

Tracing RACUNDRA

A voyage from Copenhagen to Mariehamn via the West Estonian Archipelago

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Any admirer of nautical literature will know that the mid-twenties produced two classical accounts of Baltic cruising: Arthur Ransome: 'Racundra's First Cruise' (first published 1923) and Adlard Coles: 'Close Hauled' (first published 1926 and in a 1987 edition referred to as Racundras second cruise). Since then - until 1989, when Roger Foxall took his Nicholson 32 to St.Petersburg (Leningrad) - for obvious reasons, little is known of yachting in these areas. For Rosemarie and me it has been a dream, ever since the possibility arose due to the changing geopolitics, to take Tusindfryd to the re-



The summer cruise of 1995

born Baltic states: 1995 should be the year:

Departure from Copenhagen Sunday afternoon 18. June in a southwesterly gale. Finally we got away from home and the 1995 summer cruise was about to start. A late Saturday night and the rough weather made us decide just to take the 22 miles to Falsterbokanalens. The canal was built in 1940 in order to connect the Eastern and Western Swedish territorial waters without having to round the exposed and (in those days) mined area around Falsterbo reef. Today the canal mainly provides small-boat traffic with a convenient short-cut from the Sound to the Western Baltic; and a sheltered night's stay for us.

During the morning the wind had moderated to steady force 6 and with a weather forecast promising still further decreasing winds from West and South-West, time (14.00 hrs) had come for a 'real' departure. Reefed mainsail and a boomed reefed genoa provided us with a steady six knots and the first 42 miles to Sandhammeren were made in only 6½ hours. After a hot meal a wonderful Scandinavian summer night (sunset at 22.00 hours and sunrise around

04.00) lay ahead of us with no really dark period. By now wind had moderated to about force 2-3 still from West. Still with a boomed genua and our (highly recommended) German WINDPILOT (servo pendulum) wind wane doing the helmsman's, job we reached the southern tip of Öland the next day at 15.30 having made 128 miles in 25½ hours. Going into the second night at sea the sky completely clouded over and it started to rain. Unfortunately Rosemarie had a couple of very wet hours 'at the helm' while I had a good nights sleep (some people have all the luck). Approaching Hoburg (southernmost promontory of the Swedish island of Gotland) we had to realise that the wind had completely vanished (fortunately there is an engine to deal with this problem) and that visibility had deteriorated to less than one mile (fortunately there is a GPS (GARMIN 65, excellent value for money) to cope with some of the problems associated with that). Carefully we had to feel our way along the coast and finally we berthed at Vändborg 'new' fishing port at 09.00 hrs having made 211 miles in 44 hours (averaging 4.9 knots).

Six 'large' islands are found in the Baltic. One Danish namely Bornholm, two Swedish i.e. Öland and Gotland, two Estonian: Hiumaa (Dagö) and Saaremaa (Ösel) and one with 'home rule' (Finnish): Åland (Ahaavnamaa). Gotland is the largest of the 6 and the island is particular in all senses of the word. It has a history of its own, belonging to Sweden only since 1645. The climate is said to be the best in Sweden, and this combined with its geology has created a unique flora. By June 21. holiday season hasn't really started yet in Sweden and we had the harbour all to ourselves except for a couple of inactive fishing boats. Facilities, however, were excellent including the possibility to rent bikes: they were basically there (unlocked) and with a handwritten sign telling you to leave 30 Swedish kr. (£2.50) per day in an attached primitive wooden money box. We 'persuaded' ourselves to try, and had a marvellous 20 miles trip to the southern tip of the island. Many interesting natural and cultural sights all with clear and instructive signposts in Swedish, English and German languages.

Coming back to Tusindfryd we were invited by the locals to participate in the inauguration of a new fish stand/shop, intended to serve the population of the local summer cottages. A truly pleasant experience where we were served home baked bread, locally smoked herrings and last but certainly not least a real Gotland ale brewed by one of the locals and prepared with smoked malt. Strong stuff (8-9% alcohol) and very tasty. We must admit that we were quite surprised to have this kind of experience in Sweden where the attitude towards alcohol generally is very ambiguous. Just read Adlard Coles comments.

