



## Stylist's Lizzie Pook travels to Älmhult to find out how the world came to worship at the church of Ikea

ILLUSTRATION: PETER TARKA

**I**t could be said that life's most poignant moments are punctuated by trips to Ikea. Our first week at university is preceded by a schlep around the nearest store to load up on glass tumblers and scented tealights. Our first flat is duly decked out with Karlstad sofas and modular storage units in unvarnished pine, sourced during a frenzied trip around our local branch – flailing

energy levels boosted by mid-shop meatballs. Even now, the majority of us will have at least one piece of Ikea furniture at home: a Billy bookcase, a Hemnes daybed, or some sort of touch-sensitive desk lamp.

Like it or loathe it, since its arrival in 1943, Ikea has changed the way we view domestic life. With 322 blue and yellow, warehouse-style stores in 28 countries – including most of Europe, North America, Australia, Russia and China – it services a generation of taste-conscious renters and space-starved families. And Ikea's is a wholly democratic way of approaching design – you're just as likely to come across an Ikea sofa in student halls as you are in a luxury holiday home; or find yourself drinking from an Ikea tumbler while travelling through Asia as you are to take one out of the dishwasher when you get in from work. Ikea possesses an all-encompassing appeal that

traverses ages, economic backgrounds and geographical locations – you can even find Ikea stores in the Dominican Republic and Jordan.

It's some success story. Last year, the company lured 716 million people through its doors: that's around 10% of the world's population. Globally, a Billy bookcase is sold every 10 seconds (although Ikea's bestselling product is actually the Pax wardrobe frame) and it's even been suggested that one in 10 Europeans living today were conceived on Ikea beds. Unsurprisingly, the shop's founder Ingvar Kamprad, now 89, has an estimated net worth of \$4.2billion, making him one of the wealthiest businessmen in the world. It's fair to say Ikea has reached cult status. The brand has such a monopoly on the way we go about our business that in Europe, at least, it has become less of a shop and more a way of life. According to some polls, more



→ people in Sweden trust Ikea than they do the Christian Church (80% versus 46%) and on Sundays in Britain, it is estimated that twice as many people visit a branch of Ikea than go to worship God.

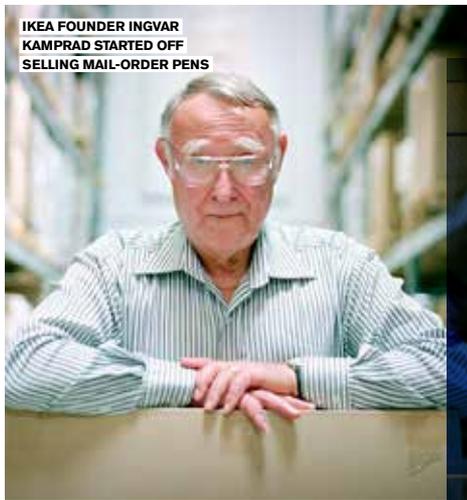
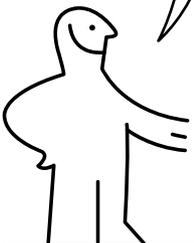
I've come to Älmhult, a small Swedish town with a population of 9,000 – and home to the first ever Ikea store – to understand how a Swede with a passion for low-key furniture design has transformed not just the look of our homes but the way we live our lives. Previously a remote and snowbound farming town, Älmhult is a small, almost eerily quiet place that now boasts an Ikea bank, an Ikea culture centre, an Ikea testing lab and the Ikea hotel – where the reading material consists of a Holy Bible and the latest Ikea catalogue. (Interesting side fact: 217 million Ikea catalogues are printed each year, compared to 100 million copies of *Fifty Shades Of Grey* sold globally.) If you feel so inclined, you can also relax at the Ikea bar or the Ikea spa (both open to the general public). You won't encounter a lot of folks in these parts, save for Ikea workers and the odd 'flat-pack' tourist who has wafted over from Denmark to visit the museum, but those you do see have Ikea flowing through their veins.

## THE SWEDISH APPEAL

Ikea's success should be no surprise, given the painstaking amount of work that goes into creating and testing some 2,000 new products a year. In the centre of Älmhult you'll find Ikea's product development centre – a warehouse-type building that brings to mind *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory's* nut-shelling room. "This is the famous butt test!" Mattias Andersson, head of the lab, tells me, as he gesticulates at a wooden bottom being mechanically pummelled into a mattress.

