

FINLAND AND THE ÅLAND ISLANDS

Monday 21 July

Today we crossed from Tallinn, Estonia to Helsinki, Finland by ferry. The first thing to do was a major and quite expensive stock-up shop at the supermarket over the road, in anticipation of more expensive times to come in Scandinavia. Then along to check in early with the Finnish Eckero Line, and after a wait of an hour or so we were among the last to be loaded, along with many other motorhomes and heavy trucks.



Big ship, with many similarities to those used for Channel crossings. The only problem was to get away from the live music in the public areas, much enjoyed by most passengers. Also popular was lying out in the sun on and around the small

covered pool in what was a beautiful blue day – windy, though. We finally found a relatively quiet spot to read and use the internet before going on deck again to watch the ship's spectacular entry to and through the Helsinki archipelago.

You can never watch the final docking because of the need to get down to the cars and vans, so the first we saw of Finland was through the open rear of the vessel. We had the Tomtom all set to guide us to the camp site, but even so it is a stressful business being dumped in a busy part of a busy city like Helsinki without much idea of where you are or how you get to where you want to go.

The camp site, in the suburb of Rastila, is about 10 km north-east of the city. Outside the site, which is huge, we joined a queue of other vans from the same ferry before going through the registration process and being allocated a pitch. This is a typically – and necessarily – well-organised urban camp site, with well over 200 places for caravans and motorhomes, plus acres of room for tents and a separate area for group caravan/motorhome tours, which is a good idea.

The evening discussion point was whether we would go ahead the next day and try to organise a trip to St Petersburg, which can be visited without a Russian visa for 72 hours. This would involve a ferry or train trip from Helsinki. The final decision was that no, the very substantial cost and other administrative difficulties (hassles) involved could not be justified by such a short visit, and that while visiting this city is still on the list, a longer and properly planned trip should await the future.

We knew little about Finland before coming here, apart from the fact that it has lots of forests and lots of lakes. The latter emerged as the glaciers retreated, and like the rest of Scandinavia the country is rising from the sea. The population is now about 5.5 million.

From the late 12th century until 1809, Finland was part of Sweden, and Swedish is still officially the second language. It then became an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire until the Russian Revolution, which prompted the Finnish Declaration of Independence in 1918. This was followed by a civil war in which the pro-Bolshevik "Reds" were defeated by the pro-conservative "Whites" with support from the German Empire. Finland then became a republic.

Under the pre-WW2 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact Finland would fall under Russian control after the war. Stalin was worried that Finland would take control of Leningrad, and in 1939 invaded Finland. In what became known as the Winter War, the Finnish army defeated and humiliated the Red Army (the officer class having been decimated by Stalin's purges), but still had to cede a buffer zone round Leningrad. Finland fought the Soviet Union in support of Germany's Barbarossa campaign until 1944, but in the last years of the war turned again and drove out Nazi Germany from the north of the country. During the Cold War years, while under Soviet domination, Finland became something of a bridge between East and West, and trade with Russia resulted in rapid economic development and a generally pro-Russian inclination which still seems to prevail.

Finland is now officially neutral, but is a member of all influential European and world bodies. By all surveys the country enjoys a high quality of life and social welfare, and is generally a good place to live. Energy is inexpensive by world standards; the country has four nuclear reactors, plus one to be commissioned by 2020, and is planning for two more.

Tuesday 22 July

Another clear blue morning, warming up quite rapidly. The Metro (part over and part underground) station is five minutes from the site, and after only one stumble managed to get our Australian credit card to spew out two tickets from the machine, not always something that can be guaranteed. After twenty minutes in a smooth and fast train we were in Helsinki.

The capital of Finland lies on a peninsula that is deeply indented by natural harbours and surrounded by countless islands in the Gulf of Finland. It was founded in 1550 by King Gustav I Vasa of Sweden and was intended to compete with Tallinn. The town was ravaged by a plague in 1710 and burned to the ground in 1713.

When Russia invaded Finland in 1808, Helsinki was again burned to the ground. The next year Finland was ceded to Russia, and in 1812 the Russian tsar Alexander I moved the capital of the grand duchy of Finland from Turku to Helsinki. Meanwhile, the centre of Helsinki had been completely reconstructed under the influence of the German-born architect Carl Ludwig Engel, who designed a number of public buildings in the Neoclassical style. Helsinki has many theatres, an opera and ballet company, and several symphony orchestras. It would be a nice place to live, for two months in the summer anyway!



The first impressive building we saw was the 1914 main railway station, where we arrived in the city. This is a massive Art Nouveau structure, red granite topped by green, with a lofty arched main hall. It has entrances all around, so having found our way out to a vast open square we took



a while to get oriented. Finally, with the aid of two girls with tourist assistance T-shirts, we got ourselves on the main promenade and headed east towards the inner harbour. The main streets are lined with some pretty impressive buildings, dotted with sculptures and balconies, enclosing posh shops and offices.

