

TEXT BY PETE BALDING PHOTOS BY HERNAN PATIÑO

SLOW RIDE
THROUGH THE
ÅLAND
ISLANDS

THE TINY, AUTONOMOUS ÅLAND GRACEFULLY STRADDLES TWO OLD RIVALS: FINLAND AND SWEDEN. OFFERING IDYLIC SEASIDE SCENERIES AND SMALL TOWNS, THIS GROUP OF ISLANDS ALSO DRAWS A WEALTH OF SUMMER TOURISM.

Åland is famous for its abundance of cycle tourists.



Boats are as common as cars in the archipelago.



LIGHTHOUSE MARKS THE SPOT

A UNIQUE EXCURSION from Eckerö on the western side of Åland is to visit the tiny island of Märket. The name means "mark" in Swedish, and signifies that this treeless rock was used as a nautical marker by early sailors. Since 1809, the skerry has also marked the border between Finland and Sweden.

In 1885 the Russian administrators of the Finnish side of the island built an impressive lighthouse. It wasn't until they finished, however, that they noticed they had built it on the Swedish side. It took 96 years for this oversight to be corrected. The border was redrawn in 1981

with a sharp zigzag down the middle to include the lighthouse on the Finnish side and compensate Sweden with an equivalent amount of space.

According to the Finnish lighthouse society, the lighthouse was automated in 1976. Volunteers spend several months of the year living at and maintaining this extraordinary but obsolete structure. This is also one of the best areas in Finland to catch sight of seals.

Write to matkat@majakkaseura.fi, or call +358 (0)44 320-0309 for information on how to visit Märket.

Tiny Märket island is shared by Finland and Sweden.



Slow was our theme for the week, and that suited me just fine. Helsinki may not be New York or Beijing, but by Nordic standards the Finnish capital is as hectic as it gets. Like many Finns who head out of the city in summers (the country has nearly 500,000 summer cottages for a population of five million), I too yearned for a leisurely trip in the countryside – this time in the Åland archipelago.

The thousands of islands and skerries that make up Åland are scattered across the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia from southwest Finland to within sight of the Swedish coast. Originally part of Sweden, the strategically located islands were ceded along with the rest of Finland to Imperial Russia in 1809 after a 19-month-long war. When Finland gained its independence from Russia a century later in 1917, the vast majority of the Swedish-speaking Ålanders hoped their islands would return to Swedish rule.

Finland, however, wanted to keep them. The dispute reached the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations, and in 1921 the League decided that Åland would remain a part of Finland but as an autonomous, demilitarised region.

Sweden and the Ålanders begrudgingly accepted the decision, but with its unique status, Åland's primary industry, shipping, prospered. The community has done so well, in fact, that envious Finns are often quick to point out the privileges that only the Ålanders enjoy. One of these is the exemption from compulsory military service, applicable to the rest of Finland.

THE LESS-TRAVELLED ROUTE

Although shipping is the major industry in Åland, tourism is a close rival. Many thousands of Finns and Swedes visit every year, especially in the exquisite summer months. Many arrive on the gigantic ferries

that shuttle back and forth every day between Åland, Finland and Sweden.

We chose the less-travelled route, the so-called Northern Line, and drove for a couple of hours from Helsinki to Kustavi, a small town on the very western edge of the Finnish mainland slightly northwest of Turku. From there we proceeded across the first major island of Åland, Brändö, to the smaller island of Lappo where we spent the first night. The islands are

connected with a multitude of ferries, which comply with a punctual schedule.

"THERE IS NOTHING TO DO HERE BUT RELAX."

MANDATORY RELAXATION
"There is nothing to do here but relax," says **Tiina Eriksson**, owner of Pellas gästhem (Swedish for "guest house") – and she's not being modest. Originally the Lappo village school, the large

red building with white trim now has apartments equipped in functional Nordic simplicity, each with its own bathroom and kitchen (WWW.PELLAS.AX).

Nearby there's a small grocery store, a post office, a bank, a full-service restaurant, and a small archipelago museum with a nice collection of the different types of skiffs and dinghies that once were vital to the local fishing and sealing industries.

The tiny island, four kilometres long and two wide, has about 40 year-round residents. The population swells to a few hundred in the summer when the 100 berths at the village marina are occupied. Fine-looking sailboats from all over the Baltic are a familiar sight in Åland.