There are weights, winches and pulleys, and – every so often – a Swedish man with a tool belt will walk past carrying a toilet in a purposeful manner. It's a convoluted operation, but one that defiantly undermines the easy accusation that Ikea merely churns out the cheapest products it can make. There's plenty of focus on its cultural heritage, too. The town's

**"ÄLMHULT BOASTS AN IKEA BANK, IKEA HOTEL AND EVEN AN IKEA SPA"**



**IKEA FOUNDER INGVAR KAMPRAD STARTED OFF SELLING MAIL-ORDER PENS**



**VINTAGE IKEA CATALOGUES IN THE IKEA MUSEUM**



**UNIVERSAL APPEAL: THE IKEA STORE IN BEIJING**



**STYLIST'S LIZZIE TAKES A REST ON THE WORLD'S LARGEST ALLEN KEY**

big draw is the Ikea museum. Showcasing old Ikea uniforms, room set-ups from every decade and, in one area, a painting of an Ikea store on the moon, it's an in-depth look at the making of the uber-brand. My effervescent tour guide Per is the living embodiment of what you'll find scrawled across the walls of the museum: extracts from Ingvar Kamprad's 1976 book *The Testament Of A Furniture Dealer*, which outlines – with arguably missionary-esque zeal – Ikea's nine core principles. "It is our duty to expand," it says. "Those who cannot or will not join us are to be pitied. What we want to do, we can do, and will do, together. A glorious future!"

It just so happens, however, that Ikea also puts quite a lot of effort into offering us things we didn't even know we needed until we find ourselves standing in front of a box of toilet brushes screeching, "But they're only £2!" In internal documents these products – the tiny 90p Mållen clips, the bags of pegs – are referred to as "hot dogs", because they cost the same as, or less than, the frankfurters available after the checkout. And this focus on cut-price items is integral to the brand's success. Kamprad remains consistently and unashamedly concerned with getting the most out of his business. Crucially, when the flagship Ikea store (in Stockholm) was designed, he demanded that it follow the same circular architecture as the Guggenheim museum in New York. That way,

people couldn't take shortcuts around the store – it stuck, obviously, much to the dismay of millions of shoppers the world over who now find themselves traipsing through aisles of decorative rugs, obediently following arrows, when all they wanted was a draining board.

But it's not just low prices. Ikea has succeeded with its flatpicks where others have failed and this is undoubtedly down, in no small part, to the enduring appeal of Swedish design. "The Swedes have always had high standards when it comes to aesthetics," says Julia Begbie, deputy director of interior design studies at KLC School of Design. "Scandinavian designers have always been more sensitive to the use of colour and light – they have to be, given the variance of light levels across the year and short days in the middle of winter. In a tough climate it's critical that products are efficient and functional – the best Swedish design is quiet, simple, with strong underlying shape that has been pared back to the absolute minimum."

With 19 stores, Ikea is certainly popular in its birthplace of Sweden (it's even one of the most sought after workplaces for Swedish graduates); but it is not its most lucrative country by a long-shot. Germany, with 44 stores is Ikea's biggest market, followed by the US, with



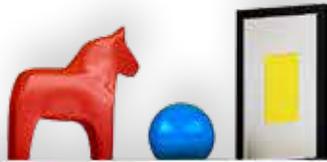
→ 40 stores, France, the UK and Russia. Ikea took the UK by storm when it imported its iconic aesthetic in 1987 (when the first UK store opened in Warrington) and it hasn't released its hold since. "When Ikea launched – telling us to 'chuck out our chintz' – the contrast with the typical British interior of twee style with bows and frills could not have been more marked," says Begbie, suggesting it made everything that went before look almost pompous. "We were ready to embrace clean style." And the whole world has followed suit. In Asia, Ikea's clean lines are paired with their traditional dark woods and minimalist decor; and young renters in India will soon be able to marry flashes of colour and gilding with Ikea's natural textures and neutral styles (agreements are in place to open two stores there). In fact today, the Ikea aesthetic remains exactly the same wherever you travel. A Billy bookcase in Japan will look exactly the same as a Billy bookcase in Lithuania. And this is a conscious decision. "We stick to our own style globally," says Ikea's design manager, Marcus Engman. "That's very important to us. We are a Scandinavian company and we are proud to be a Scandinavian company. That's what makes us stand out from the crowd."

There is a third, and somewhat surprising, facet to Ikea's appeal. In 2011, researchers at Harvard Business School pinpointed 'The Ikea effect', demonstrating that people attach greater value to products they build themselves (such as Ikea's flat-pack designs). They even discovered that we would be willing to pay more for an item of flat-pack furniture than one that came ready-assembled.