We already knew that a tour of the harbour and the nearby islands was something that had to be done, so we straight away boarded the good ship "Doris", one of the many taking tourists on such trips. We had tried to find out from the tourist information office at the station just what



were the differences between the trips being offered, but as it turned out that this apparently independent source of advice was in fact an agency for a specific company they were only able to expound on the virtues of the vessel they represented.



There were lots of tourists – practically all local – but also lots of boats, so we got good seats on the open upper deck. We couldn't hear the commentary (in Finnish and English) but we had done sufficient research to make it unnecessary. The first important group of islands to be passed jointly form a fortress, called Sveaborg by the Swedes and Suomenlinna by the Finns, which initially secured the settlement from attacks by Russians when it was constructed in 1748. But

when the Russians invaded in February 1808, the bulk of the Swedish army withdrew, allowing the Russians to conquer Helsinki without a fight and besiege the fortress. Following its surrender two months later, Finland was ceded to the Russians.



We then meandered on a route that took us outside the inner group of islands, many of which are popular weekend or day-trip destinations with marinas, then inshore through more little islands and islets. Most are thickly covered with pine trees. We finally passed through a swinging bridge back to the small and congested inner harbour, where the several skippers were doing a good job

avoiding collisions and the harbour walls.

Beside the harbour is the attractive 1888 indoor market, a Victorian-era building completely renovated earlier this year. Its very authentic-looking stalls sell a wide variety of produce and include several cafes and small restaurants. We were looking for lunch, but were scared off buying anything, including lunch, at the advertised prices. On the other side of the harbour, however, lies the open-air Market Square (Kauppatori), all covered by tent-like awnings, and there is a long line-up of affordable food stalls. We shared a "special" on the menu, which included grilled salmon, sprats (very popular here), prawns and squid, with a bowl of vegetables and free coffee or tea. Not a place to sit around for long, but great fun watching the crowds and the boats.



We then embarked on an afternoon's walk around the main buildings in the city. The first visit was to the Finnish Orthodox Cathedral, high in a very prominent position overlooking the harbour. Its prominence is something of an anomaly. The Eastern Orthodox church is recognized as the second state church of Finland, but the faithful comprise only a little over 1 per cent of the total population in a predominantly Lutheran country. The church is now one of the few existing reminders of Russian rule. The red church with its green domes, with its typically glittering Orthodox iconostasis and interior, is impressive, and from its terrace there

is a great view over the harbour and the marketplace we had just climbed up from.

We could also see over another part of the harbour to the east, where a number of interesting-looking sailing craft lay, so we walked down that way to look them over. Given its location and geography, Finland inevitably has a very strong maritime heritage. Apart from a two-masted square-

rigged ship, there were no craft of especial significance, but all were working vessels of up to a century old, and interesting in their own right. Looking across to the commercial harbour we could see, lying now at rest, the five large ice-breakers that keep the harbour open during the harsh winter.



We walked back inland, up into the grand Lutheran Cathedral through a side entrance. The interior, as befitting the Lutheran faith, is Spartan and relatively unadorned, which we rather like as a contrast to Catholic iconic over-indulgence. The white, domed arches over the nave add a touch of grandeur. Walking through and out of the main entrance is a breath-taking experience, as the broad expanse of Senate Square suddenly opens up in front of you. The brilliant white walls and columns of the cathedral overview the square from the top of a wide range of steps. On the other three sides of the square stand the Government Palace,

the matching main building of the University of Helsinki, and the National Library of Finland. The ensemble was the work of Carl Ludvig Engel between 1852 and 1852. In the centre stands an imposing statue of the liberal Tsar Alexander II.

And so back to the Metro and a ride back to the camp site after a busy but interesting and entertaining day.

Wednesday 23 July

A mostly driving day today, down towards Hanko in the south-west corner of the country, with a couple of stops on the way.

The first did not appear in our tourist literature, but was noted on our Michelin map. This was an imposing mansion, Mustion Linna, or Svarta Manor, depending on the language. (The south west is mainly a Swedish-speaking region.) The manor is set in beautiful grounds, and we noticed on our approach from the minor road a lovely-looking boardwalk round a lake. This turned out to be a floating walkway, and although a bit on the wobbly side, was as lovely on it as it looked from the road. Its feature was that it wound around and through fields of waterlilies, a good proportion of which were open, white and pink, glowing in the sun as the water sparkled round them.



Then on across country to the village of Fiskars. Fiskars became famous after its foundation in 1649 for high quality iron and steel work – indeed, at home we have an Fiskars extendable pruner and some garden shears. Their (now) orange-handled scissors are seen and copied everywhere. The industry is elsewhere now, but the company has kept the village it founded more or less as it was, on the outside. There is a museum, but it's a bit disappointing not to see some of the original industrial processes reproduced. Most of the original foundries and small industrial buildings now house local arts and crafts. We did enjoy seeing an original bakery, though, and have it explained to us that in the old days of the region massive amounts of bread were baked only twice a year. The bread was then dried by hanging in special containers, becoming crisp and durable for months. Thus, the origins of Finnish crispbread, the modern versions of which we are very fond.

