

Sailing in Sweden: off piste in the Baltic

The outer Stockholm archipelago may be only a quick ferry journey from the city, but a late-season visit proved it is perfect for the yachtsman looking for isolation and beauty in equal measure



Stockholm archipelago, the second-largest in the Baltic, contains about 30,000 islands and islets Photo: Felix Odell/Link Image

By Will Ellsworth-Jones

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Saunas have never really held much interest for me. First you get all hot and sweaty, and for what? To have a cold shower or a roll in the snow. And for what? To go and get all hot and sweaty again. So what's the point?

But then we sailed into a completely perfect little harbour – protected, deserted, sunny, pretty – on Lokholmen in the Stockholm archipelago and the sauna took on a completely different meaning.

It was Thomas who convinced me. Thomas – seasoned, self-sufficient, ever so slightly wild, sailing around the islands in solitary splendour all summer long in a classic boat, long on the waterline, narrow at the waist. Thomas who told me I just had to take a sauna while in Sweden and this was the perfect place to do it.

The essential pilot book for the islands lists not only harbours, restaurants, reeds, rocks awash, wrecks showing hull, wrecks underwater... but saunas too. On our last night we were tied up on one tiny island when a father brought his motor boat into the shore close to us, jumped on to a rock and tied his boat up.

Whereas an English yachting might have gone hunting for a pub (he would have been out of luck – there was nothing on this island but a sauna) the Swede hurried off to see if he was in time to write his name in a book to bag the sauna for his family's Saturday afternoon.

But there was no need to book where we were. Early in September there was just Thomas and us. He gave me the code for the lock, told me I had to chop my own wood and left me to get on with it. He was disappointed to learn we had no beer on board, only duty free wine from Heathrow; to him a sauna without cold beer was hardly a sauna.

So off I went through the trees, across the rocks, to the sauna hut – actually more like a house than a hut. Sure enough at the back there was an axe and some wood waiting for me. Chop the wood, light the fire, wait for the stones to heat, pour your bucket of water on them and bingo you have a sauna.

Just as I was about to strip off and start sweating Thomas arrived, on his way to the ferry for the five-minute journey to the neighbouring island of Sandhamn, just to make sure everything was OK. He was carrying an ice cold beer for me – what a star.



Aerial view of the Stockholm Archipelago. Photo: Roine Magnusson

When I was hot enough it was down to the sea – starkers, the place was that deserted – for a quick swim. There was a moment of thinking I was completely mad; the forecast that morning had told us there would be ‘No Baltic Ice’, but that was no great comfort. ‘It’s September, in the Baltic and I am ***** freezing,’ I thought as I paddled as hard as I could. Then back for another sweat.

I don’t think I will ever have another sauna in my life: this was too perfect.

In the morning we took our boat to Sandhamn. The postcard I bought there called the village ‘the metropolis of the outer Stockholm archipelago’ which told me a lot about the other islands. In the height of summer there is apparently a queuing system to get a berth, but for now the place was almost empty.

There was one hotel that we could see, one shop, a bakery already closed for the winter, two restaurants, a ferry stage, a pilot station, Strindberg’s garden, a variety of prettily painted clapboard houses, no cars, one main street and not much else. Very attractive in a quirky sort of way, but hardly a metropolis.

Before setting sail we had been given a helpful itinerary for a week’s sailing with stopovers most nights in places like Sandhamn, but when I talked this through with a Swedish sailing acquaintance he told me

– very politely – that I was a wimp. Real Swedes don't eat in port restaurants every night, they find shelter in the middle of nowhere, anchor, cook on board and enjoy the solitary beauty.

We were not going to see nature, only nature-lite. So in the face of his gentle scorn we decided to go off piste – get out there and be Real Swedes.

Fortunately we were well equipped for this. On board were my friends: Jonathan, with huge experience in all kinds of sailing and navigation, undoubtedly the admiral; his wife, Cathy, crew and – most important – galley slave; and me, a sort of first mate.

In truth the sailing is easy in the archipelago, reasonable winds and very little tide to worry about. The problem is the navigation; there are rocks you can't see waiting for you underwater, rocks you can see all too close, small islands, big islands. You absolutely need an auto pilot as well as the usual charts for the green Swedish islands are a bit like the blond Swedes: initially, at least, they all look the same – beautiful, but the same.

Our first night could not have been more on piste. Due to a gathering storm and our general lateness we only got two hours sailing in and ended up in Vaxholm, which you can actually reach from Stockholm by bus. Thomas was later to tell us he thought the place had been ruined.

