

VASAMUSEET

The Vasa Museum in an hour

TEACHER'S GUIDE

“The Vasa Museum in an hour” teacher’s guide is designed for teachers who are leading their own groups around the museum. The guide is based on the most frequently asked questions and provides an overview of Vasa’s history. Follow it as a script or pick and choose specific sections. It is suitable for all ages, provided you adapt the language to suit your group. See the map for location references 1–6.

1. LOCATION: ENTRANCE LEVEL, FLOOR 4

Meet the ship!

Stop for a moment and soak in the feeling of seeing this magnificent ship – in real life! What do you think? Share your impressions with each other.

The warship Vasa was built in Stockholm between 1626 and 1628 for use in Sweden’s war against Poland-Lithuania. It was commissioned by Swedish King Gustav II Adolf.

Is the ship authentic?

Today, around 98% of Vasa’s timber is original from the 1600s. The new sections have a smoother surface and are sometimes lighter in colour to make it clear which parts are not authentic. The ropes you see are not original; they are reconstructions that were added later. The masts on Vasa originally stood twice as tall, but now only the lower masts remain. The museum’s roof features new masts showing Vasa’ full height before the accident: 52 metres. The gun ports are empty, but three original guns are on display in the museum. The other guns were salvaged from the ship in the 1600s, some time after the disaster.

How did they get the ship into the museum?

Vasa lies in what used to be a dry dock, which is a repair basin for ships. The dock outside is filled with water in the summer. The floor beneath the ship is the concrete pontoon that Vasa was placed on during the salvage operation – and it is the very same pontoon that the ship was on when it floated through the rear wall of the museum in 1988, before they finished building the museum.

Why aren’t visitors allowed on board?

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Vasa is the only 17th century ship in the world that is on dry land. Over a million people visit the museum every year. The weight and vibrations from all their footsteps would quickly destroy the ship if they were allowed on board.

2. LOCATION: THE “HIS MAJESTY’S SHIP” EXHIBITION, FLOOR 4

The disaster

Gather around the model depicting the moment when Vasa sank on 10 August 1628. See how the water rushes in through the gun ports. If they had been closed, Vasa might have survived, at least for a little while longer. Beneath the model lie original stones from the ballast, which was intended to stabilise the ship. Unfortunately, when the ship listed, the stones shifted and threw the ship even further out of balance. You are allowed to touch the stones.

Why did Vasa sink?

On the wall nearby is a model showing the interior of Vasa. The ship’s balance depends on the combination of ballast, other cargo, guns, crew, the shape of the hull and wind strength. Changing one thing affects another. We do not know exactly how the ship was loaded or where people were positioned, so we will never know the exact cause of the disaster. But a simple answer is: Vasa sank because it was unbalanced. The part of the ship above the water was too heavy compared to the part below the water.

Despite this, everyone agrees the ship was built with great craftsmanship; that has never been in doubt.

Whose fault was it?

The slideshow in the next room tells the story of the inquest held at the royal palace in Stockholm a month after the accident. The aim was to find someone to blame, but no one was convicted or held responsible.

3. LOCATION: THE “LIFE ON BOARD” EXHIBITION, FLOOR 5

What was life like for the people on board? The great cabin and the gun deck

The cabins were where the captain and officers (the people in charge on the ship) lived. Vasa’s great cabin was decorated with sculptures on the walls and furnished with comfortable benches and tables. The benches could be folded down and used as beds. The cabin even had windows with glass panes – impressive because glass was actually very expensive in Sweden at that time!

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Near the cabin and the steerage is a reconstruction of part of a gun deck. The gun deck is where the rest of the crew lived – seven between each gun on each side of the ship. There they would sleep right on the wooden deck. Most of the crew were sailors and soldiers. They were forced to serve on the warships and often came from poor families.

Life on the warships was uncomfortable and difficult. It was crowded on board, and there were many rules to ensure that there was no trouble among the crew. The officers threatened severe punishment if these rules were broken.

The crew's belongings

The display cases in the exhibition contain remnants of the crew's belongings that were left behind in the ship when it sank. Here you can see items such as clothes and shoes, as well as the things needed to mend them: needles, thread and cobbler's tools. Some of the clothes show patches where they have been mended.

