

MORE LAND THAN SEA – A CRUISE IN FINNISH WATERS

Thierry Courvoisier

(Flying Fish 2014/2 carried the story of Cérès's cruise along the southern Baltic coast from Denmark to Estonia, where she overwintered in Tallinn. We rejoin her here about to head north across the Gulf of Finland...)

Between mid July and mid August my wife Barbara and I sailed *Cérès*, our Centurion 40S, from Tallinn, Estonia to Finland, the latest leg of our exploration of the Baltic Sea. We enjoy sailing up in the north, where the light does not end during the summer weeks.

Leaving Tallinn on the south shore of the Gulf of Finland for Helsinki means leaving the Hanseatic world. The Hanseatic league was a union of North European cities organised to foster maritime trade which flourished from the Middle Ages until the 16th century. Cities like Gdańsk, Riga and Tallinn, but also Bergen and Koenigsberg (now Kaliningrad), belonged to this league, a centre of which was the island of Gotland in the middle of the Baltic Sea. The architecture and quality of the building materials in these cities is a testimony of the wealth brought by this organisation. Some of the 'local' specialities still to be found in modern shops give a clear indication of the extent of the exchanges. Thus Tallinn is proud of its marzipan, and some go as far as claiming that it is there that it was invented in the Middle Ages. Since almonds, the basis of marzipan, do not grow in the cold marshes of Europe, but rather in the warm climates of the southern and eastern parts of the continent, the tradition of producing marzipan testifies to long-lasting links between the Baltic Sea

Cérès under sail in the Finnish archipelago





*The roofs of the
Hanseatic city Tallinn*

and regions of the Middle East. Tallinn and the other Hanseatic cities were thus the maritime end of long terrestrial routes that linked Northern Europe to the rest of the then known world including China and the Middle East.

None of this is true of Helsinki. The long tradition of trade with southern regions ends on the south shore of the Baltic – its northern shore reflects the harsh lifestyle of the Vikings rather than the sweets of international trade. There are no sophisticated medieval stone buildings in Helsinki, but rather many early 20th century constructions, which tell a story of prosperity developing at that time. Older buildings are often in wood, brightly coloured and harmoniously shaped.

Leaving the south shore of the Baltic Sea also means leaving long, straight, shallow coastlines of sandy beaches, dunes and forest extending for many miles, with very few good natural harbours. The latter are naturally where the Hanseatic cities prospered. On the northern shore of the Gulf of Finland one finds no sandy beaches, but rather the granites of the Scandinavian Peninsula. The distance from Tallinn to Helsinki is some 45 miles and navigation is easy. If in doubt about the direction one can simply

A section of the long shore line of Helsinki



follow the ferries which cross between the two cities many times each day. There is almost always at least one in sight in either direction. Arriving from the south, the coast is preceded by a reasonable number of islands with clearly marked channels leading to the city's many harbours. No problem there either, provided ships are avoided.

We stopped at the Helsinki Sailing Club (HSK) on Lauttasaari island, a very friendly harbour for visiting yachts with all facilities, including chandlers and chart shops, in the immediate vicinity. Kalevi Westersund, a former president of the club, whom Vladimir Ivankiv, OCC Port Officer Representative in Saint Petersburg, had recommended as a helpful and reliable contact in Helsinki, welcomed us warmly, indicated the way to the sauna, and helped us get started with the preparation of our Finnish navigation. Indeed some preparation is necessary before sailing along the coast, as the 'reasonable' number of islands off the coast near the city does not prepare the newcomer for the challenge of sailing in the completely unreasonable dense mesh of water and land that one finds elsewhere in these 'waters'.

Our first call was therefore to the chart shop to find the charts and other documents that we would need to cruise in Finnish waters. Looking at the charts it is immediately clear that sailing between Helsinki and Mariehamn in the Gulf of Bothnia is not like sailing from A to B in open seas. The area is littered with rocks and islands of all sizes, from a metre or less to kilometres. The highest ones dominate the sea by a few tens of metres, the more treacherous ones are covered by a few centimetres of water. Routes

A chart of part of the archipelago. Routes with maximum allowed depths are indicated – we followed them with attention and precision





Leading marks in the grey Finnish summer of 2015

are marked on the charts to guide boats and ships and the maximum draught allowed on any route is indicated. Fellow sailors we met in the HSK warmly recommended that these routes be followed, as the regions surrounding them are not reliably charted. We were told about a boat which had hit a rock with an indicated depth of 6.1m while approaching a known anchorage – on enquiry, the skipper was told that a mistake had been made and the depth on the chart should have read 1.6m! Subsequent editions of that chart were corrected. The maze of rocks and islands made it easy for me to be convinced that we should follow the marked routes.