We took a walk in the evening light after a satisfying fish dinner at the Restaurang Galeasen. The hallways tapping against the sailboat masts and the occasional call of a gull were the only noticeable sounds.

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

If there was any lingering urban anxiety left, the next step in our excursion would help purge it. On the opposite end of Lappo island is another ferry that

connects to the even more sparsely populated island of Björkö. This ferry operates on demand: I pushed the button near the ramp, and within a few minutes our ride had arrived.

While Björkö has a few houses and cottages, the primary residents are sheep who range freely in the large grassy meadows in the middle of the island. We were invited to take shelter from a sudden summer shower in the home of Anders Stenmark, who has been raising sheep here for more than 15 years. He offered us coffee and played us a couple of tunes on his *nyckelharpa*, a traditional Swedish folk instrument.

Soon after, his partner Eva Sundberg arrived home. She explained that she had just had a conversation with the sheep about the sudden cloudburst. Allegedly they had replied that they had weathered the storm just fine.

Once the skies had cleared, we found a picnic spot on a large slab of granite jutting into the sea. Thanks to Everyman's Right, a common practice throughout the Nordic countries, you are allowed to walk around or have a picnic on private land as long as you choose a spot well away from anyone's home.

STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

We proceeded further south along the Northern Line and took a much larger ferry to the island of Vårdö. This island is famous for its medieval church and as the home of author Anni Blomqvist (1909-1990) who wrote the *Stormskär* series of novels about the hard life of Maja, a fisherman's wife. It later became a popular TV series. In real life, Blomqvist lost her

husband and son to the sea – despite choosing a life on the water, not many locals knew how to swim.

"It used to be that a young man in Åland had two choices: to be a farmhand or a seaman. Many went to sea and came back and told stories about the world. That is why we have always liked having visitors here," says **Jarl Danielsson**. His wife Peggy operates Peggys Hantverk & Kafé, a little handicraft shop on Vårdö island (**PEGGYS.AX**, in Swedish).

Not far away is the equally charming Anna's handicraft shop which is run by Kurt Eriksson, a polyglot who after a life at sea returned to Åland replete with stories of the four corners of the world. A spry 80-year-old, he shared a few tales with us, played tunes on the fiddle, and showed off four of the 14 languages he claimed to know: Swedish, Finnish, English, and Spanish.

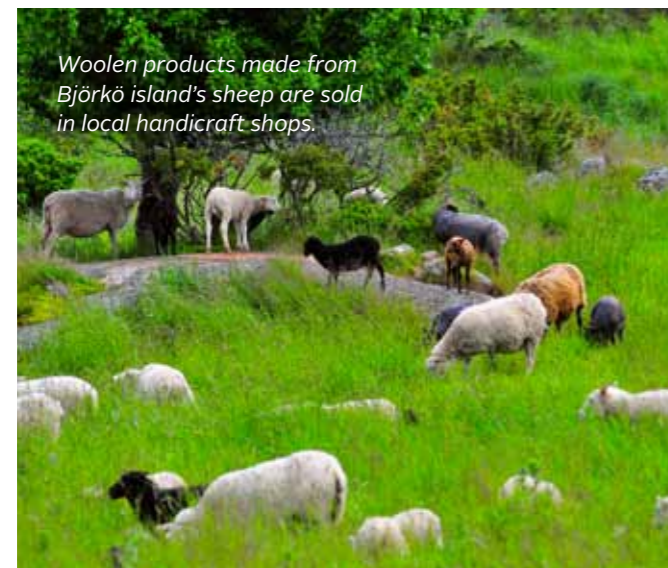
MORE BIKES THAN CARS

Vårdö is a short distance from Fasta Åland, the main island, where 90 per cent of the locals live. The capital city of Mariehamn is situated on the southern end.

We, however, proceeded north to Saltvik where we spent a couple of nights at Hjortö Stugor & Stockhus (**VISITALAND.COM/HJORTOSTUGOR/EN**), a collection of modern and luxurious cottages by a narrow bay. Our two-storey cottage was big enough for a large family to call home, but according to owner Maria Häggblom, the cottages are also popular with groups of sports fishermen who try their luck year-round.

Even on the "big" island everything is quite close. This is one reason why Åland is the most popular destination in Finland for cycle tourists. Approaching

"WE HAVE ALWAYS LIKED HAVING VISITORS HERE."



Woolen products made from Björkö island's sheep are sold in local handicraft shops.



The summer sun heats up Pub Stallhagen's terrace.



