



All photos: Peter Cumberlidge

Our elegant Swan 38, *Rhune*, moored at Borstö

PERFECT FINNISH

This was just a short taster of a charter cruise, inspired by an old Admiralty chart of the Finnish archipelago. It will definitely stand repeating, as Peter Cumberlidge discovered

For anyone with salt in their veins, the approaches to Helsinki harbour provide constant interest. From the verandah of the elegant Nyländska yacht club, which stands on Blekholmen Island, the whole intriguing prospect was set out before us. To the north-west lay the main expanse of South Harbour, with huge modern cruise liners berthed on either side and the colourful waterfront of Market Square at the head of the inlet.

Beyond the square and the busy town quays where the tourist launches land, the green domes and classical façade of the Lutheran cathedral caught the last of the evening light.

To the south-west, opposite the yacht pontoons, we overlooked the narrow western entrance channel with its two large cardinal buoys. Close to the south was Luoto Island, with ferry jetty and comfortable restaurant. Beyond Luoto, mostly out of sight from the Club, lay the numerous islands and buoyed

channels through which ships and yachts have to pick their way into Helsinki.

Finland lies between 60° and 70°N and in high summer the archipelago has almost 20 hours of daylight. The country's lakes and islands are spectacular and a great attraction for cruising is the seclusion. Although Finland is 2½ times the area of England and Wales, the population is only five million. You can look forward not only to an anchorage to yourself, but a whole island!

We had not cruised in Finland before, but for years had been tantalised by an elderly Admiralty chart of the waters between Sweden and south-west Finland. Here, at the junction between the Gulfs of Bothnia and Finland, scoured out by the Ice Ages and now protected as a vast nature reserve, lie thousands of square miles of shallow sea, packed with countless islands and skerries.

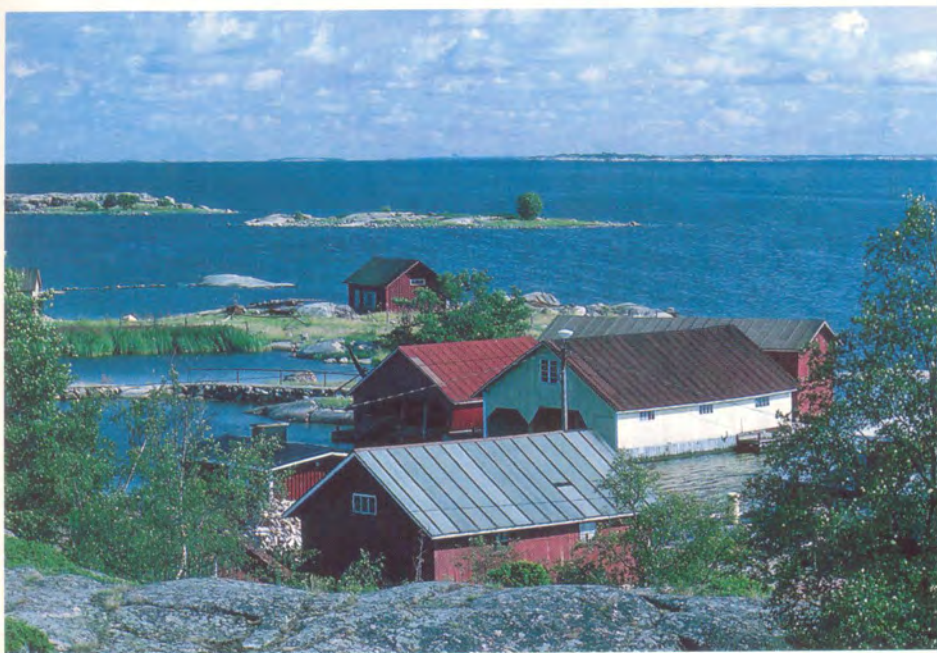
Given time and a bit of organisation, we would like to cruise here in our own boat. But



the season is short and the distances significant. It is, after all, as far again from Kiel to Helsinki as from Dartmouth to Kiel. An energetic crew with generous summer leave could certainly get up to Finland and back in a season, but would miss many fascinating places on the way. Better to adopt a staged expedition, laying-up in Denmark or Sweden to allow a full summer in the Baltic.

