

A part of Swedish history

The Göta Canal – Sweden's biggest cultural historical construction



The historical canal

Who first hit on the idea of a canal straight across Sweden? Was it legendary king Gustavus Vasa? Or perhaps Sweden's bishop of the day, Hans Brask? No matter whose the idea originally was, it was to take centuries, and many complicated studies, before the canal was finished. Not until the resourceful Baltzar von Platen came on the scene were the ideas and plans translated into action and the Göta Canal became a reality.

I have never been able to regard a map of Sweden without feeling that the mighty waters Mother Nature enveloped in this country were made ... to one day provide water transport from coast to coast."

That was how the Göta Canal's creator, Baltzar von Platen, described the need for a water route through Sweden.

The 1780s saw a technological breakthrough that hastened the construction of the Canal. Its designers abandoned the idea of following existing waterways and began building series of locks, grouping them together instead of spreading them out over a long stretch of canal.

The opening of the Trollhätte Canal in 1800 showed that large, complex lock and canal constructions were possible, and that modern technology could triumph over mountains, waterfalls and other obstacles in nature.

Since 1429, Denmark had demanded a duty for all foreign vessels passing Öresund. One of the strongest arguments for building the Canal was that Swedish merchant and warships needed free passage through the country instead of having to pass Öresund.

Construction begins

In 1809, Baltzar von Platen and Scottish canal builder Thomas Telford presented a detailed plan for a water route through Sweden. An overwhelming majority of the parliament voted to build the Göta Canal. One of the fans of the cause was the newly crowned King Carl XIII. He set out the rules for the construction of the Canal in the royal charter that created the Göta Canal Company.

Took longer than planned

The gargantuan project finally got started. Construction was expected to take ten years, at a cost of 1,597,481 riksdaler. But the calculations were off by far – the Canal took 22 years to build at a cost almost six times the estimate. The first lock was completed in Forsvik in 1813, but the entire canal didn't open for traffic until 1832.



Baltzar von Platen,
founder of the Göta Canal





New technology

The canal project covered a large area and was carried out by thousands of Swedish soldiers. It was gruelling work: all digging was done by hand. One rumour has it that the canal was built by Russian prisoners of war, but in fact the only Russians involved were a single company of deserters from the Russian army.

Lock-building technology developed over time, in part thanks to experiences of canal-building in Britain. Telford advised von Platen to hire a number of skilled British engineers as foremen. Tools were also bought from Britain. In 1822, Baltzar von Platen opened a small repair shop in Motala. From this modest start, with just 22 employees, the Motala Verkstad grew to one of Sweden's most important industrial facilities, sometimes called the cradle of Swedish industry. Forsvik, on the other side of Lake Vättern, was home to one of Sweden's first technical schools, where brothers and engineers Nils and John Ericsson were key players.

But above all it was Baltzar von Platen's

great stubbornness, goal-orientation and focus that created the conditions for the project, which would never have been completed without him. In an age when Sweden needed new role models and leaders off the battlefield, von Platen became a hero of the new era, and one of the nation's first entrepreneurs.

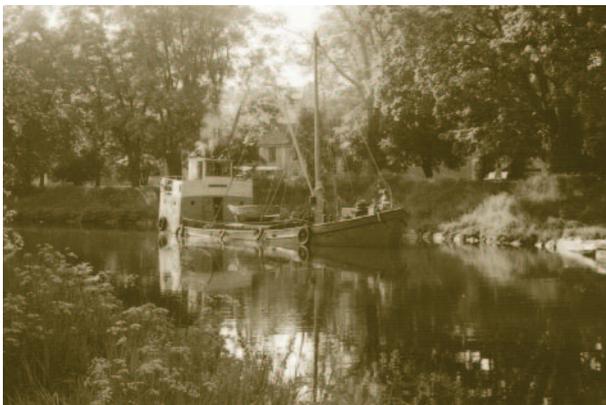
The grand opening in 1832

The Västergötland part of the canal was completed in 1822; ten years later the whole gigantic project was finished. Shippers could now travel from Göteborg, via the Göta Älv River and the Trollhätte Canal, through Lake Vänern, from Sjötorp to Karlsborg on Lake Vättern, and on from Motala to Mem on the east coast. The vision of "bringing the seas together" was reached. Baltzar von Platen died in 1829 and never got to see the solemn opening ceremony, when the royal yacht *Esplendian*, with King Karl XIV Johan on board, was pulled through the last lock at Mem.

The importance of the canal

It is a common misconception that the canal was never important to shipping because of the rapid growth of the railways. But today we know that the Göta Canal was a key transport stretch for at least a hundred years. The railway did increase in importance, but it didn't take over – rather, it worked with the canal. Not until the 1930s and 40s, when the Swedish road network was improved and the number of lorries on the roads grew, did land transports rob the canal of its importance. After a few decades of dormancy in the 1950s and 60s, the canal reawakened when it was taken over by leisure boats and tourism.

Today the Göta Canal is one of Sweden's best known and most popular tourist attractions. Alongside boating on the canal, "experience tourism" and activities around it have also become well-loved pursuits.



The Göta Canal's history in brief

Built: 1810–1832.

Cost: Nine million riksdaler, which corresponds to about SEK 15.3 billion at 2016 prices.

Labour: 58,000 conscripted soldiers participated, performing about seven million man-days. A man-day consisted of 12 hours. The gruelling digging was done primarily by hand.

Course: Mem at the Baltic to Sjötorp on Lake Vänern.

- 190 km long
- 58 locks
- 50 bridges
- Passes through five lakes
- Highest point 92 m above sea level

