

Stockholm to Helsinki

written by Marcus | 23 September, 2014



In Finland just over 74% of the land area is covered in forest. There are over 50,000 lakes longer than 200m (but no-one has actually counted them all) and the Finns love to swim in them. The population is around 5 million and there are 2 million saunas, roughly 1 per household. So it seemed unlikely we'd be able to avoid trees, cold water and sitting naked in a hot room.



Stockholm

16th to 22nd September 2014

The crossing from Stockholm was thankfully more successful than the maiden voyage of the Varsa that we had been to see earlier that day. Before leaving Sweden we'd also managed to solve the perennial problem of the English travelling abroad and found some proper tea bags after Stuart tipped us off about The English Shop which supplied all things British at reassuringly expensive prices. A good cup of tea at the beginning and end of each day is too important to begin worrying about the price though.



Proper tea makes for a happy Kirsty



The Varso museum

We arrive in Turku as dawn breaks and have a couple of hours

to ride round the city centre. Finland is the most expensive country yet and we get charged 4 euros for a coffee. Our food bills are comfortably 15-20% more than even Denmark and Sweden too but maybe we're just eating more. Turku is 60 degrees north, roughly in line with Lerwick on the Shetland Islands, and marks the most northerly point of our whole trip, from here we can begin following the flocks of geese we've been seeing and start heading south.



Sailing into Turku at dawn

Through the power of Twitter, Taina has agreed to be our guide for the day and we meet her outside the impressive library (Finns love a good library). It's a lovely little city with the River Aura at its heart and Taina leads us on a gentle ride along the river bank to see parts of the old town, formerly Finland's capital. We pass a 'nap house' that offers weary travellers somewhere to catch 40 winks but it's closed, as is the adjacent sauna but there would be plenty of time to

find another one of those.



Taina our amazing Turku Guide

After a bite to eat and crossing the Aura on the iconic little Föri ferry that has been offering free transport for bikes and pedestrians for over 100 years we meet a reporter from the local paper that Taina had tipped off. It seems our story is news worthy so we get our photo taken, offer a few soundbites and are told it should be published the next day.



Daisy, Daisy in Turku

Turku sits on the South West corner of Finland where the coast is littered with some 40,000 islands forming a huge archipelago. We had been toying with the idea of venturing out onto some of the islands as there are a few marked cycle routes that form loops of varying lengths centred around Turku. In fact, for anyone looking for inspiration for a cycle tour of a week or more then this would be a very good place to come. Unfortunately some of the key ferry crossings we'd need to take stop operating at the end of August so we're left with the choice of the biggest loop, that would take a week or a short out and back route. We explain our dilemma to Taina and she immediately sways us towards the out and back route by suggesting we try and get to the most remote and southernmost inhabited island of them all: Utö. This would involve 65km of hopping across several islands, most with bridges between them but also a slightly longer crossing on a ferry before we get to the little port of Pärnäs. From Pärnäs it's a 4.5 hour

ferry that has to weave between hundreds of islands before eventually arriving at Utö, a rock out in the middle of the sea with just a handful of permanent residents and Finland's first lighthouse. We decided to go for it and ride some of the way that same day, camp, then ride into Pärnäs to catch the 2:00pm ferry to Utö the next day. Along the way we pick up a copy of the local paper and see we've made the front page! At Pärnäs a couple say they'd read about us that morning too but thought we were going to a different island? The reporter had written that we were off to one of the other islands in the archipelago which left us with images of bunting being hung out and a crowd gathering somewhere else only to find we never arrived.



First bridge onto the Archipelago



Tandemillia!

Unlike everything else in Finland, the 4.5 hour ferry crossing is remarkably good value, better even than our previous

favourite ferry company Caledonian MacBrane in Scotland, as it is completely free. The boat is 'crowded' with twitchers keen to spot a sea eagle or cormorant but apparently the most exciting thing on display that day is a kestrel. For us though it's a fantastic way to experience the archipelago with so many different islands, some with houses, huts, windmills and boat houses but most are uninhabited. It would be a great place for a kayaking trip.



Jurno

Eventually we land at Utö at 6:30pm and we extract the bike from the ferry through an awkward side door as the jetty is too high to allow the main door to open. We could have had it craned off but decided against it. It's not a big island by anyone's standards but we still get lost trying to get to the lighthouse and luckily a friendly resident comes to our help and hands us a map. He used to live there but is now just visiting to help his son with a building project and to enjoy the unusually warm weather. He tells us it's a very unique place, especially when a storm hits and we should stay a bit

longer than just the overnight stop we'd planned. But at the moment it's turning into a beautiful clear evening so we make our way up to the lighthouse to cook dinner and watch the sun set. There is a waterside sauna that could have ended the day nicely but it's only for guests of the only hotel on the island and besides there would be plenty of time for that later.