As a prelude, though, we were chartering for a week, to sample a minute portion of the archipelago. We were due to pick up our Swan 38 at Taalintehdas, a small harbour 80 miles west of Helsinki. Taalintehdas is well placed for a first cruise, with a choice of northern or southern route towards the Åland Islands.

The north route takes you past Gullöarna and the larger islands of Nauvo and Korppoo, while the seaward route skirts the south fringe of the archipelago, past Borstö, Jurmo and Kökar. You need to follow the charted channels when cruising hereabouts, otherwise >



Top, visiting yachts at the little private island of Gullkrona. In Finland boats usually moor bows-to the jetty with a stern anchor out. **Left**, at the small settlement of Borstö, the timber buildings are painted with the red preservative which is so distinctively Scandinavian. These tiny hamlets have no shops and are served only by the island ferry service. **Above**, the chain ferry at Färja



Above, the Helsinki waterfront at Market Square, South Harbour, at the head of the inlet. Right, the author and his wife, Jane, find the Swan 38 very comfortable for two to handle

there's a real risk of hitting one of the numerous rocks that lurk outside in no-man's-land.

There are plenty of buoyed routes, though, and the local charts are excellent. They come in spiral bound sets, a bit larger than A3. Each chart covers about 8 x 11 nautical miles and a set may contain up to 30 charts.

The coach journey from Helsinki to Taalintehdas followed a steady, purposeful route through lush farmland. The coach left Helsinki precisely on time, reached all its stops on time, and arrived in Taalintehdas at the precise scheduled minute. Our boat, *Rhune*, was ready and waiting, moored bows-to the quay and stern-to a buoy in Finnish fashion.

Built in 1974 and designed by Sparkman & Stephens, she had the timeless grace of all ships from the famous Nautor yard. The 1970s aren't that long ago, but they were heady days for yacht design and ocean racing, so there was something nostalgic about the lines of this Swan of a certain age.

She would be comfortable for two, of course, and good-tempered to handle, I was sure of that. Martti Santavirta showed us her few minor quirks and suggested various choice anchorages from the thousands available. A good supermarket just a short stroll from the quay meant we were soon underway.

The two-hour passage from Taalintehdas



***Rhune* slipped along at eight knots with aristocratic ease – no fuss, just smooth, rapid progress. A gentleman's yacht . . .**

to the sea followed a tortuous route between close-packed wooded islands, but we emerged every so often into wider expanses of apparently land-locked water and had to steer a compass course for a mile or two, towards some invisible gap on the far side.

Some of the leads were very narrow, but the channels are well marked by buoys and by the large red and yellow leading marks – which sometimes waited until the last moment before appearing through the trees. We passed a chain ferry at Färja, before crossing the shallowest spot of our 3.7 metre route.

All charted lines through the archipelago have a minimum depth marked against them, and in some northern parts you also have to

watch out for bridge heights. The shallowest route we came across was 2.4 metres, but this minimum depth only occurred at one or two critical points along the way.

We crossed an open sound between Högsåra island and Kasnäsländet, negotiated the last narrow channel south of Högsåra and then broke out into relatively open sea. Our bow lifted to a slight swell at the mouth of the channel and a light breeze steadied from the south-west.

I hoisted the main, unfurled the genoa, cut the engine and we bore away northwards. To starboard lay the straight, wooded shore of Högsåra. Out to port, in all directions and as far as you could see, a bewildering complex of

islands and low skerries overlapped in silhouette against the afternoon sun.

Rhune slipped along at eight knots with aristocratic ease. Her elegant hull was easily driven, but her displacement and classical lines gave an instant sense of capable seaworthiness. There was no fuss, no flightiness, simply smooth, rapid progress. She was, without doubt, a gentleman's yacht.