That was quite a long, hot walk (it's only recently that we were cold!), but it was a fairly short drive down to near Hanko (or Hango) and the camp site. The countryside in the far south-west of Finland is very pretty, scattered with many small hills, richly wooded in between green farmland, and with lakes peeping through the trees. The excellent road is bordered in several places by walls of red granite, which we have seen in several buildings.

The reason the road is so good is that the city of Hanko is bigger than we had thought, and is a large container port through which used to come more than half of the country's total imports, although we were told that its business has recently fallen off substantially. Visiting the city could wait, as we settled into a pitch near the west-facing waterfront. There is a beach of a kind, with some sand and a lot of shingle. The water is very shallow for a fair way out, which makes it safe and very popular for



the many kids splashing around in it and on the bouncy plastic structures moored a few metres out. The site was relatively busy but large, so there was plenty of room, and the beach could not be regarded as crowded, at least by typical northern European or Mediterranean standards.

The sun held in until sundown, and we watch it sink slowly into the sea.

Thursday 24 July

Sunny again in the morning, but few on the beach, even kids. The water didn't look that clean yesterday, but this morning for a long way out it was covered by an odourless brown sludge that looked awful. We were advised by a local couple that this was a regular non-toxic algal bloom, although a worse one than they had seen before.

Continued sunny until the afternoon, when there was a brief thunderstorm, a little rain, and a cool wind. Followed again, however, by a golden sunset. Lots done on diary and blog today, with dodgy wi-fi at the pitch but OK by the loos!

Friday 25 July

A driving and exploring day. First, further down the peninsula to have a look at the town of Hanko.

Following the Winter War with Russia, the whole Hanko peninsula was "rented" to the Soviet Union as part of the agreement reached in Moscow in 1940. The Russians then built a huge garrison in Hanko, bringing in thousands of men, building railways, an airfield and coastal defence fortifications, and moving part of their navy into the harbour. It became a restricted region. The Finns fought these advances with some bloody battles, but then in 1941 the Russians realised that all this was a sideline to the war with Germany and pulled out. Remnants of the coastal batteries and other fortifications



remain, and we stood at a battery post and the south-west corner of Finland and marvelled at the lovely view over the waterways of the archipelago. All around us were the smoothed, grooved faces of the granite rocks where the glaciers had met their end.

In pre-war Russian times Hanko was a spa resort for rich Russians, whom we now call oligarchs, and a reminder of these days is in the many beautiful, ornate wooden villas that they enjoyed in the summer.



We took a coastal road east along the southern side of the peninsula, and although most of the time we had pine forests on both sides we also came across some lovely harbours in the inlets. Although we have a worldwide digital nautical chart on the computer, it is almost impossible to

work out in an instant exactly where you are in the maze of islands and waterways of the archipelago. It is a sailor's dream, especially on this lovely kind of day.

We had a brief look at a possible camp site in the region, but thought little of it, and on the way north towards Turku investigated another. This was on an island reached by a causeway and a little bridge near the town of Salo, but was simply an unshaded field by a car park used by beachgoers, with awful-looking facilities. Nearing Turku, however, we came to another site, small, and which was lovely, set on top of a small pine-covered hill overlooking one of the many waterway inlets.



We took the steps down the hill to the water, where a large number of local families had come for the day, and to our mutual surprise finally went for a swim in the Baltic! Norma reckoned the 30 degree temperatures experienced today justified a swim, however cold the water. As it was, the near-fresh water wasn't too cold, even for me, and it was a refreshing finish to an interesting and pleasant day.

The water is fresh or very nearly so far in this part of the Baltic because the connection to the salty Atlantic is so narrow and, on the large scale, water flow in and out is so limited and the tidal range is minimal. On the other hand several major rivers drain into the Baltic, bringing fresh water with them. Our reservation is that as the eastern parts of the Baltic were all Russian up to quite recent times, the water is not as clean and free from chemical and other environmental pollutants as it might be . . . There is a Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, but most of the improvements are in Scandinavian waters.

Saturday 26 July

Relaxed departure from this very pleasant site, and first to an excellent supermarket for stores for a few days – where I found that the separate “Alko” store was twice as expensive as in the Baltic States, and realised that we were back in a Nanny state where alcohol's concerned. Then, round to Turku to book a ferry to the Åland Islands. Finally found the almost deserted booking office near the docks and booked a trip to the islands on the evening/night of Tuesday 29th, the earliest that was not booked out.

Out then to our planned camp, Ruissalo Camping, for which the Tomtom could not plan a route because “she” could not work out a complicated wiggle that got us over a small bridge to Ruissalo Island. The camp was at the far tip of the island, a big and popular one. In the early afternoon in choosing a place we were trying to predict where the sun would be later in the afternoon, and it was certainly hot for a while but the choice was the best available.