But of course, that depends where you start from; for us it seemed a little like the ports along the French and Spanish coast before they really were ruined. Our arrival was not impressive – skippering the boat into the harbour I had an unfortunate argument with the harbour wall and we ended with a small hole in the fibreglass bowsprit.

But things got better after that. There was a scattering of restaurants, a couple of clapboard shopping streets with a slightly New England feel about them, a nice hotel taking pride of place on the front and a constant bustle of boats and ferries to keep you entertained.

No beach, but an offshore fort added a little history to the place. The fort deterred the Russians from attacking Stockholm in the 18th century but did little to impress the Germans in the 19th century. The pilot book told us that the German Field Marshal von Moltke was said to have only laughed twice in his life: once when his mother-in-law died and once when he visited Vaxholm in 1881 and saw that the fort could not possibly cope with modern cannons.

The next morning, while waiting for the wind and rain to abate, we decided we needed sustenance and headed for the Heritage Museum which, the guide book added, had a 'fantastic outdoor cafe'. The museum, showing living conditions a century ago and run by an enthusiast and his elderly mother, sadly seemed to be doing very little business, even though it was free, while the cafe next door was mobbed. We too were seduced by cakes over culture. How could anyone resist a table that stretched the length of the room, piled high with pastries and buns? How do Swedes stay thin in the face of such temptation? Perhaps the price deters them: £18 for three drinks and a sugary, creamy delight each.

But with that comes a seat in the garden, overlooking the water, blankets provided if necessary. Perfect apart from the vague guilt about the museum without any visitors.

It was when we left Vaxholm that things began to change. Trees, not houses, stretched down to the waterfront; people, cars, worries were all disappearing fast, although when I sailed us down the wrong channel it reminded us that we still needed to worry, but at least the subjects we worried about had changed.



First Mate Will, breaker of bowsprits. Photo: Jonathan Giles

Loknasviken, our next stop, was a natural harbour with nothing but a few boats, with no one on board, tied to a small jetty. We motored up as close to the horseshoe end of the bay as we dared and anchored close to the reeds.

And there we were alone, the bay and us; a few sheep bleating quietly away in the field across the water, swans and their cygnets looking for food, with a gentle almost comforting sort of Highland rain adding layers to the stillness. Here we were less than a couple of hours' ferry ride out of Stockholm and already we could have been in the middle of nowhere.

Ever since the 1930s the Swedes have been going on about 'heartless property developers' at work in the archipelago, and in some of the 30,000 islands that we never got to maybe that is true. But having had several immensely enjoyable family sailing holidays in Greece and Turkey and seen mega hotels eating up quiet bays, the Swedes seem angels by comparison.

Perhaps the winter ice and the short summer season helps protect them but the islands we visited were remarkably unspoilt. I suspect they are much better with the boring subject of planning consent than the Turks who suddenly found an irresistible gold mine sitting on their beaches.

In the 1960s and 70s, while Southern Europe was getting rich quick, the Swedish government was buying up whole islands and now owns 15 per cent of the archipelago. Through the impossibly named Skärgårdsstiftelsen they protect the islands they own but also develop them where necessary to provide work for the islanders who want to stay all year.

The Swedes go back to school in the middle of August and before then the archipelago must be full up, but at least it is full of boats and ferry passengers rather than coaches and sun umbrellas. In the first week of September it felt as if someone had pulled a mysterious plug on the whole archipelago; the people had all disappeared down the plug-hole but the water had stayed.

But even in midsummer if you find the 'metropolis' of Sandhamn too much then you can do what we did and just keep heading east to the outer, outer islands where there are absolutely no cars, no people, no facilities, and even the trees have a hard job hanging on because the winter weather is so bad.

Strindberg describes them so well, 'These islands, holms, skerries lying so softly on the water it was impossible to say whether they were part of the earth or part of the heavens.'

We sailed for most of the day until it became too dangerous and we had to motor, picking our passage through the rocks until we found Gubben on Stora Nassa, a collection of 365 islands and rocks where the last permanent inhabitant died in 1930 at the age of 96.



Moored in Hallskar for another perfect night. Photo: Will Ellsworth-Jones

We were anchored both fore and aft, so well protected by the rocks it felt as though we were enclosed in some welcome womb – again totally alone, the only people in the universe, sitting on the edge of the world – silent, safe but still on the edge.