Following the routes is straightforward, provided that continuous attention is given to the navigation. There are a huge number of marks, most in the cardinal system, but some red and green. All must be followed without missing any as the route winds between large and small rocks. At times the passage is barely wider than a couple boat lengths, allowing a detailed look at the texture of the granite. Precision is required at the helm, which cannot be trusted to the autopilot for any length of time. In addition to the marks in the water and the little lighthouses, one also follows



Barbara at the helm as we follow a tricky route in company

leading marks and lights – large red and yellow panels which indicate a segment of route with precision when superimposed. Some are large enough to be seen several miles away. My solution was to take the paper chart into the

Following a route – the chart part



cockpit, install a portable chart plotter next to it, and tick off all significant marks on the paper chart as they were identified. Looking at the way the local navigators behaved indicated to me that they followed similar routines.

By the end of a day's sail we had seen hundreds of such marks. We had reminded ourselves ad nauseam that you pass east of an east mark, so leaving it to your west, and west of a west mark that you therefore leave to your east, and so forth. At the end of the day it was necessary to drink a solid beer followed by some considerably stronger beverages to straighten our cerebral cells again and get them ready to find north and south properly the following day.

Our course took us west from Helsinki in the direction of Hanko and Kasnaes, where we met up with OCC port officer Tom Tigerstedt. Tom told us how we could identify spots to stop for the night, and how to relate the charts to the other information in our possession. From then on we had all the tools and tips needed to navigate safely and locate suitable harbours and anchorages.

In the course of the month we stopped at many places, some rather small, where the



*Straightening neuronal cells after a long day's navigation,
and preparing for the next one*

first thing we were told upon arrival was how to find the sauna. We soon understood that saunas are an essential element of the Finnish way of life. At the HSK, even during the winter, when all boats are out of the water for fear of ice, the sauna opens every week for members to gather and share a beer, naked in steaming heat. Apartment buildings also have saunas in which the inhabitants meet regularly. Passing along the coast and islands it was not unusual to spot naked silhouettes on the shore on their way between sauna and sea or back. In Finland, therefore, a significant part of social interaction takes place between naked people, a somewhat disconcerting fact for most Europeans and even more difficult to imagine in America. Where and how the sauna emerged in Finnish society seems to be unclear, but it is certain that religious pressure was less successful in quenching the need for hot baths there than elsewhere on the continent.



Sauna on the rocks

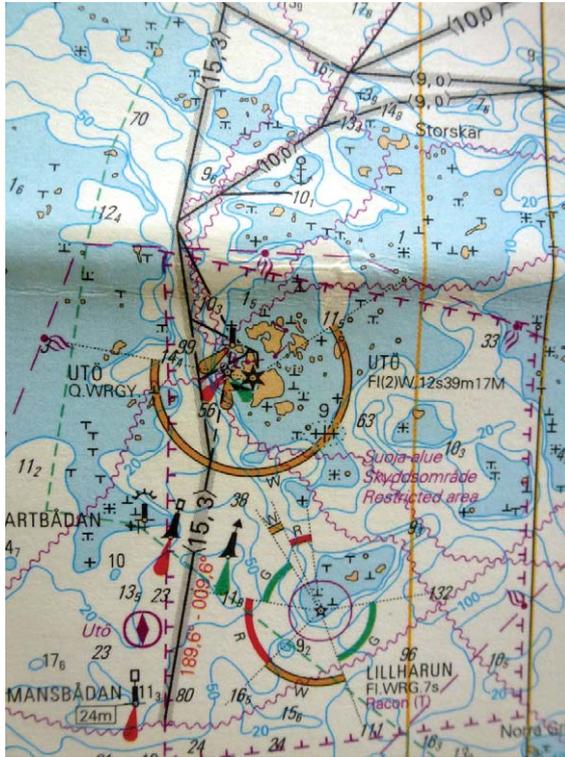


The weather was rather miserable – cold, wet and unpleasantly windy – during the summer of 2015, so we stayed a couple days in Kasnaes before moving on to Nauvo where, the weather continuing to be miserable, we again stayed for some days, making a bus excursion to Turku. In Nauvo, a large place by Finnish archipelago standards, we met a long-time friend and colleague astrophysicist, a professor at Turku University. He had a group of Russian scientists visiting and invited all of us to his cottage, some distance from the harbour.