Pleasantly warm in the evening yet again, nearly 30 degrees in the van, not at all what we expected in Finland but welcome and much better than being cold. And no midges or mosquitoes, which we were told to expect.

During the day Norma, on one of her wildlife surveys, saw a red squirrel and a woodpecker.

Sunday 27 July

Moved over to a better pitch before leaving temporarily, one that had better shade in the evening and more sun in the morning. A Finnish camper told us that this heat wave was the hottest in 30 years! Drove into Turku to see more of the city.

Our first attempt to park where we wanted was foiled by barriers blocking off part of the city along the south side of the River Aura, which runs right through it on its way to the Baltic. It turned out that the city was in the midst of a major musical festival, for which a large temporary stadium had been erected. People were already queuing at 10:00 for a concert that was to start at 1:00 pm, and some youngsters looked as though they had been up all night. There was other evidence of that – Turku is a university city, and there was far more rubbish strewn around than we have become used to seeing in a Finnish town.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, the term "Finland" mostly referred to the area around Åbo (Turku), a region that later became known as Finland Proper. In the 15th century, "Finland" became a common name for the whole land area to the east of the Gulf of Bothnia, when the archipelago was seen as belonging to Åbo (Turku). Finland evolved as an entity when John III of Sweden called his duchy the "Grand Duchy of Finland" (about 1580), as a strategy to meet the claims of the Russian tsar. Thus, effectively, Turku became the capital city until after the Russian takeover, at which time Tsar Alexander 1 moved the Grand Duchy to Helsinki in 1809.

We did find a parking place on the riverside on the north side of the river and walked across, first to the much-recommended Museum of Biology. We don't normally take much notice of displays of stuffed animals, but this is different. It simply comprises a series of dioramas representing different regions of Finland and in different seasons. It is marvellously and realistically well done. In particular, the taxidermy is the best we have ever seen. Animals and birds are represented in such authentic postures that you expect them to continue eating, moving or flying away any moment. We got there early, as we try to do for museums, and had the place to ourselves. As it is in the dark, except for the dioramas, the sense of involvement was enhanced.



We followed this by another excellent museum, the Luostarinmaki Handicrafts Museum. This is more than is implied by its title. In the 18th century Turku – along with most other Finnish towns and settlements – was built largely of wood. In 1827 a great fire destroyed two-thirds of the city. Part of what survived was the precinct of Luostarinmaki. With the aid of the ubiquitous German Carl Ludwig Engel Turku was redesigned and rebuilt. Luostarinmaki was deemed to be a fire hazard and was left alone pending a decision on what to do with it. In the early 1900s the decision was made to restore and preserve it as a centre dedicated to crafts and craftsmanship. Unlike most open-air museums (skansens) the wooden buildings here – while restored using traditional techniques – are the same, and in the same places, as they were 200 years ago.



We spent time wandering along the narrow streets and passing through doorways into the courtyards enclosed by dwellings that are the building blocks of the precinct. Typically the courtyards include a vegetable garden, and the one or two-storey buildings housed the families as well as their animals and the tools of their trade: shoemaking, watchmaker, a printing press, carpentry, and

small foundries are all represented here, along with many others. In several dwellings museum personnel in period costume were demonstrating their skills with period materials, and again because we were early we had time to talk to the potter and lace maker among others. A terrific experience in a unique setting in our experience.

Walking back across the river we paused to view the medieval cathedral, not a handsome building in our view but important to the Finnish people as the seat of the Finnish Lutheran faith. I also appreciated seeing the splendid statue of the great long-distance runner and Olympic multi-medal winner Paavo Nurmi, whom I hugely respected as a role model when in younger days I was an only mildly talented long-distance runner myself.

Back at the site we found the shade was already creeping over our new position. I took the iPad up to a nearby café, the only place for wi-fi access (which is not generally nearly as easy as in Estonia), to follow the Hungarian Grand Prix and enjoy Danny Ricciardo's exciting victory.

Monday 28 July

A waiting day used to catch up on some emailing, because as noted we could not get a ferry to the Åland islands until tomorrow evening. But a useful day anyway, with a walk down to the quite good beach in the afternoon.

Tuesday 29 July

Norma walked back down to the beach to have another look at a flock of barnacle geese gathered on the sand, which she had spotted early yesterday but which moved on later. She also startled a large hare, which ran away through the scrubland and pine trees backing the beach.

Late morning drive to the nearest Lidl, one of many, for an affordable stock-up before a few days of uncertain provisioning. Then to the Forum Marinum, a museum of Finnish maritime and naval history. This is very close to the ferry terminal from where we would leave mainland Finland, so we found a good spot that would be shady later in the day.