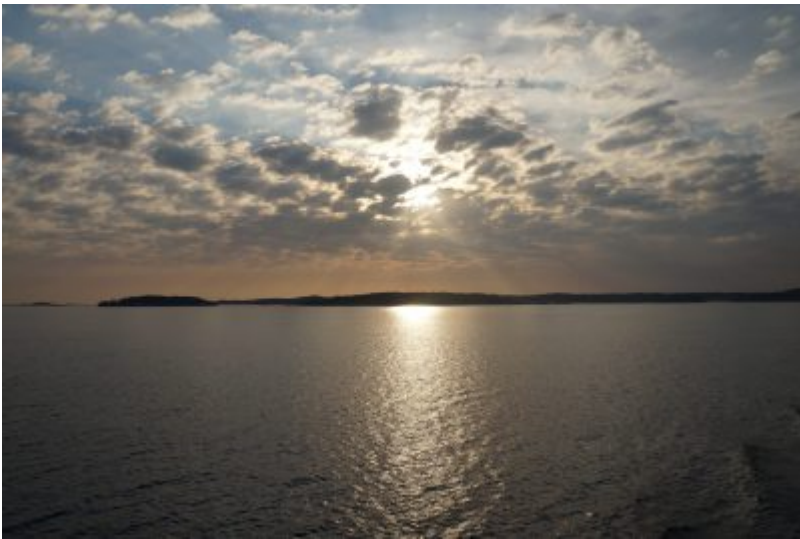
The ferry timetable is a bit awkward to say the least as the

return trip is at 5:30am the next day. It barely seems worthwhile putting up the tent, so we don't. Instead we turn the cosy little ferry waiting room into our own 'nap house' and get a few hours sleep before climbing back onto the boat.



MV Eivor

The advantage of the early start is that we get to see a great display of stars given the sky is still clear, followed by sunrise over the islands. Thank you Taina for this superb and very memorable suggestion.



Retracing our steps up the archipelago is nice and easy. The only traffic passes as a small convoy shortly after a ferry arrives at either end of the island so mostly the road is quiet. One of the ferry crew coming back from Utö had asked if we'd swum while we were there but regretfully we have to admit we didn't. I make amends the following night when we camp next

to a swimming beach and join some locals by taking in a lap of the floating pontoon. 'It's not so cold at the moment' one of them tells us. It's not so warm either.



Kaarina swimming pontoon in morning mist

There is only one route option heading east without making a large detour, which is to follow the 110 main road. It's long, straight and has plenty of steady climbs followed by steady descents where our terminal velocity is always 52 km/hr. There are a few lakes on either side but 74% of the time they are hidden from view by trees. An uninspiring day ends suitably with a struggle to find a camping spot, half a pan of quinoa being spilt and a peg going missing in the undergrowth.

But the next day starts much better as the prodigal peg makes a return and the fog that had been quite thick on previous mornings soon lifts. There's just 20km left to ride on the 110 before we get to turn left onto a much more pleasant side

road. The climbs are tougher but the views much nicer. Harvesting finished a while ago so the farmers are now busy burning stubble and ploughing. Finland is supplied with the same shade of red paint as Sweden for their barns but, controversially, some of them aren't painted at all.



Our next destination is another tip from Taina, the Nuuksio National Park which is just 40km from Helsinki. Getting there proves interesting as we approach from the north west whereas the main entrance is on the south east corner. As such we have to negotiate some gravel roads and then some mountain bike trails to get in. The granny ring has to be deployed having been kept clean since the very beginning of the trip to get up some challenging loose climbs. But it's worth it when we arrive at one of the designated free camping spots in the park, right next to lake Haukalampi. It's very well equipped with a covered cooking area, a shed full of logs for a fire and an axe to chop them. It's been a warm day so we cool off

in the lake then spend the evening round a fire wishing we'd bought marshmallows. We were a day late for the park's Saturday sauna but there was still a couple of days left in Finland to find another one.





Then our luck with the weather changes. There are lots of marked walking paths in the park so the next morning we head out on foot into the woods. After about an hour the light drizzle turns to heavy rain and we get a good soaking. We just about manage to spot a flying squirrel, or at least hear it land above us and see a tail disappearing when we look up. After sheltering for lunch the rain is still pouring so we dig out the wet weather gear and make for Helsinki. We're very glad when we arrive at Antero's flat, our host for the evening, and within minutes of entering the front door he's let us have a warm shower, put clothes in the wash, and begins cooking food. An amazing reception for two bedraggled strangers. And his house is equipped with a sauna! Which is offered to dry our clothes.

Antero tells us about his own cycle trip from Copenhagen to Helsinki, the other way round the Baltic from us, and I admire his extensive vinyl collection while Kirsty plays with the cats.



Antero, our host and guide in Helsinki

The next day he kindly offers to guide us into the city centre despite it adding 10km to his commute which is invaluable as

he knows a great path alongside the river that avoids most of the traffic. It's stopped raining but the temperature has dropped to 3 degrees, a full 20 degrees less than 2 days ago. All the clothes that we've been lugging about that seemed unnecessary now come out of the panniers and become very necessary.



Helsinki Cathedral



Helsinki Cathedral

Helsinki is an interesting town though not quite as striking as some of the other cities we've been through. There is a slightly soviet feel to the architecture probably helped by the biting wind and big statues of important looking men with very important looking moustaches. Unusually there are big chunks of rock nestled between some buildings, one of which has been blasted out and turned into a very impressive church. After a good look around the city and a trip to the Olympic stadium it's time to catch a ferry to Tallinn and into our 9th country. Looks like the famous Finnish sauna experience will have to wait until another visit.







