - guess which country had the most saunas. Eventually, one CEO got it right.

For many years we organized a hosted buyer workshop in NYC or LA, to which we invited North American tour operators to meet with our participating Scandinavian travel partners. We conducted a series of sales calls and destination training sessions targeting travel agency and tour operator sales staff in the US, who heavily book foreign travel. The goal was to personally inspire them to sell Scandinavia and to introduce partner products and services. Since Scandinavia is a relatively unknown region, we created a web-based educational programme for travel agents that focused on our strongest selling points, such as nature, cuisine, and lifestyle. Travel agents were introduced to a series of mesmerizing images of Scandinavia alongside educational information and detailed information on partner products. Each agent took an exit test in order to become a certified Scandinavia specialist.

We sent out a monthly e-newsletter - directed at travel agents and tour operators throughout North America - focused on travel and tourism news emerging from Scandinavia, as well as stimulating stories. The e-newsletter was designed to entice tour development and to serve as a tool and inspiration for travel agents to sell and meet clients’ travel needs. We conducted webinars to further educate and create awareness of all the things Scandinavia has to offer for the agents’ client base. The webinars proved to be an exceptionally cost-efficient way of marketing to a larger group. Our web site, Goscandinavia.com, was designed exclusively for trade industry professionals; however, the site contained links to each tourist boards’ homepage, which were more consumer friendly. We used search engine optimization to allow agents to find us more easily.

We partnered with one of the largest travel agent consortiums (Signature Travel Network)

by hosting a Scandinavia day, with presentations during the day followed by an evening gala at a Las Vegas hotel. The entrance to the ballroom was lined with beautiful images of Scandinavia. In the ballroom, we projected our branding logo onto the walls and served Scandinavian-inspired food. Attendees gleefully greeted our special guests, including the Little Mermaid, Santa Claus, and a Viking.

It makes sense for Scandinavian countries to work together, because most consumers choose the region for a multi-destination vacation and will typically visit two to three countries on their trip. Most tour operators' pre-packaged products for Scandinavia also combine at least two countries in the region. Scandinavian countries have been registering strong increases in bed nights of US travellers over the last couple of years. Despite these strong gains, however, Scandinavia remains a relatively unfamiliar region for American consumers, who have a high propensity to consult and book more complex trips (those that include overseas travel and multiple destinations) with a tour operator or a travel agent. Scandinavia's market share of US travel to Europe is about 10 percent, according to the US Department of Commerce, Office of Travel and Tourism Industries.

## US travel market

The travel trade industry continues to be a lucrative business in the US. The US resident outbound market totalled 87.7 million in 2017, up 9 percent. Travel to overseas countries (38.3 million) also increased by 9 percent.

The 'outbound' market has been strong since 2014. Competition is fierce, but Europe is still a top destination for American travellers. According to PhocusWright's prediction, US travel revenue will reach \$381 billion.<sup>1</sup> The market is heavily dominated by airlines and hotels or lodging, which account for 83 percent of the total. The remaining 17 percent of the market is shared between car hires, cruises, packaged travel, rail travel, and travel insurance.

A biannual economic impact study by PriceWaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC) found that active members of the US Tour Operator Association (USTOA) contributed \$15 billion to the US tour operator industry in 2017, representing more than 8.8 million individual travellers.<sup>2</sup> Tour operators primarily sell directly to the travel trade.

The emergence of the Internet and the increased popularity of social media channels have drastically altered the way that tourist boards communicate with, and market to, their target demographics.

We have conducted Scandinavia-specific research studies and also accessed research commissioned by the European Travel Commission (ETC). Our primary traveller to Scandinavia is still the baby boomer, someone who has already experienced the most-visited countries in Europe. The boomers continue to be a very viable target group.

Besides the boomer, Scandinavian Tourist Boards, just like every other tourist board, is after the mythical group of Millennials. In 2015, Millennials officially became the largest market of US travellers by age. They are the most educated and most diverse generation in American history. They are also the most civic-minded generation - 71 percent of US millennials and post-millennials view experiences as the most important thing in their lives.