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The man who resides at the centre of this whole operation, Ingvar Kamprad, grew up on a farm in the village of Agunnaryd, near Älmhult. At the age of five he started selling matches to neighbours, then went on, over the next few years to dabble in seeds, pencils, Christmas tree decorations and greeting cards, before his father gave him a sum of money in 1943 when he was 17 as a reward for doing well at school. Kamprad used it to register the mail-order business he was working on, setting up office in a shed in the garden and naming the fledgling company Ikea, after his initials (IK), plus the farm (Elmtaryd) and the village (Agunnaryd). Ikea originally sold pens, wallets, picture frames and nylon stockings.

Soon enough, business started to take off and furniture, such as armchairs, was introduced in the late Forties. The company's first showroom opened in Älmhult in 1953, but it was three years later when things got *really* interesting. Gillis Lundgren, a young draughtsman hired by Kamprad, was loading a bulky table into the boot of a car. Realising it wouldn't fit, he suggested they take the legs off and put them underneath, to make the table easier to transport. Thus flat-pack furniture was invented – all items were subsequently shipped in this way – and a revolution was born. Now, the model is crucial to Ikea's success. "Ikea is very open about the reasons why their products are so affordable,"



## 10 THINGS YOU NEVER KNEW ABOUT IKEA

*Sure, we know about the Daim bars but Ikea can still surprise*

**1. Ikea uses approximately 1% of the world's entire commercial supply of wood every year.**

**2. Products are named rather than numbered as founder Ingvar Kamprad is dyslexic.**

**3. In Kuala Lumpur, Ikea meatballs are served with fries rather than mashed potatoes.**

**4. The company was the first to portray a gay relationship in one of its adverts.**

**5. Customers have been banned from hide and seek in stores, as they were getting out of control.**

**6. The world's largest Ikea store is in Seoul, South Korea and covers 59,000 square metres.**

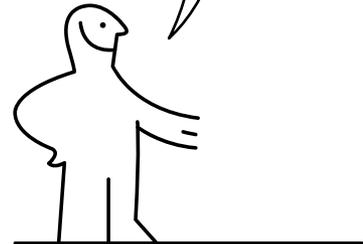
**7. In 2009, a Hamburg theatre staged an opera about Ikea called The Miracle Of Sweden.**

**8. Paper tape measures given out in a year in the UK would stretch from Croydon to Brooklyn.**

**9. Last year, 217 million Ikea catalogues were published in 30 different languages.**

**10. When a new store opened in Shanghai, China, a huge 80,000 people visited on the first day.**

**"IKEA FOUNDER INGVAR KAMPRAD STILL GETS HIS HAIR CUT FOR £5"**



says brand expert Rob Coke from Output Group. "It all comes down to the flat-pack. Because of this they can transport it cheaply and the customer provides their own labour."

Today, Kamprad remains a particularly thrifty man. On a normal day he drives his old faithful Volvo, gets his hair cut for £5 and has been known to take packets of salt and pepper away from the restaurants he eats in. He was even once turned away from a Businessman of the Year gala (where he was due to win the main award) because he arrived by bus.

Ultimately, Ikea likes to present itself as a transparent and low-cost company that doesn't scrimp on design. But its philosophy runs a lot deeper. As has been reinforced by my trip to Älmhult, Ikea is fundamentally founded on the (particularly Swedish) notion of equality and democracy – for those of us who want our homes to look beautiful without having to part with huge sums of cash, and for all of its staff who seem genuinely passionate and invested in the brand. Of Ikea's top 200 managers, 40% are women, and almost everything about the company is democratic, from the way they design their products (they work from five principles of 'democratic design': function, form, quality, sustainability and low price), to their staff canteens – which offer free ice cream and where everyone must do their own washing up. Add to this the fact that Ikea was the first company to feature a gay couple in its TV advertising (in 1994 in America), and its impressive approach to equality becomes clear.

Yes, Ikea may not be for everybody, and yes there are certainly those of us who refuse to put something in our homes that the person sitting next to us on the bus probably owns as well – but there is no denying it's a phenomenally successful business model that has given the brand unshakable appeal. Love it or hate it, Ikea is easy. Ikea is useful. It taps into our need for helpful and good-looking homes that make our exceedingly busy lives a little more manageable and the laid-back, functional Swedish way of life a little more within our reach. Its cult appeal shows no sign of waning. Three million Billy bookcases a year can attest to that.