We didn't venture far that afternoon and had picked out a likely anchorage on the chart, between two small islands lying close together in the form of a V, almost joined at their south-west tip. The narrow sound seemed to offer perfect shelter from the strong south-easterlies which Helsinki Radio were forecasting for overnight and the following morning.

Helsinki and Mariehamn Radios broadcast local shipping forecasts in English twice a day, using a chain of slave stations throughout the archipelago. The bulletins are easy to follow, except that wind strengths are given in metres per second instead of Beaufort.

I always find this rather a curious notation. The full picture conjured up by Force 6, locally 7, doesn't seem quite the same when expressed as 13 or 14 metres per second. The conversion is straightforward, since a metre per second is equivalent to just under two knots of wind.

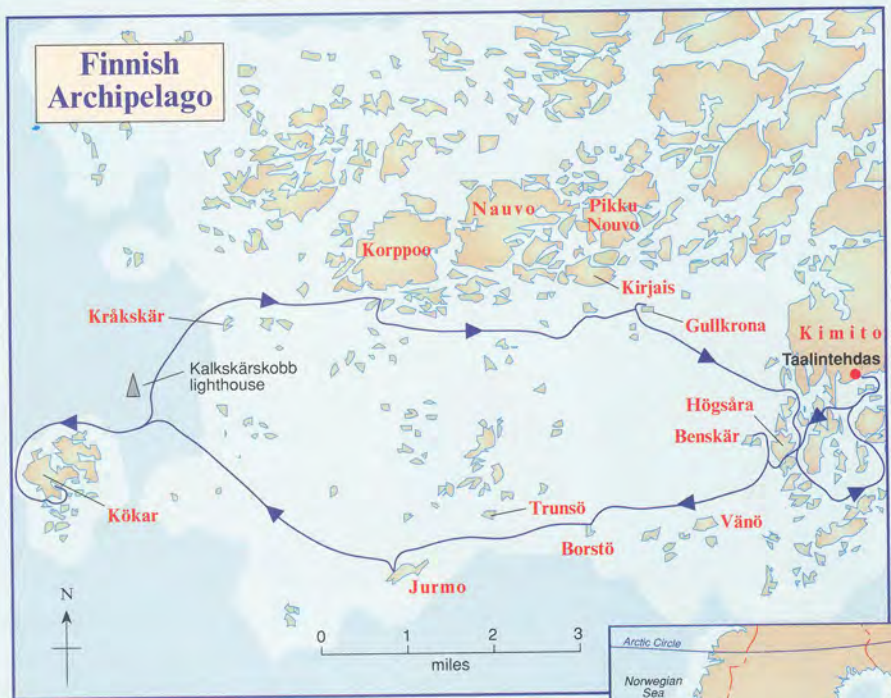
Approaching our first islands, Norra Bensjär and Södra Bensjär, we nudged in slowly, but the pilotage was straightforward using the large-scale insets given on the back of each chart. The creek between the two Bensjärs was completely snug – unless the wind should swing round to the north or north-east. There were no houses, no boats, no sign of life at all.

The chart showed the shoreline as shallow in parts, but mostly steep-to with enough depth for our 6ft draught. In England or France we'd simply have anchored in a sheltered spot, but Finns prefer to be secured directly to the shore, with easy access for wandering through the woods to collect berries and wild mushrooms. The accepted method of mooring is stern-to an anchor with your bow pulled close in to the rocky shore by warps to a couple of trees.

Smaller boats can heave their anchor over the stern as they go in, but our big CQR had to be lowered over the bow-roller in the usual way. The anchor had a couple of fathoms of chain shackled to it, and a reel of anchor-braid, secured aft to the pushpit, served as the main warp. Therefore, before fetching up, a couple of boat lengths of braid had to be led forward outside everything, back aboard through the roller, and then shackled to the chain.

