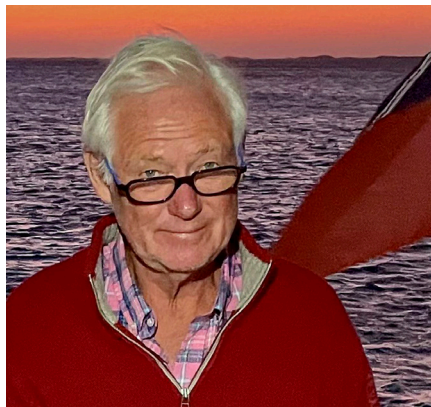


Cruising archipelagos 6,000 miles apart

Cruises in Los Roques and in the Baltic

William Garnett



In early March, Susannah, I and Aurora Sillars – the daughter of Calum, (RCC) joined Robert Holbrook (RCC) to sail his XC38, *Maria* from Antigua to Bonaire, with the hope of stopping for a week in the Los Roques archipelago 120 miles north of Caracas.

This is a rarely visited area, due to the mix of Venezuelan politics, associated poverty and violence. It has been a no - go area for nearly twenty years, and as far as the FCO goes it remains so. However, advice both from the local

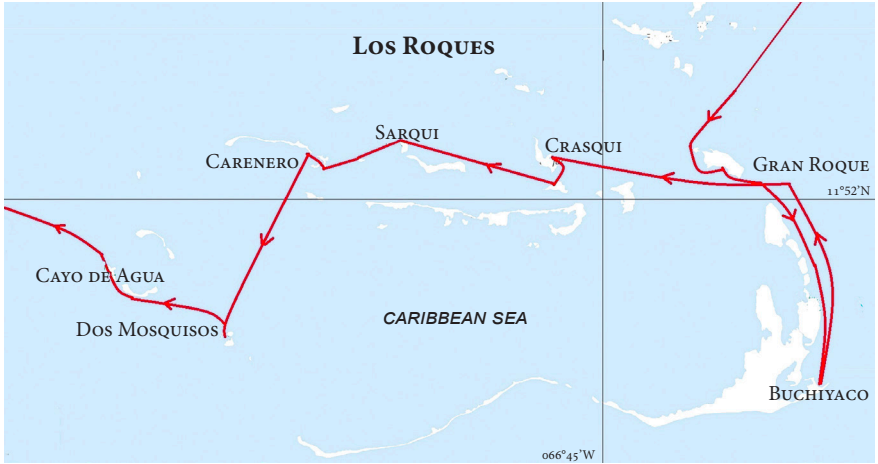
agent based in Gran Roque (the main island) and Noonsite indicate that, provided you keep your wits about you, continually assess risk from both reef and rogue, you can visit this remarkable group of coral reefs (cays).

We armed ourselves with a 20 year old addition of Chris Doyle's *Cruising Guide to Venezuela and Bonaire*, Don Street's even older *Pilot of the Eastern Caribbean* (Venezuela), an Imray chart D22 of the archipelago and the limited charting on Navionics, provisions for 16 days, and of course ample lures.

The consistency of the trades meant that Robert had promised us a rollicking downwind voyage. However, a deep depression building in the central western Atlantic left us motor sailing for 60 hours. As compensation we witnessed three spectacular sunsets, the conjunction of Venus and Jupiter followed by the rise of a full moon, with the firmament of radiant stars



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above our heads. A good size tuna caught within 20 minutes of dropping the lure just off Monserrat, kept us well fed.

We were relieved after three days to pick up the light house on Gran Roque (light houses in the area are frequently out of order). Robert had appointed a local agent to provide us with advice and to deal with customs and immigration. It is possible to do this without an agent but there is a strict bureaucratic order that needs to be followed and doing it on your own takes a day. Alejandro Linares was not cheap, 250 US\$ per person to cover the entry and exit process plus fees for entering the National Park, but worth every cent. Having arrived in a pirogue he collected our papers and passports and was back within two hours not only with the stamps into Venezuela, but for seven days ahead the stamps out of Venezuela which is of enormous benefit as it obviates the need to slog back into 26 kts winds to Gran Roque (the established route through the islands is to go west with the Trades). Alejandro also provided the flag to show that we had paid the Park fee and included a SIM card which just about works and a useful local chart.