The Forum Marinum we found to be a superb maritime museum. Part is enclosed in some large buildings, and the rest is a collection of museum ships. The interior includes displays including the history of the Finnish shipbuilding industry, the history of marine engine building in Turku, the development of cargo ships and, temporarily, a history of Finnish seaplane aviation. In one small hall there is the most astonishing display of small marine engines, including outboards, mounted on the walls from floor to ceiling all sides and beautifully lit – all photographers had their cameras out.

There is also an interior display of relatively small military vessels – patrol ships and motor torpedo boats – and rescue craft.

One hall enclosed a group of typically Nordic small vessels, including slim yachts and small motor vessels, many featuring the classic double-ender stern and lots of varnish. But the major lesson we learnt at this exhibition was on the building of large ships in Finland, about which we had had no idea. Early in the 1980s the first Finnish-built passenger car ferries were built in Helsinki and orders started coming in for passenger ships locally and from overseas. In 1975-76 five 150-metre ships were built in Turku for the Soviet Union.

The rapid expansion in the international cruise ship industry brought new markets, and by the 1980s Finland was a major manufacturer of cruise ships and ferries. Customers included major cruise lines

such as Carnival and Caribbean. The Royal Caribbean Line's *Oasis of the Seas* and the *Allure of the Seas*, both over 360 metres and carrying 5,500 passengers, were built in Turku in 2009 and 2010, and were at the time the world's largest passenger ships. That this could be done in a country with a population about the size of Sydney is quite astounding. It can't be put down to cheap Asian-style labour, because the standard of living here is high and the social services and infrastructure are excellent.



The highlight of the museum ships is the shining white full-rigged sailing ship with three square-rigged masts, the *Suomen Joutsen* ("Swan of Finland"). The ship was built in France in 1902 as a worldwide cargo carrier, and passed to German ownership 1922. She was acquired by the Finnish government in 1930 for use as a naval cadet training ship, and made some substantial voyages in the Atlantic and around South America during the decade before WW2. After the war she became a stationary training ship, and she was donated to the museum in 1991. Also in this museum fleet are a couple of small warships, a depth-charge layer and a fast gunboat. There is also an early cruise ship built in Turku. All in all, a highly impressive museum.

From the museum car park it was only a few metres to the waiting line on the ferry dock, from where we would be sailing to the Åland Islands, still Finnish but closer to Sweden than Finland, a voyage of a little over four hours.

Among hordes of cars and trucks we waited for nearly a couple of hours in the hot sun before being loaded at about 8:45 pm. Not only were we the only motorhome, we were last on and requested to board backwards, to that we were facing the opening stern door. As soon as we were on, the ship was away at 9:00 pm.

The explanation for all this was, it turned out, that only we and a dozen or so cars were to be unloaded at the Åland Islands. The hundreds of other cars and their passenger were all going on to Stockholm. Before we worked this out we were puzzled how the small Ålands were going to manage all these extra cars and people!

The Viking Line ship, the *Viking Grace*, was the largest car-carrying ferry on which we have ever travelled, a new vessel and really a small cruise liner with many cruise-liner facilities. We wanted to avoid the several grades of restaurant (we had eaten on the van while waiting), as well as the casino, nightclub and disco. We did find a peaceful cocktail lounge associated with the fine dining restaurant, where for the price of a couple of glasses of good red we could sit in space and quiet, watching the islands slip by until dark fell.



And what an amazing array of islands! The Finnish archipelago out of Turku is a mass of islands and islets, and for the first few miles this large ship was threading its way through narrow channels sometimes with only metres between its hull and the rocks. By midnight most Stockholm-bound passengers – apart from youngsters still dancing at the disco – had retreated to their cabins for a

night's sleep, while we sat around on deck and below, waiting to arrive at the Åland Islands and the tiny port of Langnas on the eastern extremity of the main island.

There was no call for drivers to return to their cars, so we did so rather casually, and were just in time to get to the van and see the stern door lowered to allow us to be the first off. We had no idea where to go, as there is nothing at Langnas except the ship dock, but as we hoped and expected, there was a large car park close to the port into which we pulled and shut the van up for the night. Our first night in the Ålands was a peaceful one.

ÅLAND ISLANDS

The islands are a group in the northern Baltic Sea. The only town, Mariehamn, was founded in 1861. The Åland (pronounced "Orland") archipelago is almost contiguous with the Finnish archipelago and consists of 6,654 islands, 200 of which are inhabited. For centuries Åland, like Finland, was part of the kingdom of Sweden, until both Sweden and Finland were conquered by Russia in the war of 1808-09.

The Ålands are an autonomous region that belongs to Finland. When Finland declared its independence in 1917, taking advantage of the Russian Revolution, the islanders wished to reunite with their original motherland of Sweden, to safeguard their culture and Swedish language. But the League of Nations in Geneva, in a typically dithering compromise, decided in 1921 that Åland should remain part of Finland but be given autonomy with its own parliament, flag, political parties and government. It was also to be demilitarised, and no armed forces may be stationed or fortifications built in the islands. These arrangements were endorsed by the EU when Finland joined the community.