I didn't much fancy lowering the anchor underfoot while we were motoring forwards, so we devised a system of approaching our chosen spot parallel to the shore, lowering the anchor opposite where we wanted to moor, and then dropping back normally on a modest scope of warp. Thus securely lying to the bow, we would slip the warp from forward and veer towards the shore, the warp now leading safely clear from aft. This variation on a Finnish ▷

USEFUL INFORMATION



FINNISH charts can be ordered in advance from Kelvin Hughes Ltd, Tel: (0703) 223772. Three sets cover the area of this cruise:

- Set B**, Läntinen Suomenlahti (Helsinki-Paraistenportti)
- Set C**, Åland
- Set D**, Turunmaan Saaristo (Paraistenportti-Utö-Uusikaupunki)

For advance planning, I recommend the excellent pilot book *The Baltic Sea* by the RCC Pilotage Foundation, 1st Edition published by Imray Laurie Norie & Wilson 1992.

The archipelago is covered by Helsinki and Mariehamn Coast Radio Stations, which broadcast forecasts in English twice a day:

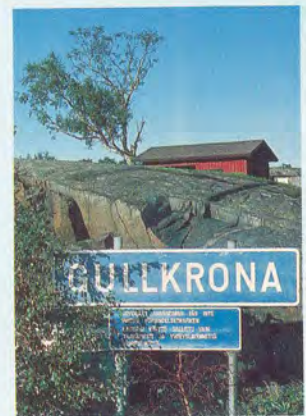
Helsinki Radio broadcasts at 1033 and 2233 local time, Mariehamn Radio broadcasts at 1133 and 2333.

VHF working channels in the area of this cruise are: **Helsinki Radio Channels 03, 25, 86. Mariehamn Radio Channels 07, 23.**

Wind speeds are given in metres per second. Note that one knot is equivalent to 0.514 m/s, ie one m/s is equivalent to two knots for practical purposes. So, for example, 12 m/s is equivalent to 24 knots of wind, or Force 6.

Finnair operate regular scheduled flights from Heathrow to Helsinki, with three-hour flight time (Enquiries, tel: 071-408 1222). The Finnish rail network is good, but the most direct way to reach Taalintehdas (Dalsbruk) is by coach from Helsinki long-haul coach station. Journey time: 3hrs 50mins.

Taking a **sauna** (pronounced sow-na) is part of the Finnish



way of life. On islands with yacht facilities, you'll find a sauna rather than showers.

Saunas are generally close to the waterside, so you can plunge straight into the sea after sitting around for a while in the hot steam.

A Finnish sauna is ultimately refreshing, but protracted. Being something of a heretic in these matters, I much prefer to have a quick swim and return on board for a glass of whisky. . .

Peter Cumberidge



The peaceful village of Borstö, where we enjoyed freshly smoked flounders

theme seemed to work well, making it easier to approach the shore under full control.

It's becoming almost impossible to find perfect peace and quiet in home waters these days, but seclusion was here for the asking in Finland. The Benskärs islands were deserted, the only sound was the freshening wind in the tops of the pines.

The wind was strong overnight, although our anchorage was calm. It was still blowing hard next morning but, with largely sheltered water among the islands, I would have pulled down a reef and set off had it not been for the low cloud and rain which blotted out visibility every so often. You can't afford to miss a mark or take a wrong turn, and Decca doesn't give fine enough accuracy up here for conning down the channels on instruments.

The cold front was through by noon, sharpening the air with a cooler wind veering south-westerly. Beating down the 7.3 metre channel towards Vänö, we joined the main route which runs west between mainland Hanko and Kōkar, the first of the Åland islands.

In the late afternoon, Borstö Island tempted us in through a narrow channel to an almost landlocked lagoon and a sturdy jetty. Near the landing was a small hamlet of timber chalets and boathouses, painted in the red preservative which is so distinctively Scandinavian. At the head of the jetty we saw the familiar conservation emblem – a seal – which, in the Finnish lakes and islands, indicates toilets and a rubbish collection point. Rubbish is collected from these stations regularly by boat.