Gran Roque is a small steep to island of one square mile, offering very limited facilities (there is nothing at all on any of the other islands). It is

Studying the local chart with Alejandro and Robert





Downtown Gran Roque High street

run down with streets of sand. There is still a small airstrip (a remnant of the oil fuelled economy) used at weekends by a few local wealthy Venezuelans, who fly in to spend their weekend on their sports motorboats and by a few local visitors driven in high-speed pirogues, with monstrosly large outboard engines around the archipelago.

The old pilots and eyeball navigation make identifying routes through the reefs pretty straight forward. A common first stop is to anchor off the nearby island of Francisquis. The clear advice was that you move through the shallow areas only when the sun is at its

zenith, so we anchored south of Gran Roque to watch the clumsy pelicans diving for fish and to swim in the gin clear water to a remote white sand beach sprinkled with exotic shells.

The following morning, we left under Yankee (but with engine running) to sail south inside the main reef protected from the continual pounding of the waves, passing to the east of Cuchillo, to anchor in the lee of a small Cay - Buchiyaco. Doyle and Navionics disagree on the appropriate route and the agent agreed with Doyle, so we ignored advice from Navionics and weaved our way through the smaller inner reefs, which were surprisingly easy to spot.

Robert sails *Maria* like a dinghy and just as he and I had grown up together messing about in boats in Seaview, he thought nothing of us dropping our anchor

View from Gran Roque towards Francisquis



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Dropping anchor on the reef

literally on the sand itself in just under two metres of water, allowing the half gale, to hold us off, in nine metres. Swimming amongst reef fish just minutes after we had anchored was wonderful. (Dropping our anchor on rocks and lying off was to become a common theme when, just a few months later, we got to the Baltic and our next archipelago off Stockholm).

The following morning retracing our route, we headed five miles west, to anchor to the north-west of Crasqui, off a white sand beach with aquamarine water and only one other boat, (rather reassuringly a few wealthy Venezuelans on board along with their own security personnel). There are remnants of beach cafes, and the odd fisherman encampment, all built out of mangrove which covers many of the cays, but we saw nobody.

Unwinding in “one of the greatest anchorages in the Caribbean”



Sarqui to the west was the next recommended stop, which offers the opportunity to anchor right next to a reef, and off another white sand beach. We saw some of the best reef fish of our trip through these islands at this point.

The best anchorage we found in the islands was between the two tiny islands (Cao Remanso

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and Cao Felipe) to the southeast of Carenero. Leaving the reef close to starboard (the water is so clear you can't believe there is any depth under you) you can slip through a very narrow gap, avoiding shallow areas to port, arriving in a completely protected small natural harbour, with mangrove and white bay to the east, reef to the west and reef to the south. Street, describes it as one of the greatest anchorages in the whole Caribbean and Robert who has sailed these waters for years concurs.



Happy skipper, Robert and bosun, William, Carenero Cay

We swam on the outside of the reef wall in 6m. As the ground fell away into the deep dark blue the array of fish transfixed us. Robert, ever the responsible captain, kept one eye out for 'Jaws'. I was intrigued that having always been terrified of the prospect of confronting a shark, time diving and happily snorkelling had made me feel less like bait.

At sunset with Robert's electric outboard, we glided silently around the anchorage spotting turtles, barracuda, reef fish, storks, moorhens, pelicans, and

Robert and Aurora at the Turtle Sanctuary

other numerous smaller unspecified birds. Once again, a carpet of stars and the complete protection of the anchorage provided the most tranquil of nights.