However, the islanders are fiercely *Swedish* independents, and Swedish is the official language. Some islanders will not or cannot speak Finnish. All the signs are in Swedish. For us, at least, Swedish is sort of understandable, with words from European roots, whereas Finnish is completely incomprehensible.

On this first morning in the islands we drove around the region of Lumperland, where Langnas port is located. Lots of trees as usual, of course, but with a fair bit of meadowland, all commonly with a glint of sea to be seen through the woods. The birch leaves were already turning and falling, having decided that autumn was already on the way. We have trouble understanding how people can live like this, with at least eight months of the year constrained by harsh winters, heavy snow, ice and frozen waterways. We thought that the islanders would be happy with a bit more global warming, thank you.

The shoreside rocks are of the red granite so widely seen in the region, with smooth surfaces grooved by the ice as the glaciers retreated and the islands emerged. Summer is a special (but short!) time here, and mid-summer is celebrated at every village by the decorating of high poles with all manner of banners and flowers. Each part of these quite complicated structures has its own name and cultural or historical significance.

We then drove round to the town of Mariehamn. Mariehamn was founded in 1862 following a request from Finnish ship owners and merchants that a maritime and commercial town be established in Åland. Shipping and tourism are the two big industries here now, and Mariehamn is a historic centre of seafaring in Åland and in the Baltic generally. It sits on a peninsula facing south, with a big but rather shallow bay to the east and a narrower but deep inlet to its west side. This western harbour is suitable for large ships, the ice conditions in spring and autumn are relatively

favourable, and a customs office is in the town. It thus became a favoured port for deep-sea sailing ships in the 19th century, especially for those in the Australian trade. After discharging in England or Ireland in the northern spring they could return to the islands in summer for rest and refitting and sail again in September.



There was also a local shipbuilding industry, with 292 registered ships being built in Åland between 1850 and 1920. In 1882 an Åland ship, the barque *Mariehamn*, was the first from the islands to circumnavigate via Australia and the Pacific. By the end of the 19th century Åland sailing ships were carrying cargos across all the great oceans of the world. One of them, the *Pommern*, was lying here again and is what we were here to see.

Pommern was originally built in Glasgow in 1903 for the prominent German fleet-owner Friedrich Wencke and named *Mneme*. On his death Wencke's will decreed that his company be wound up and all his ships sold. She passed through the hands of a lesser-known company before being purchased by the Laeisz family in 1906 and renamed *Pommern* as one of the famous "Flying P" Line. With Wencke, the Laeisz family were one of the two leading

German owners, and became famous for their fleet, all of which they named with the first letter "P", including the *Preussen*, *Pamir*, *Passat* and many others.

The world's commercial sailing fleet reached its peak in about 1870-80, after which steam gradually took over as the prime source of power. But ocean sailing ships came on to the market at low prices as a result, and were purchased by owners who saw a continuing future for the cheap international transport of bulk cargo that was not vitally time-dependent. In particular the German fleet, based in Hamburg, grew rapidly until in 1912 118 large sailing ships were based there. But after WW1 under the Versailles Treaty nearly all these ships had to be handed over to Britain, France and other Allied powers as reparations. However, none of these countries had much interest in sailing ships by that time, so German and other fleet owners bought most of them back at knock-down prices and built up their fleets again. *Pommern* had spent the war lying in Chile, with many other German-registered ships, and was sailed back to Europe in 1920.

Åland-born and Mariehamn-based Gustav Erikson became the owner of the last big fleet of windjammers. He first went to sea at the age of 10 and became master of the barquentine *Adele* at 20. In 1913 he started purchasing barques, his business plan being to own several ships, manned by experienced skippers, and not waste money on insurance. It was cheaper to lose a ship a year than pay insurance for all of them, he said. After the war, in 1921, he bought the four-masted barque *Herzogin Cecilie*, one of the biggest, most famous and successful commercial sailing ships of all time. He purchased the *Pommern* in 1923 to join his growing Åland-based fleet.

The last of the long-distance routes on which sailing ships could make a profit was the Europe-Australia-Europe run for the grain trade. Because the ships generally left Australia at about the same time the return passage became known as the "Grain Race", although Erikson latterly thought the race was resulting in too high a cost in sails!

The ship lies in Mariehamn as part of the maritime museum there, and I have wanted to visit her ever since reading the marvellous first-hand accounts of sailing the grain route by Alan Villiers (on

Erikson's *Grace Harvar*) and Eric Newby (on his *Moshulu*). Our own seagoing interests have taken us aboard many grand sailing ships in museums around the world, but nearly all have been modified at some stage from their original form for financial, touristic or other purposes. Some have later been restored. However, the steel four-masted barque *Pommern* is uniquely the only large merchant sailing ship of her era to be still preserved in her original state. She is exactly the same ship as she was when she returned from her last voyage from Australia in 1939, being maintained since then in the same way as if she was being made ready for sea. And she is docked in the very harbour where she and her sisters lay for the summer's refit before returning to the great oceans.