The island seemed deserted, but smoke was trailing from a hut on the shore near the boathouses and we found an amiable local smoker his morning's catch of flounders. He opened the smoker to display several racks of fish and said they'd be ready in 20 minutes.

The small harbour and village, slightly ramshackle yet essentially well ordered, had an extraordinary atmosphere of calm and harmony with the natural surroundings.

The villagers live here all year round and we could only imagine what it might be like in January, with a piercing east wind from Russia, ice on the shore and just a few hours of daylight.

The only links with the mainland were the island ferry service and the fast launch, moored opposite the smokery, which served as the local taxi. I could hear a diesel generator chugging in one of the huts, but the electricity supply was probably rather precarious.

Shops are so far-flung in the archipelago that they are marked on the charts (as K for *Kauppa*) as features of some importance. There wasn't one on Borstö.

Islanders make expeditions to these *Kauppa* by boat; the nearest to Borstö were at Vänö or Trunsö, about seven miles in either case. Having had two devaluations in the last couple

CHARTER FACTS



WE CHARTERED from Midnight Sun Charter Ltd, main charter operators for the Finnish archipelago, starting from and returning to their base in Taalintehdas (Dalsbruk is the Swedish name). The boat was well maintained and equipped. Taalintehdas is a fascinating three-hour coach ride from the long-range coach terminal at Helsinki.

Contact: Midnight Sun Charter Ltd Ab, POB 111, SF 02 321 Espoo, Finland. Tel: +358 0 6222 470, Fax +358 0 6222 394.

For other charter possibilities in Finland, contact: Riitta Balza, Finnish Tourist Board, 66-68 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4RF. Tel: 071-930 5871, Fax: 071-321 0696.

of years, Finland is no longer expensive for other Northern Europeans. Supermarket prices are slightly higher than in the UK, but not markedly so. The Finnmark is currently about 8.5 to the pound and, for comparison, you can reckon a Finnmark roughly equivalent to a French franc.

Yachts need to stock up before cruising the archipelago, since shops in the islands are few and far between. The state-owned company Alko AB still has a monopoly on wines and spirits, although beer can be bought in supermarkets and general stores. Reasonable table wines are a tolerable price, and the Californian whites and rosés are quite good value. Spirits are still extremely expensive. Taalintehdas has an Alko store and two large supermarkets.

Finns are not great gastronomes and congenial restaurants are thinly spread, but they excel at salmon soup and the lightly marinated gravadlax salmon, both of which can be superb. Also try the local herrings (*vendace*) with mashed potatoes.

Next morning the wind had settled to a light southerly as we slipped westward under full sail towards Jurmo, a low island, yet more isolated than Borstö, on the outer fringes of the plateau.

Five miles west of Jurmo, the main buoyed channel turns north-west to skirt the complex group of islands around Alskär and Osterskär, before a 5.2 metre route forks west to approach Kōkar along its north coast. On the south side of Kōkar, one of the few marinas in the archipelago lies at the head of Karlbysund, a long sheltered inlet most easily reached from the south-west corner of Kōkar.

Since our time was rationed, we opted to turn north-east from Kōkar towards the centre of the archipelago, to follow the channels back past Korppoo and Nauvo.

Kalkskärskobb lighthouse is something of a crossroads, and then the first few miles north-east feel strangely empty until you turn off to starboard soon after Kråkskär, towards the tight cluster of islands south of Korppoo. The north sides of Korppoo and Nauvo tend to be busier with yachts coming out from the old Finnish capital of Turku, so we kept to the south, closer to the smaller, more isolated islands for which we were acquiring a taste.

Because 'facilities' are thinly spread, you need to be well stored, topped up with diesel, and parsimonious with water in the traditional style of cruising. You also need to take precautions against mosquitoes. We used a repellent whenever we went ashore and lit a slow-burn spiral on board every evening.

Trying to picture the archipelago in winter gives some insight into the tough self-sufficiency of the Finns living here. Yachtsmen cruising in August, facing three-day-old bread and the last two bottles of wine, seem a shade decadent by comparison. □