There is a charitable Turtle Sanctuary and research station on the southern of the two cays of Dos Mosquitos, a few miles south. If you have the guts to get through the gap in the reef, which is narrow and approximately eight feet deep (if the coral heads haven't grown!) you can lie off the southern island in the most exquisite of anchorages in calm water whilst the Trades blow between NE and SE. Street and Doyle both advise that you can find the small gap in

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the reef if you approach on an angle of 060° magnetic to the palms on Bequeve (the northern of the two cays). As we approached, it became clear that the palms had been blown over sometime in the last 30 years, so we took a view on their position, and nudged in slowly. The station collects many of the turtles hatched on surrounding beaches and supports them for the first two years of their life before releasing them into the ocean. Some have been tagged and are now many thousands of miles away from their birthplace, but they will return in due course to lay their eggs. The walk round the southern cay reveals a reef running far out to the east and with the sun above you, the colours reflected off the reef are remarkable, and the clarity enabled us to spot numerous large fish, hovering up the local Bocadillo (sardines). The staff in their research station were grateful for all the provisions that we left them, (especially the tinned Fray Bentos) which Robert might have had to resort to had his Trans -Atlantic been any longer than it was.

Our final stop and the potential high points were to be the anchorages south of Elbert Quay and Cayo de Agua. The latter was the historic source of fresh water to the whole archipelago when Amero-Indians had eked out an existence. The fresh water is evidenced by verdant large palms growing out of the holes that were dug to source the water.

The entrance is shallow and tricky and with a strong south-easterly blowing, we anchored off Elbert to take photos of the sandy isthmus that sometimes connects Cayo de Agua with west cay. We had planned to stay another day, but having walked around the Cay, taken photographs and, with the sun once again falling into the sea (we had seen pretty much perfect sunsets for eight days in a row), we took the weather and left in a steady 15-20 kts to roar down to Bonaire.

Had we stayed the extra day, we would then have taken advantage of the opportunity to stop at Los Aves, which are even more remote than Los Roques, and break the 110-mile voyage, but the timing was wrong as you should sail to and enter Los Aves in full daylight. Los Aves is even less visited and a potentially higher risk.

Whilst not wanting to put anyone off cruising in this area, security remains an issue. We had switched our AIS off southwest of Monserrat and kept it off until approaching Bonaire. We didn't want to advertise our presence to anyone within a 25-mile range. At 0200, surfing down the waves, ten miles south of Los Aves, Robert suddenly noticed a vessel following and now closing on us, with unconventional lights. As it closed in, we switched off all lights and unrolled more sail and luffed up to accelerate. In the darkness it crossed astern not allowing for the change in bearing following our increase in speed, but then alarmingly came back across our wake. After a while mooching about, it turned away towards Los Aves. It would be good to think there were no ill intentions and these were lonely fisherman wanting company, but ...

We arrived at Kralendijk the capital of Bonaire in the dawn and reluctantly paid a Visitor Tax. Bonaire is a Dutch diving and kite boarding mecca, surrounded by

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very deep water. It is unlawful (and frankly impossible) to anchor anywhere off Bonaire and overnight, you must be on a mooring off Kralendijk. We spent a day touring the island on motorbikes (there's not much to see in truth) and at sunset sat with ice creams watching the cruise liners leave. We had left remoteness behind. The Los Roques archipelago had been a unique adventure.

William, Robert and Aurora at Cayo de Agua



With a newfound taste for sailing amidst archipelagos and with so many people recommending the Baltic, we left Cowes the day after the Coronation, in pouring rain and a strong south-westerly. Our plan was to day sail, as much as we could. We had a 'Troika' of Brigadiers keeping a watchful eye on our progress, as Andy and Fiona Bristow (RCC *Atlantis*), Nick Nottingham (RCC *Spellbinder*,) were taking a similar (coastal) route to Stockholm. We regarded ourselves as a mini RCC cruise, three yachts proudly flying our RCC burgees.

For all the talk of mast up or down, canal



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or coastal no one seems to state unequivocally that the coastal route in early May is utterly ghastly. North easterlies persist, the sea is shallow, sandy brown and cold (12°C) and horribly rough. I now understand what the 'bite' in German Bight, is.

Stopping at Scheveningen, we enjoyed a day off in The Hague, but the next day when arriving at IJmuiden a police launch roared up and fined us 500€ for having sailed inside the 500m exclusion of a wholly redundant tower. IJmuiden is one of those 'doubly bombed' (by Germans and allies) towns which offers little more than a bus ride to Haarlem. Haarlem was a deep immersion, windmills, clogs, canals.