The admiral declared he had never ever found a bay like it and we all sat transfixed watching the sun go down. But only the admiral was keen enough to be up at fiveish the next morning to spend an hour and a half watching it come up again. We went below to eat, drink wine and talk about Henry Moore – these rocks have something of his soft sculptural quality – football, our children and where the world ends, all in no particular order.

In the morning I celebrated this amazing place with a skinny dip, having first checked that the jelly fish were still all asleep, and then bacon and eggs in the cockpit – perfect.

At our next stop, Hallskar, there were two other boats in the same bay and it felt like Piccadilly Circus. The drop-off from the rocks was so steep that we could put our bow against the land so we were almost touching without going aground. This was fortunate since we lacked a tin opener and so I scrambled ashore and then over the rocks to beg for one.

If ever there was proof needed of the theory of 'Six Degrees of Separation' – the idea, as I have always understood it, that if you meet a stranger you are only six acquaintances away from making a connection – it surely came here. Both boats were Swedish, and one had English guests on board who lent me their basic Boy Scout tin opener.

I had only got about halfway round the precious tin of tomatoes I was carrying when we had established the connection; they lived on the Isle of Wight and we both knew a good friend, Serena Allott, who had died there earlier in the summer. It was extraordinary.

I returned triumphant to the boat with the tomatoes and got told by the admiral to jump aboard. He was very unimpressed at my efforts to scramble across the bowsprit, 'I told you to jump on the boat, not shag it,' he shouted as I struggled to stay out of the water.

That night there was more wine below and we talked about trips of a lifetime and how much they depended on who you were with and what was going on in your life as much or perhaps more than where you were. Thus my trip of a lifetime was the last time my late wife, Barbara, could really travel to the sun; we went to Majorca. The hotel was good; we did nothing much – it was just the fact that we could be there together that made it such an amazing trip.

The Swedish islands were, though, an experience of a lifetime, one I would more than happily come back for.



Map of the outer Stockholm Archipelago

After Hallskar we had to turn for home. First we saw more sailing boats, then a ferry, more trees, and then the occasional speed boat and the houses. We were back in civilisation. This time we nosed our way into a 'guest harbour', Malma Kvarn, very roughly our equivalent of a marina, but tiny, where the admiral put me to shame with the way he tucked us into the smallest space between two boats.

Again, in a very Swedish way, the millionaire who owned the harbour gave the whole place to the Cruising Club in 1949. But perhaps Swedish solidarity is wearing a little thin these days; the Club's

members who use the harbour are supposed to come a couple of times a year and help clean it up, but an old-time member pointed to a shiny motor boat and said, 'That big fat boat won't help. He's got a summer cottage here and he's just not interested.'

There was a small restaurant on the jetty and a path by it had been christened 'Avenue du Champagne', all 40 feet of it. The restaurant announced love all, serve all, but already it was closed (and the mooring fees were stopped, too). There were no provisions to buy, just ice creams left in a deep freeze in a hut, and when we didn't have the right change the man on the dock declared a 'special sale' and gave them to us for the few coins we could produce.

Then we were really on our way home. Again we found shelter away from the big harbours, although for the first and only time we were turned away from a tempting jetty by people shouting that it was a members' only island – very unSwedish.

That night I had one final swim and this time I persuaded the admiral in too. Strangely the Baltic seemed warmer than Chichester harbour to me, but not the admiral, and certainly much less salty. The only Swedes who jumped in seemed to be using it as a bath rather than a place to swim in – maybe swimming stops in mid-August along with everything else.

On our final morning we took a different route back to Stockholm through what was almost a canal with lawns coming down to the water and a hint of Esher about the place. And then we were back at our marina in the outskirts of Stockholm. Having had a slightly difficult conversation with the owner of our boat about the damage to the bowsprit we took a ferry to the heart of the city.

It seemed unbelievable: so far from everything one moment and then back in the midst of the world the next. In the morning, before flying home, I visited the Vasa Museum to see the Swedish warship that sank on her maiden voyage back in 1628 and was then salvaged in 1961. The Vasa is a staggering ship, so well preserved, so high, so ridiculously unseaworthy.

Staring up at her I thought, well I might have hit the harbour wall on our maiden voyage but at least I didn't sink the ship.

You can charter a boat through Nautilus Yachting (charter@nautilusyachting.com or 01732-867445;nautilusyachting.com). A two-cabin, 33ft Bavaria costs £1,565 for a week in low season rising to £2,000 in high season. We flew to Stockholm with British Airways (ba.com)