The next day brought us further North along the East coast of Gotland to Herrvik. Almost no wind and we had to motor most of the way. The place is situated on Easternmost Gotland only some 80 NM West of Ventspils our expected landfall in Latvia. Herrvik is a comparatively large fishing port, nowadays unfortunately terribly struck by the deteriorating fishing conditions in the Baltic. The surrounding landscape, however, is very beautiful and well suited to celebrate mid-summer which is an extremely important event in Sweden.

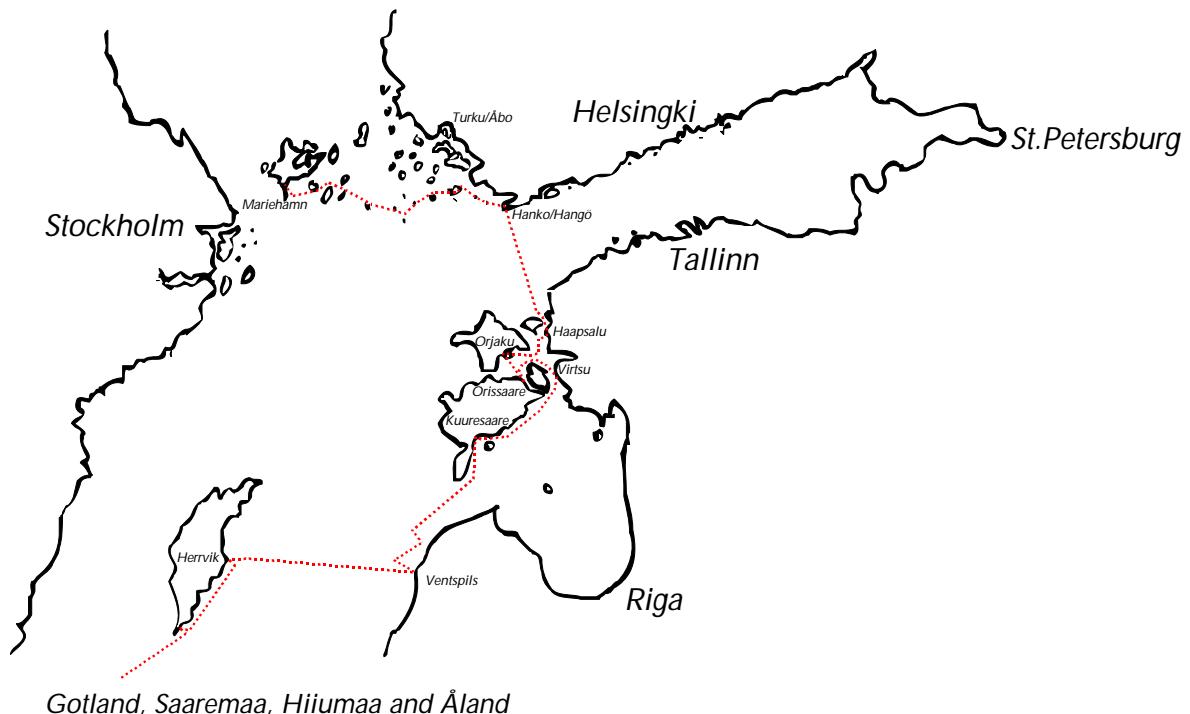
In order to make an early landfall in Latvia we decided to leave Herrvik at 14.00 hrs. (25/6). Swedish weather forecast at 13.00 promised north to northeast 5-6 decreasing, almost per-



Early morning, 'drying out' at Ventspils

fect conditions. We had an eventless night experiencing very little except for a Swedish naval vessel patrolling the territorial waters and some pretty rough waves when we passed Klints Bank (only 28 metres as opposed to the surrounding 120-130 metres). Around 01.30 Rosemarie sighted the first lighthouse on the Latvian coast (Uzava, Fl.(3) 15s.) And at 04.00 we contacted the port authorities in Ventspils. At 07.30 Tusindfryd was moored and the entry at custom house was well done without problems.