Kvarnbo guesthouse is located a short ride from the town of Godby.

SLOW BEER

GODBY, A SMALL TOWN about 20 kilometres north of Mariehamn, is home to the Stallhagen brewery and gastro pub (Getavägen 196, **WWW.STALLHAGEN.COM**).

While the microbrewery phenomenon has now reached most corners of the globe, it's a bit surprising that one of the best in Finland is in this little out-of-the-way hamlet in the middle of Åland.

The brewery started in 2004 and the restaurant opened in 2010. They have grown rapidly from a few batches at the beginning to over 200,000 litres a year today. They regularly brew about a dozen different types of beer ranging from a smooth honey beer to a hoppy American-style red ale, a personal favourite.

Restaurant proprietor **Christian Ekström** is a firm believer in the slow-food philosophy that emphasises using the best available ingredients which are accessed, whenever possible, from local producers. This is not only true for their food, but also for the brewing process. They even print the words, "slow beer" on their labels.

Ekström's hobby is scuba diving, and he is a member of the team that found several nearly-200-year-old bottles of Veuve Clicquot Champagne on a shipwreck in 2010. One well-preserved bottle of bubbly fetched nearly 30,000 euros at auction.

"We're in the middle of the Baltic Triangle where more than 20,000 shipwrecks have been found so far. That's more than in Bermuda," Ekström says.

The divers also found five bottles of beer. After analysis to extract the recipe at the VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, Stallhagen was recently granted permission to replicate the ancient ale by the government of Åland. The first samples should be ready next year.

According to Åland culture minister Johan Ehn, a portion of the profits from each beer bottle will go to charitable causes.

Mariehamn's eastern harbour is home to several boat restaurants.



Bomarsund, which is home to the ruins of the huge but never finished Russian fortress, we saw a ferry carrying more bikes than cars.

The Bomarsund fortress was destroyed in 1854 by combined British and French forces during the Crimean War. The large, disused cemetery nearby is a testament to the cultural diversity of that time, with grave markers from all the world's major religions and with surnames from every corner the Russian Empire and beyond.

The cultural roots run even deeper at the nearby and much older fortress of Kastelholm. Dating from the 14th century, this well-preserved castle played an important role in Sweden's imperial history. At times it was the residence of princes and kings. Resplendent in the evening sun, it's an imposing landmark.

BATS IN THE BELFRY

Our next abode was in the tiny church village of Kvarnbo, also in Saltvik. The view of the imposing medieval church whose origins date back to 1200 filled the window of my room at the Kvarnbo Gästhem (KVARNOGASTHEM.COM). The house was a stately home in the 19th-century, but had since fallen into disrepair. Martin and **Ella Cromwell-Morgan** have carefully restored it, and paid careful attention to maintaining its authenticity.

"We were able to buy back some of the original furnishings that were sold at auction," Ella says and points to a Victorian bookcase. "This was one piece we recovered, and based on an old photograph we were able to refill it with the same books."


THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN SCANDINAVIA
Mariehamn, built on a narrow peninsula and home to

about 12,000 people, is not a big city. But being the capital and the only major urban centre in Åland, it is surprisingly lively and diverse for its size. During our visit the streets were packed with merry makers popping in and out of the many bars, restaurants, and nightclubs. Even on a normal summer weekend, there was a carnival-like atmosphere.

It took about 20 minutes to walk across the peninsula from the east harbour, which was filled with hundreds of sailboats and yachts, to the west harbour where the huge ferries, floating hotels really, stop on their way to either Helsinki or Stockholm. One reason they stop here is to take advantage of Åland's unique status that still allows the tax-free sales of goods such as alcoholic beverages.

Before hopping on the next ferry to Helsinki, we still had time to visit the recently renovated and expanded Åland Maritime Museum (WWW.SJO-FARTSMUSEUM.AX/ENG) and the museum ship Pomern, the last of the great wind-powered freighters. The four-masted barque, built in 1903, was the flagship for local shipping magnate Gustaf Erikson, and was in service until the Second World War.

A dose of history was a fitting way to end our journey. At times Åland seemed almost too good to be true, that nothing bad ever happens here. Of course that's not the case, but this tiny archipelago is nothing less than an idyllic microcosm. And by the end of the week I felt refreshed and ready to face big city challenges again. ●

 **FINNAIR OFFERS** codeshare flights to Mariehamn twice daily on weekdays in cooperation with Flybe.