She was rigged unusually with five square sails on each of her forward three masts, larger but fewer than the six more commonly carried but which require more men to work. From her sailing times, this did not reduce her average voyaging speeds as she was good in light airs and she could still reach 15 knots in suitable conditions. Also, for a cargo trader she had an unusually tapered stern under water, which would have reduced form drag. (Interestingly, her trans-oceanic average speeds were very similar to those of our yacht *Cera*, being in the 5-6 knot range week after week.)

All this makes wandering around and within her a very special experience. One of the few concessions to visitors is a good display of contemporary photographs and equipment in the 'tween-decks and holds. She was and is a commercial cargo-carrying "tramp" ship, not designed mainly for speed as were the clippers in the Asian tea trade, but powerful and safe, still a good ship to sail and relatively easy to manage with a short-handed crew.

The associated maritime museum ashore from the ship is, as usual in Finland, a good one, much aligned to children's interests as it allows the pulling of ropes and the turning of wheels. Here it concentrates on the history of Mariehamn and its considerable influence on the worldwide sailing trade.

Thursday 31 July



We spent the night in a car park on the outskirts, just opposite what is called the Maritime Quarter of Mariehamn. This is a collection of buildings on the waterfront where various trades are involved in the maintenance and repair of traditional vessels. It was very quiet at the time, but we were interested to see work being done on what was claimed to be Finland's oldest traditional wooden sailing vessel, the 11.2 metre gaff-rigged double-ended *Lille Bjorn*, built in Copenhagen in 1896. The wooden hull was obviously not fit for any kind of sailing, and – rather sadly, I thought – was being sheathed with a skin of ferrocement. This will allow her return to the water, but will have destroyed her soul, in my opinion.

On our way out of Mariehamn we called in at a tiny harbour typical of these cold climates and similar to those we have seen in Canada, where small vessels are stored on water in red-painted boathouses. These little precincts are jointly owned here and become social centres in the summer. They often include what seems to be a uniquely Finnish activity, and that is washing of the rugs used in the boathouses. We saw two women busily scrubbing their rugs on specially-built rack, prior to drying them with the help of a large mangle and then setting them out in the sun on long rails. Norma wished she could give the van's carpets the same treatment, but we did not seem to be welcome visitors to this facility, so had to drive away to the north and then east, to the region of Sund.

Here lies one of the most prominent and important sites in the islands, the remains of the immense fortress of Bomarsund. With the decline of the Ottoman Empire, forces of both the East (primarily Russia) and West (mostly Britain and France) sought to extend their territories west and east respectively. This was the basis of the Crimean War. Following their defeat of Sweden in 1809 the Russians occupied the Ålands and fortified them against western encroachment as part of the conflicts that included Crimea.



The massive walls of the fortress were faced by the local red granite, hewn into interlocking blocks to give additional strength against cannon fire, but this was to be one of the early conflicts using explosive shells as well as cannon balls and the walls were more vulnerable than anticipated. The building of the fortress resulted in the demolition of an existing small village but the inclusion of a small town within its expanse. A joint British and French fleet bombarded the fortress in 1854 and breached its walls and destroyed its defensive towers, and it was surrendered by its commander to prevent further loss of life. During the battle of Bomarsund Royal Navy Mate Charles Davis Lucas tossed overboard a shell which had landed on board. The shell exploded before it reached the water. For saving his ship he was the first man to be awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry. Four more were to be awarded later in the Baltic theatre during the Crimean War.

After the war in the Baltic, in the Treaty of Paris 1856, the entire Åland Islands were demilitarized, a status that has been preserved to today.

We spent some time wandering the walls of the fortress and exploring the partly demolished defensive towers, which have – for obvious reasons – a staggering view over the lovely waterways and nearby islands of the archipelago. Those of its multi-ethnic community who died here were buried in a nearby cemetery divided by walls into plots for each of the several religions. Few gravestones have survived.

Then to another fortress of a kind, a castle this time, and the only one in the islands, Kastelholm Castle. This is a medieval castle built by the Swedish in the 14th century, originally on a small island surrounded by moats filled with water and planted with several rows of poles. The castle was gutted and ruined in 1745. It was used as a Russian headquarters before the Bomarsund period, and In the 1930s, it was partially used as a granary. However, since then it has been refurbished and is now an important part of the tourist circuit in Åland.



It was remodelled several times during the centuries, and has been only lightly restored. So it's a mixture of styles that still include the essential keep as well as regular living quarters, ceremonial halls and the like. The principal features are well explained in placards, and as usual in Finland nearly all include an English text.



Next to the castle is a small but very well done skansen, with wooden dwelling and farm buildings brought in and represented as a traditional farmstead. The main building is a house which, it was explained by a lady hand-working a quilt in the front room, would only be used in the winter. The large front room was only for special occasions, and the whole family would live in the smaller room that included heating, cooking and sleeping facilities.