Ventspils is the second most important port in Latvia and was an important export harbour for the former Soviet Union. The city of today is hit by crises and probably a 'perfect' example of



'real' Eastern Europe. The harbour master, an elderly man who spoke a little German as he had been sailing with a German ship during the war, had been in Denmark then and was anxious to communicate. We had been buying some very nice bread and when I tried to say something on this, he answered something like: 'oh yes bread.... we have white bread and black bread, everybody knows how it is made and what it costs.... we live on bread'.

From Ventspils and to our first planned landfall in Estonia (Nasva) is a mere 65 NM to the North. The wind being N 5 however, made us cheat. The first three and a half hours on our way North we had our 27hp. Volvo help us improving speed and leeway. At approximately 11.30 though, as we entered the Irbenskij strait, the course allowed us to turn the engine off and we had a marvellous 'wild' ride through the strait. 'Irbenskij Strait', doesn't it have a dramatic sound to it, almost like 'Le Maire Strait' or 'Bering Strait'? However, the trip as such wasn't quite as dramatic and at 15.30 we were contacted by the Estonian coast guard (I suppose at Kaavininaa lighthouse at Sörve) and asked to identify ourselves: nationality, call sign, name, and cargo. To the latter question Rosemarie tells me that she was tempted to answer: 'my husband (!)'. At 20.45 we moored at Nasva yacht harbour having sailed a total of 74 NM. When we arrived the Danish ensign had already been hoisted and we were welcomed by a fluent English speaking harbour master who inquired whether we wanted to make our inward clearance immediately or whether we wanted to have a bath and a sauna first. We did however, choose the third possibility: a meal in the yacht club restaurant: two courses, wine (Australian), coffee and a local liqueur, all at a price of £25



Windmills at Saaremaa

(two persons). As anybody can imagine such a welcome wasn't quite what we had expected.

Nasva was originally established as a training centre for the Soviet Olympic sailors (the harbour master being one of them) and is nowadays being developed as a tourist centre with hotel facilities etc. We stayed for two days at Nasva as it seemed to be a good place to explore Saaremaa (Ösel). The 'capital' of Kuuresaare (Arensburg) is an attractive city with around 15.000 inhabitants. There are several interesting buildings from the Swedish time (1645- 1721) notably the Town Hall and a Weigh House. But most of all a beautifully preserved medieval episcopal (bishop's) castle dating back to 1384. The island itselfs is quite flat and with a mixture of rather extensive arable land and forested areas. There are however, several interesting things to look at, I myself particularly fancied the meteor crater at Kaali dating back some 2.800 years.

From Nasva to Virtsu the distance is 50 NM. The trip took 10 hours being quite eventless with winds between W and NW force 3-5, clear sky, lots of sun and a marvellous visibility and we arrived at 18.30. At Virtsu ('Werder' according to Ransome) the 'new' lighthouse still exists but apart from that the place is a busy ferry harbour with poor yachting facilities and is quite exposed to winds between NW and NE. It is however, a convenient stop-over before entering Muhu Väin ('Moon Sound') particularly as we had been warned by local yachtsmen at Nasva not to go to Kuivastu ('Kuivast').

Being such an unpleasant place we decided to leave Virtsu and carry on immediately the next morning (1/7). Winds were still in the N-NW



The Russian inn at Kuivastu

corner and currents against and we had to motor through the sound and further to Orissaare. During the next hours and throughout the night winds increased to gale force and hail-showers occurred however, to little concern of ours as Orissaare was everything Virtsu wasn't: well protected and with friendly people around us. Next morning we really enjoyed the place and the people. Orissaare has a small yacht club with a



The harbour at Orissaare

diminutive restaurant and a very nice German speaking innkeeper and 'harbour mistress'. In no time she provided us with a car (500 E.kr i.e. approximately £30 for the whole day) giving us the opportunity to visit some nearby sights: first of all the village of Koguvu at Muhu ('Moon'). Koguvu is a still 'live' fishing village with more than 100 buildings several of them dating back to the early and mid 18th century. The car however, also gave us the possibility to visit Kuvaistu and by personal experience see that Ransome's 'Russian Inn' was still there. No traces though of 'The Gates of Moon'.