Grim as Den Helder was, (we dodged a NE gale), one's romantic notions of sailing in the waters of the '*Riddle*' are aroused (forgetting the emphasis in the title is on '*Sands*'). When you get there, you are reminded of the great admiration we have for Carruthers and Davies, sailing amidst shallow, moving hard sandbanks; no one in their right mind should go near the place!

As the nor'easter blew, Andy decided to go offshore beating up to Cuxhaven, and we beat fifty miles to get in behind Amerland. You start the entrance eight miles out and in coming to the 'safe water buoy' find yourself with little water and breaking waves around you. The area is so open that there is little protection from the wind despite the lengthy detour.

The next day was much worse as we continued to punch into the NE 26 kts and rough seas. With a deteriorating forecast, we decided to seek protection behind Nordeney, Bad idea: the closer we came to the Island the larger and steeper the onshore waves, despite slowing to allow for the limited tide rise. We found ourselves surfing in on a two metre breaking wave towards the shore. As we accelerated, I turned hard into the wave, which broke right across the boat. With just 1.5 m

A 'Troika' of brigadiers aboard



under the keel, we were over the bank, and delighted to arrive in the small marina.

Timing for the long haul into the Elbe was good, and we joined an armada whooshed in on the early flood, all destined for Cuxhaven (which is rather charming and has a very protected marina). Entering the Kiel Canal at Brunsbüttel we stepped into late spring and early summer, as songbirds sang and cornflowers, poppies and lilac covered the banks. a

After a night's rest - *Spellbinder* at Rendsburg and us, in the wonderful anchorage further on and south of the canal, we both joined *Atlantis* at the marina built for the 1936 Olympics.

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One oft repeated and disconcerting RCC comment was that ‘unless you have hit a rock you are not trying’, I was keen to avoid this. The RCC pilot and the morass of data held by the Cruising Association, (CA) are both most useful. In truth Navionics have got it sorted, and locals told us that any foreigner claiming they hit an uncharted rock needed to look more carefully at their plotter. We had also been told that the Finns deliberately didn’t chart all the rocks so as to surprise the Russians if they ever returned. Also, not true. The modern charts are based on late 19th century Russian charts, now updated.

Having sailed solo to Hammerhavn on *Bornholm*, Susannah re-joined *Hero* after a sojourn for sun and grandchildren. As we sailed NE I was keen to stop at Utklippan, a pile of rocks off the SE tip of Sweden, with a lighthouse where a small harbour was blasted out of the rock. Arriving at dusk added to the challenge, as we wiggled through the rocks and teased our way in, with barely room to turn.

Pushing north the obvious next stop is Kalmar, a former viking stronghold, with its World Heritage Site castle, and fine baroque architecture in the town, reflecting the immense wealth created following the Union of Kalmar signed in 1397 brought Denmark, Sweden and Norway under a single monarch until 1523. (The kingdom stretched to the Russian border, there being no Finnish state until much later.)



Susannah, Kalmar Castle

The small island of Furo is a niche stop on the route north, offering just an old pontoon half the length of *Hero*, surrounded by rocks, a limitless horizon, and complete isolation. As we lit our barbecue on the sensuous, glaciated granite rocks, with Caspian terns screeching and swooping, jealously protecting their eggs both from us and the sea eagles, with swans leading their small fluffy cygnets through the shallows, and the sun high above, we experienced our first serious sensory overload. One of those moments, where whether life is short or long, there was nowhere, nor nothing, better than this right now.

By late May it was never getting dark, and throughout June and July, the crew at bedtime looked like a scene from *Fifty Shades*, as they wandered around in eye masks. Going to bed in broad daylight reminded me of the requirement, as a child, to have an afternoon rest, before being allowed to stay up. With sunrise by 0230

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our guests did not always appreciate the early starts, but what a joy they were, the stillness and calm punctuated by teeming bird life.

The beat north towards Stockholm (prevailing summer winds once the Baltic High kicks in, are NNE or SSW) offers either the 'Blue' coastal route, or a leg out to Visby on Gotland. Visby is worth a visit, having been a key Hanseatic port linking the whole of the Baltic. The medieval buildings have been wonderfully preserved, and you tie up right in the heart of the town. Whilst one of the joys of the Baltic are the kind summer breezes calming seas and little swell, the close fetch to Visby was the exception that proved the rule.