Finally for the day we drove up through farming and pine-forested scenery in the Saltvic region to a tiny marina where, for €15, we could stay the night on the waterfront car park, plug into the marina power supply and use the excellent sanitary facilities. We enjoyed a long, sunny and hot but windy evening watching a few small craft coming and going.



Saturday 2 August

Dawned blue again, calm, but a fair bit cooler to start with. Writing during the morning, and Norma taking some local walks. As it warmed during the day, and enjoying the sun, a Swedish family boarding their motor boat to take over to their holiday house on an island told us, "we've never had a summer like this". For weeks, average temperatures has been five or six degrees above the usual, so we have been very lucky.

Away in the afternoon for a bit of a tour of the far north of the main island. We noted again the typical features of the Åland countryside: houses, barns and farm shed painted dark red with white trim, similar to the combination seen throughout middle America; prosperous-looking farmland; and forests of pine and birch. Up in the northern region of Geta we came across acres of apple orchards; we had heard about the good apple juice of the islands, and had indeed been given glasses of it at a museum at Bomarsund, but the apples this year were hardly ripe and we saw nowhere to buy their juice.

There are many medieval churches in the islands, and we made a stop at St Gorans in the town of Geta. The church dates back to 1490 and, without a steeple, has a separate wooden and enclosed bell tower, most unusual. It has a typically austere Lutheran interior, with two large wooden coats of arms of benefactors mounted on the north wall.

There are no camp sites up in these remote regions (not that "remote" means much in the way of distance here), so we were looking for a wild camp for the night, preferably by the water as for last night. But it turned out there were no marinas up this way. The first possibility was right at the northern tip of Geta, but we found that it was a large private hotel/resort development with, possibly, a small harbour but not one we could stay at even if we could get to it. We tried again at another headland where the tourist map showed an anchor symbol, but this was a private village not open to outsiders.

However, just south of this settlement there was a forestry road that led to an open expanse of flat red granite rock that appeared entirely suitable. Around us were pine forests, and through the rocks were growing moss, grass, heather, and a few hardy wild pines. In the cracks were appearing some optimistic pine seedlings; as we were manoeuvring to find a level spot on the granite we crushed one, which Norma in Jain mode commented, “was a bit sad”.



Sunday 3 August

Calm but rather disturbed night, with intermittent rain. Showers became heavier in the morning, followed by a long-lasting thunderstorm. Is this the end of summer, after all we were discussing yesterday? But no, soon after it cleared and became hot again.



Just a 55 km or so drive round to the western side of the island, and the port of Eckero. We stopped at two medieval churches on the way. The first was St Michaels, where the tower is trimmed with four little towers at the corners, almost Gothic in concept. All the tiling is of wooden shingles. The oldest part of the main structure has been dated to the 12th century, but most of the rest of the structure and the paintings were completed in the mid-1400s. There are many wooden sculptures from the Middle Ages. The walls carry excellently preserved frescoes by four different artists, and the arches over the nave are also nicely patterned. In the chancel stands a unique old organ from 1768, encased in wood.

The second was the Eckero Church of St Laurentius, probably built in the 13th century. It is built in the red granite of the island, presumably as a place of worship by seafarers. It is another delightful, calm and peaceful little old place.

We also stopped for a closer look at the most elaborate mid-summer pole we have seen. It rises with spreaders like the yards of a ship; bunches of flowery decorations dangle from these yards, streamers flow in the wind from them and from the very top. At the ends of four rotating arms there are sailing ship models, and as the set of four rotate in the wind their sails back and fill as if they were tacking.

The final tourist stop was in the outskirts of the small township of Eckero, at the 1828 Eckero Post and Customs House. The original mail road between Stockholm and Turku/Åbo was established in 1638, relying on farmer mailmen to transport mail over different parts of the land. It was transported between the islands on small rowing or sailing boats, and when the water was frozen over, taken straight over the ice.

After the war with Russia that ended in 1809 Eckero became the westernmost outpost of the Russian Empire in the Baltic. The Tsar wanted something spectacular to show for it, and the architect of the resulting opulent building was – would you believe it – Carl Ludwig Engel again, the architect behind the remodelling of Helsinki and much else. In recent years, with no need of such a communications link between Finland and Sweden, the building has been refurbished as a small museum and a gallery of modern art.

Just out of the township there is a museum of fishing, and like most of them is largely an eclectic collection of bric-a-brac. There were some interesting tales and photographs however, a

reconstructed fishermen's hut such as were established in the outer islands, and another collection of old outboard and small marine engines. One very early Archimedes outboard was an amazing little piece of engineering, with an incorporated rudder. To start the horizontal engine the user had to wind a fixed handle on the rim of the exposed flywheel, which looked to me like a seriously hazardous operation.

Back to the van, we decided to stay the night where we were, near the fishing museum and looking over a collection of typical boatsheds to the water, and only a few minutes from the ferry dock from where we would sail over to Sweden.