Next morning we left Orissaare and the friends there. The destination being Kassari a small island connected to Hiiumaa (Dagö). Winds were favourable (S-ESE 2-3) and by 13.30 we called at the port of Orjaku a nice well protected site with only one Finnish yacht besides ourselves.

Next morning we managed to catch a Swedish weather forecast and the news wasn't too pleasant. An extended low covering most of Scandinavia and giving unsettled weather for the next three days: today (4/6) 4 to 5 from South later turning West and Northwest 7

possibly 8. We thus decided to leave immediately for Haapsalu ('Hapsal') and for the first 5½ hrs. we had a marvellous sail. On the way we met a huge field (close to 100 boats) of racing yachts and were reminded that maybe Estonia isn't as remote and strange as we would like to think but 'just' another country with people like you and me.

When approaching the rather complicated entrance to Haapsalu winds had increased and some nasty rainy showers had reduced the visibility to less than ½ NM. Some good old fashioned compass buoy to buoy navigation however, solved the problems and at 15.30 we were safely moored at Haapsalu after some 40 NM.

Haapsalu is a city with around 15,000 inhabitants. Its history, which is long and complicated, dates back to 1279 and there are lots of interesting things to see. What struck us most about the place though, was the way that it so clearly demonstrated the problems of present day Estonian society: contradictions and potential conflicts. In the former century and until Estonian independence in 1991 Haapsalu became an important health resort and during the Soviet years it furthermore became a significant military base. These two facts have led to a considerable influx of ethnic Russians (around 30%). With independence, the economic foundation of the place has crumbled leaving lots of problems unsolved. Simultaneously one will observe clear signs of poverty, decay and obsolescence. Most strikingly demonstrated by the old peasant woman who at the local market-place tried to sell a few potatoes, some dill and a pair of old shoes, still at the same time, just a few hundred metres away, we found the best-provisioned supermarkets that we ever saw in the Baltic.

Leaving Haapsalu also meant leaving Estonia. From Haapsalu to Hanko (Hangö) in Finland the distance is only 61 NM. The weather was beautiful, sunny and with winds from West force 3-4. The route passes between the island of Wormsi (Worms) and mainland Estonia (Nukke channel). The channel is quite narrow but well buoyed and on a quiet day running free the passage was sheer delight. After only 10 hours we cleared in at customs in Finland being back in, the EU again.



The extraordinary anchorage at Benskär

Hanko is the centre of Finnish yachting a local counterpart to Cowes I suppose. We arrived during the main regatta event and everything was completely different to what we had been experiencing the previous weeks: huge yachts, full bars and restaurants and lots of people doing nothing but 'see and be seen'. So we enrolled ourselves in the crowds and thoroughly enjoyed it. Coming to Finland meant that again we were within reach of continuous and updated weather information (Radio Helsinki broadcasts weather forecasts on VHF twice a day in English) and to our delight news were that a high was stabilising over Scandinavia and that we could expect sun and light winds between SW and NW for the coming days.

Sailing in the Finnish skärgård (archipelago) with its more than one thousand islands and skerries is a story and an experience of its own. However, as this is primarily an account of Tusindfryd's visit to Estonian waters most of our Finnish experiences shall only be mentioned in brief: the wonderful guest-harbour of Rosala (where we met a British yacht) with its remarkable geological display of giant caldrons. Benskär, a beautiful natural harbour with an extraordinary privacy and the old skärgård village of Nötö.