There are many such cottages hidden behind the first lines of trees along the coast – so many that even in very small harbours one sometimes sees a moderately large supermarket and rows of mailboxes. People use this infrastructure as base camps to keep the small boats they use to reach their cottage, and to purchase the food and goods they need to live on their isolated islands. The cottages are often more like cabins than fully-fledged homes. They are used during the summer months for holidays, the state not being keen to have these houses permanently inhabited as that would imply keeping a much larger infrastructure, including for example schools, running year-round. The cottages are hidden, as the law requires that they should not be visible from the sea. Our friend had built his himself, as many do. Indeed tradition requires that every Finnish man should build at least one house in his life. Inevitably part of the afternoon we spent at our friend's cottage was used for a sauna that included a swim in the 16°C sea.

From Nauvo we moved further west to Mariehamn in Åland. Åland is part of Finland, but not within the European Union. How this is arranged is unclear to me, but it suits everybody, as taxes, particularly on alcohol, are very low. In addition, ferries travelling from Stockholm to Turku or Helsinki and making short stops there are allowed to sell tax free goods on board. Mariehamn, like Turku, is a very, very quiet city. We did nonetheless enjoy a 19th century *lieder* concert in the local church.

From there we moved southeast to Utö, a rocky and windy island at the extreme tip of Finland. Until a few years ago this was part of an extended military region closed to civilian navigation, but it now hosts a hotel open all year. The recent military past is clearly recognisable by the large number of trenches and holes in the rocks, and the remains of cannons. The population is about 35 in the winter and 300 in summer. That



Arriving in Utö

Viking centre, and one can visit some reconstructed buildings from the Middle Ages. Among the objects on display are models of the island over the centuries, which show that the island has grown significantly since Viking times. This is due to a rise of the land – Scandinavia was covered by a kilometres thick ice layer during the last glacial period, which melted some 10,000 years ago. The weight of the ice on the land having disappeared, the land now rises at a speed of about 5mm per year. We worked out that since our previous visit to these waters, when our children were still very young, the

these numbers are sufficient to sustain a human social life was illustrated by a marriage between two local people which took place the day we were there.

The next days saw us sailing east back towards Helsinki, where we were to leave *Cérès* for the winter. We enjoyed some magnificent sailing, following routes winding between northeast and southeast with mainly westerly winds. Barbara was at the helm and I at the charts, which did not leave much time for anything except keeping to our route. We set the sails not so much to maximise boat speed as to keep to a pace with which we could follow all the marks without missing any. It seemed to me that 6 to 7 knots was plenty.

We stopped in Rosala, another very small 'harbour'. Actually these small places often have a wooden jetty around which one finds some buoys. One ties the stern to the buoy and the bow to the jetty. Rosala used to be a



Utö in the wind and sun



One of many small and delightful harbours of the Finnish archipelago

land had risen by 13cm – or expressed differently, that there would be 13cm less water under our keel now than then, and some of the rocks just at the surface now would not have been visible then. This is geological phenomena taking place at a speed fast enough to be noticed within the span of a life.

Our cruise had taken us from regions of rather large islands near the shore to parts of the archipelago dominated by small islands, most of them uninhabited. Rocks are found everywhere. The larger islands, also rocky, are covered by forest. Blueberries and wild strawberries grow generously under the trees. The rocks, be they bare or appearing in the forests, have been polished by the glaciers to round, soft, almost voluptuous shapes. Any roughness has been wiped off, making them comfortable to walk on. While their shapes are soft, their firmness is not to be questioned and contacts between hull or keel on one side and rocks on the other are to be avoided, particularly when speeding along marked routes.

Approaching Helsinki and looking back on the month spent in the archipelago, we realised that we had had very little contact with people. We counted that we had exchanged no more than ten sentences with about fifteen people over that period, including my colleague and his four Russian guests. This was partly due to having spent a few nights at anchor, partly to the fact that not all Finns speak English comfortably, or to the bad weather that confined all of us inside heated boats, but it was mainly because most Finns tend to speak very little. They don't speak when they have nothing to say and, contrary to so many of our contemporaries, evidently despise small talk. This makes contacts difficult, but gives a very special rhythm to conversations, in which silence is part of the exchange and is amicable rather than hostile. We were nonetheless happy to spend our last evening in Helsinki with another astronomer colleague, very popular in science communication in Finland, together with his wife and a friend, all talking a lot, he having given a long interview to a national newspaper a few weeks before while naked in his sauna...