Rather than list all the islands that *Hero* visited on our subsequent cruise of the Stockholm and Finnish Archipelagos, (a rally organised by another club), this is what struck us. Mooring is straightforward either lying to an anchor, or if less space going bows to the huge smooth granite rocks, (into the cracks of which you drive your pitons for your two bow ropes) laying a stern anchor as you get close. Where there is a pontoon, (the Gasthamns) guest harbours, you go bow or stern to, hooking a stern buoy as you close the pontoon (a simple long hook is worth buying at Ystad on your way through). Whilst we had bought a bow ladder, it was

Alongside Stora Nassa

never needed.

Each Gasthamn, and many natural bays offer communal facilities, including an open barbecue, washing up bowls (they don't even want grey water in the Baltic) and picnic tables.

The footpaths around the islands are well marked with splodges of paint or seasonal ribbons. Great care of the local environment is shown by the local community. Recycling is everywhere (even on the smallest of islands) as are the rather 'fruity' smelling compost loos. Harbours also have floating pump out stations, (towed to land at the end of the season to be pumped onto the fields). It is unlawful to discharge sewage within 15 miles of the coast or an island, which makes discharge impossible, hence compost loos and the pump outs. A holding tank whilst not a legal requirement of foreign yachts, are a necessity in practice.

The paths range over smooth granite, woodland, bog and grassland.



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There is some open pasture on the larger islands, but mainly dense woodland comprising birch, beech, oak, larch, and predominantly pine. As for flowers and shrubs, wild lilac grows as trees bushes and hedges, and the fields were teeming with wildflowers, butterflies, dragon flies and migrating birds. Keep an eye out for ticks, (we collected five in our time and understood why all swedes are inoculated against Lymes disease and encephalitis) and for adders, of which we saw a few, (some large).

Saunas were ubiquitous and as people who thought, before coming, that sitting in a sauna was an unutterable waste of time and not frankly pleasurable, we were suprised. We loved the experience, (especially of cutting the wood, lighting the sauna, walking whilst it warmed up, and then stepping in, then out for dips and drinks) so much we are now looking at installing one next to our boathouse on the beach in Priory Bay. (If the chimneys alight, and the flag is flying, bang on the door). It's worth mentioning that our obsession with what to wear, (I suspect we all feel the fear that as you walk in that the others will be thinking 'Oh Dear!') the sauna is a place of peace, reflection and complete, not to say, obsessive cleanliness, where historically you would wash weekly in the only hot room, babies would be delivered, and the dead were laid out (no fire in that case!).

In the Åland Islands, sitting with huge Finns whilst the women were the other side of a lattice screen I asked in the silence (amongst the men, the women were having a wail of a time and not for the first time I would have preferred to have been with them), what they liked about the sauna. One looked me in the eye and said, "the silence". I got the message.

Following the rally our plan was to push NE to the Åland islands, and then east to Helsinki, leaving *Hero* mid-July at the NJK, 'the' yacht club of Helsinki.

Classic wood fired sauna and a midnight post sauna dip



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The Ålands sit between Sweden and Finland, come under Finland but have their own legislature and flag. Swedish is spoken either exclusively or, as you get closer to Finland, in the majority. They seem keen to cling to what they see as a more liberal, wealthy, and confident Sweden than the more austere and repressed Finland. The archipelago between Mariehamn (famous for the supply of many of the great sailing ships/ grain traders of the late 19th century) and Hanko in Finland is reputed to be the densest archipelago in the world.

We loved the wonderfully decorated midsummer maypoles on each of the various islands we visited over the following weeks. In their beauty,

towering above villages, they symbolised community well-being, hope, happiness, and a good harvest to come. For the week around the solstice the sun briefly disappeared, but the sunset never did, instead slowly tracking from NNW to NNE.

Decorated midsummer maypole towering above a village

The Ålands and Finnish archipelago through to Helsinki offer a huge range of anchorages and harbours which feel more remote. Indeed, many Swedes come to Finland to get away from the swarm of local yachts that sail out to the Stockholm archipelago straight after midsummer day. We sailed north to Isokari (60°N), where the Russians built a



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huge lighthouse in 1856. En route north we anchored at our favourite Åland Island, Setlinge which offers a completely protected anchorage, and a Gasthamn run by a local mother who was effectively the ambassador for the island. Catching the free ferry, on free bikes we crossed to Kumlinge to cycle to the 12th century St Anne's church with its 14th century frescoes.