Finska Utö however, does deserve a few words. Finska (Finnish) Utö (not to be confused with the island of the same name in the Stockholm skärgård) constitutes the southernmost inhabited skerries of Finland. It is a military outpost and an important entry to the Turku (Åbo) archipelago, thus a historically important pilot station with a 9th generation pilot still working from this fascinating outpost. Utö also has the oldest lighthouse of Finland the original

building dating back to 1753. Inside the lighthouse is an interesting chapel which for many years was the only church on the island. The place of course also has a long history of shipwrecking and disasters, the latest one being the tragic loss of the passenger liner 'Estonia' in 1994 which took place only a few miles south of Utö. Many of the few survivors from 'Estonia' were brought ashore here after their rescue.

Leaving Utö also meant leaving Finland proper and that our cruise drew to a close. Åland (Ahvenamaa) is a Finnish county and consists of one large and several smaller islands plus literally thousands of inlets and skerries. Since 1921 (according to a decision by the League of Nations) Åland has had home rule. On the islands the only official language is Swedish, they have their own national flag and stamps of their own. The capital of the islands Mariehamn has a long history of seafaring and an interesting maritime museum including a 92 metres long fully equipped 4 masted bark: 'Pommern'. At Mariehamn good friends took over Tusindfryd in order to take her back to Copenhagen and the eventful cruise of 1995 had finally come to an end.

Acknowledgements:

Special thanks to Robin Boyd who so generously let us have his copy of 'Racundra's First Cruise' when he heard of our plans for a cruise to the Baltic countries.

Statistics

Duration of the cruise 18/6-15/7-1995 i.e. 28 days including 9 days ashore 'playing tourists'. Number of hours at sea 154 hours. Total milage covered 770 NM. Total number of engine hours: 49. Number of countries visited (including Åland): 5.

Note on languages

All names of places and sites have (so far as possible) been given in the local language (Estonian or Finnish) with alternative name (German or Swedish as used by Ransome) given in brackets. German and English are spoken by few Estonians, however, by most Finnish yachtsmen whom one meets. As Finnish and Estonian languages are closely related (like Danish and Swedish) this may sometimes be taken advantage of and a local weather forecast may be obtained. On languages it is furthermore worthwhile noticing that on several islands of the Finnish archipelago the language spoken by the original population is Swedish and in Hanko (Hangö) almost 50% is Swedish speaking.

Practical information (Estonia)

The RCC Pilotage Foundation pilot on The Baltic Sea did provide us with valuable but scarce help, and by now the information must be said to be somewhat outdated. Since early 1995, Estonian charts are available covering all areas

in scale 1:100,000. The charts are quite detailed, however, a further series in scale 1:50,000 is in preparation. In connection with the 'MiniLOTS' pilot (text in Estonian, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, German and English), giving ample and detailed information on harbours and anchorages, navigating the Estonian archipelago does not cause any problems (except those of sea and wind). It is worthwhile noticing though, that there are considerable local differences in magnetic variation, maybe some of Ransome's compass problems can be attributed to this fact. Another peculiarity of the area is the fact that the surrounding islands are very low, mostly less than 20 metres and with the coastal areas less than 10 metres altitude. Particularly in good visibility this makes estimation of the distances very difficult as forested inland areas are often sighted as individual islands long before the actual coastline.

In general we found that buoyage was in place and that lighthouses etc. were in working order. There is not yet any working, shore based VHF system and we really missed reliable and continuous weather forecasts. Forecasts are only given in Estonian. Local forecasts however, are understood by the Finnish sailors (75% of all non-Estonian yachtsmen) and occasionally they might help giving you an updated forecast.

Foodstuffs and provisions cannot be obtained too normal Western standards. It seems as if more or less everything is available (somewhere), but supply in 'supermarkets' are often poor (and random) in selection. Some items (for instance fresh meat) may sometime be difficult to obtain.

Before we left Denmark, many people warned us of the dangers of our 'adventure'. Indeed the crime rate is high in the Baltic countries, particularly in the big cities of Tallinn and Riga (which we did not visit on this trip as we have been there on earlier occasions). We ourselves only met friendliness. Particularly in the islands we did not experience anything but helpful and nice people. To us the real 'danger' seems to acquire (too) many friends that you feel deeply indebted to.

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German no.: 141
Swedish no.: 7, 73, 81, 82 & 839

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