For the typical millennial, traveling is not as much about the destination as it is about the cultural experiences they can share in. About 20 percent of millennials travel internationally, and 86 percent of those who do so travel to experience a new culture, according to Internet Marketing, Inc.<sup>3</sup> An MMGY study on Millennials found that 6 out of 10 prefer to spend their money on experiences rather than on material possessions. According to Internet Marketing, Inc., 76 percent of millennials decided on a travel destination based on recommendations from friends. Although Millennials travel more frequently, boomers take longer trips and spend more money.

## “Faces of Scandinavia”

Perhaps one of the most successful and enjoyable social media campaigns on which I worked on a joint basis was the 2011 “Faces of Scandinavia” campaign, in which our effort was to spotlight inspiring destinations within our four Nordic countries, featuring travel testimonials from prominent Scandinavians ranging from a polar explorer to a hockey legend, a chef, a jewellery designer, a supermodel and even a cello rock band.

These famous Scandinavians were promoting their favourite local travel destinations. The purpose was to inspire US travellers to visit Scandinavia. Visitors to the site could read about these well-known Scandinavians’ personal travel stories and comment on them, or upload their own stories. In addition to posting their stories on our website, we encouraged visitors to share them on Facebook and Twitter, and to leave a comment on other published stories.

This allowed visitors to interact with each other and our campaign as part of an immersive experience; participation also allowed visitors to enter to win a roundtrip to one of the four destinations. The campaign ran online and included a mobile travel application.

## “NORDICS – a hot commodity in the US”

In 2013, in conjunction with the Kennedy Center’s<sup>4</sup> *Nordic Cool* 2013 Festival in Washington D.C., the Scandinavian Tourist Boards collaborated jointly with the Nordic Council of Ministers by launching a new *Nordic Cool* campaign. The objective was to create greater awareness of Scandinavia through fun, quirky, and creative facts and cultural trivia.

The consumer campaign coincided with a month-long international festival of theatre, dance, music, visual arts, literature, design, cuisine, and film to highlight the diverse cultures of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, as well as Greenland and the Faroe and Åland Islands. The festival provided us with a great opportunity to build awareness about the Nordic cultures amongst the

general population and through an engagement campaign geared towards a key target audience. In this case, the target age group was adults between the ages of 35 and 60 who are well-educated, travelling without children, and who have previously visited Europe, but not necessarily Scandinavia. The campaign was physically located in the D.C. metro area, but Facebook was utilized to simultaneously spread the campaign to a wider audience. Fans of Scandinavia could test their knowledge about the region and learn more about the Nordic countries at a dedicated web site. Once again, a grand prize giveaway with two round-trip tickets to a Scandinavian destination of choice was offered.

Our core business challenge was the fact that Scandinavia is still fairly unknown as a travel destination in the U.S. We wanted to leverage the buzz generated by the Nordic Cool festival to place the region at the forefront of people’s minds as a great travel destination for the well-educated and the curious. Our focus was to capture the attention of our target audience so as to transform their vague interest into an urgent desire - to move them from “I’ve heard great things about Scandinavia” to “I really want to go this summer!” We also wanted to deepen consumer knowledge regarding the wide variety of travel product offerings in Scandinavia, to increase social media interaction and engagement, and to provide a tangible increase in travel bookings to Scandinavia.

With the marketing activities, we used an integrated approach. Our outdoor advertising campaign used strategically placed ads on buses and the Metro in key routes in Washington D.C. The messages contained indisputable facts about Scandinavia that would grab the public’s attention, such as, “*If World Domination Were Determined by Herring Consumption, We Would Rule the Planet.*”

The Nordic embassies in Washington D.C. organized a Nordic Restaurant Week, where each embassy invited a chef from their country to partner with a restaurant in D.C., which served a special Nordic menu during Nordic Restaurant Week. This was a perfect oppor-

tunity to engage culinary, travel, and lifestyle journalists with press releases and invitations to enjoy the special Nordic dinners.