Compare the cooking equipment in the two display cases on either side of the large cauldron.

The officers had faience (tin-glazed earthenware) plates, pewter bottles, silver spoons and drinking glasses, often imported from Europe. The sailors and soldiers had wooden plates and jugs. The wooden spoons were usually homemade.

One of the display cases contains a board game, dice and clay pipes. This shows that they made plans for their free time. If there was no wind, they couldn't sail, and there was no way of knowing for sure how long they would have nothing to do.

How did they go to the toilet?

It is believed that the officers had their own chamber pots, which they kept in their cabins and emptied into the sea. You can see some of these chamber pots in one of the display cases. The rest of the crew, several hundred people, had to share two toilets. These are located in the beakhead, at the very front of the ship. They look like square boxes, but have no lid or bottom. One of them can be seen from floor 6 on the other side of the ship. If there was too long of a wait, it was probably fine to stand on the sheltered side of the ship and urinate into the sea.

4. LOCATION: THE STERN, FLOOR 6

Why are there so many sculptures on a warship?

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Skilled carvers created around 700 sculptures for Vasa. The sculptures were painted in bright colours and nailed to the ship. They were carefully chosen to strike fear into the enemy, give courage to the crew and give hope to the Swedish people. Perhaps frightening faces, Roman warriors and guardian angels spoke to people in the 17th century in the same way that advertising speaks to us today?

High up in the centre of the ship's stern, on the transom, there are two large lions and the Swedish coat-of-arms. Above the crowned heads of the two lions are the letters G A and R S. They stand for Gustavus Adolphus Rex Sueciae in Latin – Gustav Adolf, King of Sweden in English. Above the letters is a young man between two griffins. The griffins hold a crown above his head. Gustav Adolf's father, Karl, used the griffin as a symbol when he was alive and was a duke. One interpretation of the group of sculptures is that it shows how a young Gustav Adolf inherits the throne after his father's death. If this is correct, it could be further interpreted as a clear message to King Sigismund of Poland-Lithuania, who believed that he was the rightful heir to the throne in Sweden as well.

Tip! Would you like to see what the sculptures looked like when they were new? Near the stern, for example, there is a replica of Hercules, painted to resemble what the sculpture is thought to have looked like when the ship was newly built.

5. LOCATION: SHIPYARD, FLOOR 2

How was Vasa built?

Vasa was built at Skeppsgården in Stockholm. This is where ships for the Swedish Royal Navy were built at that time. At that time, the shipyard was one of Sweden's largest workplaces, employing about 400 people – carpenters, sawyers, turners, top mast and mast makers, painters, carvers, sailmakers, ropemakers, blacksmiths and many more.

The exhibition features a model showing the intense activity at the shipyard in the spring of 1627. Vasa lies on the slipway, in the centre, ready for launch. Next to Vasa is a ship under construction, where the fore and aft stems have been raised and work on the hull has begun. This is Vasa's sister ship Äpplet (The Apple), which has now been found in the Stockholm archipelago. Pictures on the wall in the exhibition describe the entire shipbuilding process, from the search for the right timber in the oak forest to the rigging of masts, ropes and sails.

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6. LOCATION: THE SHIP, FLOOR 2

How is Vasa preserved?

In the museum, it is important to keep the indoor climate stable. The humidity and temperature must not fluctuate. The climate is controlled by an advanced system that ensures that the temperature around the ship is always 18°C. What look like chimneys on the floor at the bottom of the museum are parts of that system. Light can also damage the ship, which is why it is quite dark in the museum.

The conservation agent PEG (polyethylene glycol) has made the ship's surface look glossy, but it is what protects the wood both on the outside and a little way in. Here and there on the ship, you can see yellowish-white patches. Most of these are residues of PEG, while others are from a chemical reaction that occurred when iron residues in the wood came into contact with oxygen in the air.

The museum's conservators and carpenters are constantly working to preserve the ship. In the 2010s, the museum began the process of replacing the bolts with new stainless steel ones, and almost all the bolts have now been replaced. In 2024, after many years of preparation, work began to replace the support structure on which the ship rests. If you see anyone on board or beneath the ship, they are most likely working on Vasa's new support structure.