The narrow cut through between islands and rocks, to Turku (former capital of Finland but now uninspiring) from the north is a natural wonder, as are many of the houses that run down to the water's edge with their small natural harbours in the rocks.

We enjoyed the new capital, Helsinki, especially the Lutheran and Orthodox cathedrals, the frontage built in the mid 19thC as a modest replica of St Petersburg, and our time at the hospitable NJK, who had done much to ease our way through the archipelagos. But there is a post Russian oppressiveness to Helsinki, both in the street layout and in the eyes of some of the people. The fear of Russia is real. So the change in the long term policy from not 'baiting the Bear' to joining NATO, and welcoming Biden to the doorstep of Russia, is a seismic shift. It made us appreciate the fear of the border states to Russia, but equally Russia's sense that NATO is encroaching on its sphere of influence.

Returning in late August, the one NJK anchorage I had missed on the way east, was at Ramsskar. The club write up states 'anxiety over the unmarked channels seems to have discouraged many members from visiting' and as nearly all local cruisers are in the 30-40ft range it was unlikely to be a challenge. The approach is interesting even after having had a few weeks of rock dodging. We had 0.4m under the keel and about 1m each side of the hull. There comes a point where you are committed, even if it means you may hit the bottom or the sides.

With a forecast of steady southerly breezes we decided we would sail at speed to the Huga Kosta, the Swedish High coast, a few hundred miles north of the Ålands in the Bothnian Sea, allowing us to go straight south to the Göta canal next year.

Unlike further south, the houses in the former fishing villages are more clustered around the edge of natural rock harbours. There is no fishing to speak of anywhere up the east coast anymore, with even the small herring having been hoovered up for fish meal for the Norwegian salmon. Nearly all properties are holiday homes which were almost completely deserted (the Finns go back to school/work in early August and the Swedes slightly later). The harbours and small copper-coloured houses are well maintained, and the simple Lutheran fisherman's chapels built from 1600 to 1650 have been the subject of immaculate preservation.

Our northerly point as the harbour on Trysunda. The name means three islands, but it is now one. That is because the centre of the ice age was on top of the Huga Kosta, (the ice was three kms thick). Since the thaw, the land has risen 800m and continues to rise at nearly one cm each year (allow for that if using very old charts). There are four outstanding timber chapels in the area, reachable in a day: Trysunda, Ulvolhamn, Bonham and Barsta.

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Ornate timber chapel in the Hügä Kosta, the Swedish High Coast

In four months on the boat, we only had two mechanical issues (a credit to the refit), one of which could have been serious. The engine ignition failed whilst it was running. Looking at the chart and with the weather deteriorating fast, there was the smallest Gasthamn an hour away, (Skatan) opposite the island of Brämön, but with a shallow and exceptionally narrow entrance up a river. We snuck our way in, no one to be seen, until on a

small pontoon appeared an old man with long white hair and beard, hand raised to beckon us in; a Pantocrator, who took our lines to a pontoon half our length. With *Hero's* bow in the grass verge, the former electrical engineer calmly helped me diagnose a faulty switch, a reward for our nautical pilgrimage to the Hügä Kosta?

Once south we explored some of the most remote rock anchorages of the outer archipelago, tying bows to, (even alongside) granite rock faces, during which we were blessed with late season sunshine, but consequential mosquitos. Despite finding ourselves in two separate live firing ranges, we enjoyed some of the best sailing, in complete isolation, but also in silence. The swans were still bringing up their cygnets, but the eiders and geese were depleted and the terns which had been so numerous and noisy had all migrated.

A change in the wind to SW brought three days of thick sea mist. It was time to pack *Hero* away, into a cosy shed at Swede Port marina in Nävekvärn next to the Commodore's yacht. During our 93 days aboard, the Baltic exceeded all our expectations and created lifelong memories for us.

Votive ship, Hügä Kosta