Each country has always handled their own public relations (PR) for the tourist board, but for joint projects, our PR personnel work as a group to compile press lists and press releases. PR is an integral part of our work.

This was a branding campaign with themes of culture and history: culinary experiences (New Nordic Cuisine); modern yet historic cities connected with beautiful unspoiled nature; and “The Good Life” and Scandinavian lifestyle (e.g. the happiest countries, egalitarianism, progressiveness, gender equality, child-friendly cities, architecture, and countries designed to improve life with sustainability in mind).

We had hoped to organize a culinary-themed event in New York in 2016/2017. Our team worked diligently and passionately to make it happen, but unfortunately the funding fell through in the end. Cuisine has always been an important focus area for the Scandinavian Tourist Boards, and historically, we have worked on, and with, multiple projects

to position and strengthen the Scandinavian culinary scene to appeal to a wide variety of people and groups, with the purpose of driving more travellers to our region.

Culinary experiences, especially local cuisines, are one of the top categories that American travellers consider in choosing a destination to visit. Scandinavia already stands strong in this category, and is gaining ground every year with the continuing emergence, and rising popularity, of “New Nordic Cuisine,” as well as its diverse restaurant scene ranging from Michelin acclaim, through farm-to-table freshness, all the way to street food, where innovation and experimentation with alternative ingredients flourish.

### Scandinavian Tourism Sites

**GoScandinavia:** <http://www.goscandinavia.com/scandinavia/go-scandinavia>

**VisitSweden:** <http://www.visitsweden.com>

**Visit Denmark:** <http://www.visitdenmark.com/usa>

**Visit Norway:** <http://www.visitnorway.us>

**Visit Finland:** <http://www.visitfinland.com>

### Noter

1. Biesiada (2016), Deloitte (2017).
2. Dolecki (2017).
3. Price (2016).
4. Merry (2013). The Kennedy Center of Performing Arts in Washington DC (see [kennedy-center.org/nordiccool](http://kennedy-center.org/nordiccool)) is the living memorial to the late President. The center has been presenting festivals celebrating cities, countries and regions of the world since its opening in 1971.

### References

Biesiada, Jamie (2016). PhocusWright's US Online Travel Overview Report. *Travel Weekly*, 15 January 2016. [Online.] Available at <https://www.travel-weekly.com/North-America-Travel/US-travel-market-grew-5-percent-in-2015-Phocuswright> [Accessed 5 November 2018.]

Deloitte (2017). *2017 Travel and Hospitality Outlook*. [Online] Available at <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/consumer->

[business/us-cb-2017-travel-hospitality-industry-outlook.pdf](#) [Accessed 5 November 2018.]

Dolecki, Gina (2017). The Member Companies of U.S. Tour Operators Association Provide Tours, Packages and Custom Arrangements for 8.6 Million Travelers Annually to Enjoy Destinations and Experiences across the Entire Globe. *United States Tour Operation Association*, 29 November 2017. [Online.] Available at <https://www.ustoa.com/press-releases/2018-survey-results> [Accessed 5 November 2018.]

Merry, Stephanie (2013). Nordic Cool 2013 Takes Over the Kennedy Center. *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2013. [Online.] Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/nordic-cool-2013-takes-over-the-kennedy-center/2013/02/14/ea7ef062-6fd6-11e2-8b8d-e0b59a1b8e2a\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f56c3fe77681](https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/nordic-cool-2013-takes-over-the-kennedy-center/2013/02/14/ea7ef062-6fd6-11e2-8b8d-e0b59a1b8e2a_story.html?utm_term=.f56c3fe77681) [Accessed 5 November 2018.]

Price, Will (2016). Millennial Travel Trends: A Look at the Largest Generations' Habits. *Internet Marketing Inc.*, 5 April 2016. [Online] Available at <https://www.internetmarketinginc.com/blog/millennial-travel-trends/> [Accessed 5 November 2018.]