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Virgin Islander Chosen as Saint Lucia at Sweden's Prestigious Adolf Frederick Music School

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Virgin Islander Natalya Bacot was chosen Saint Lucia this month at the Prestigious Adolf Frederick School of Music in Sweden. By. PROVIDED

Natalya Bacot, a Virgin Islander who attends the prestigious Adolf Frederick School of Music in Sweden, was chosen this month as Saint Lucia, a coveted honor for the ubiquitous December commemoration in the European country.

"The Lucia tradition is as integral to Swedish culture as midsummer and crayfish parties. Immensely atmospheric, this 400-year-old custom brings peaceful joy each year on 13 December – and it's spreading across the world," reads a description of the tradition on Visit Sweden, a website about the country.

Lucia Day – also called Saint Lucy’s Day – can be traced back to the 4th century. A Christian feast day, it commemorates the martyr Lucia of Syracuse, who, as legend has it, brought food to Christians hiding in Roman catacombs, lighting her way with a candlelit wreath on her head, the website says.

The December 13 was the historic Julian calendar’s shortest day, and according to Swedish folklore, the long night was dangerous, with dark spirits out in force. Staying awake was paramount, and eating helped – another connection to the small feast associated with the Lucia celebration. Lucia made her first recorded appearance in a Swedish rural home in 1764, but the custom really established itself in the 1900s.

According to Visit Sweden, if you're in the country in time to catch a Lucia celebration, you'll be able to experience these at various places, such as churches, town halls and even restaurants (as well as on TV and radio). According to tradition, Lucia appears before dawn, but for practical reasons many events are held at dusk. Don't be surprised if the Swede next to you joins in with the choir – most Swedes know the main Lucia song, “Sankta Lucia”, off by heart.

The website continues with its description: "Leading the procession, Lucia is trailed by handmaidens ('tärnor'), star boys ('stjärngossar') and gingerbread men ('pepparkaksgubbar'). If children are participating in the procession, they may choose to be dressed as Christmas elves ('tomtenissar'). As for each individual group's attire, Lucia's defining feature is the lit-up wreath on the top of her head. Traditionally, real candles were used, but for safety reasons they've been replaced by battery-powered ones – and the same goes for those carried by the handmaidens, who typically wear glitter or a wreath (without candles) in their hair and glitter or a decorative red ribbon around the waist. Star boys wear all-white – just like Lucia and the handmaidens – with cone-like hats and star-adorned sticks. The lantern-carrying gingerbread men sport full gingerbread costumes, replete with white icing – you'll find these in many Swedish retailers.

"As well as being the bearer of light, Lucia's offering of treats is just as key. She has been immortalised carrying a tray of fika by several iconic Swedish artists, such as Carl Larsson. The eats are gingerbread biscuits and an S-shaped saffron bun called a “Lussekatt” – a treat almost as classic as the cinnamon bun. Many Swedes would find it sacrilege to eat a Lussekatt at any other time than Lucia and the weeks leading up to Christmas. To drink, you'll sip little cups of “glögg” (mulled wine), served with almonds and raisins. Coffee was served traditionally and it's still an option.

"Lucia is anchored in tradition but it keeps evolving. In the past, the crowning of the national – and local – Lucia was an anticipated event, inviting newspaper readers to vote on their favourite, based on a headshot and a short description. Since this had a whiff of beauty contest about it, it has been relegated to the past. These days, schools tend to select their Lucia randomly, lottery-style, and in the younger year-groups it's not unusual to see more than one Lucia. As for other modern updates relating to the must-have baked goods, Lucia often serves up vegan alternatives.

"No longer confined to the borders of Sweden, the custom as it's celebrated here (there's a different Lucia Day variant in Italy, for example) has spread to other countries. In London, for instance, The Swedish Church puts on events that are so popular that they have to be booked months in advance. You'll also find Lucia events in countries including Germany, Latvia, Russia and China. Sometimes Swedes perform and in other cases non-Swedes have gone to the trouble of learning the songs in Swedish as a mark of appreciation. Experience it once and it's likely you'll get smitten, too – it's a celebration like no other."

