

## The best of two worlds

(This is the translation of the blog ‘Beste van twee werelden’, published in Dutch on the website of the Dutch magazine Zeilen on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022: [https://www.zeilen.nl/op\\_reis/reisverhalen/blog-anna-noord-het-bestе-van-twee-werelden/](https://www.zeilen.nl/op_reis/reisverhalen/blog-anna-noord-het-bestе-van-twee-werelden/))

“Bye!” with the mooring rope still in my hands, I almost dislocate my arm, waving. Tears well up in my eyes; the eternal good-beyes that are part of our sailing lifestyle hurt again today. Conny and Carina wave in the increasing distance. The last time that our boats were moored alongside was in Thailand. And now again. This is the end of two great weeks, in which we visited six sailing friends. Each of the three couples has showed us their region of eastern Sweden in a lovely way. “What time does that bridge open?” Wietze asks and pulls us back to earth. “In half an hour”.

After the Götachannel we went north along the famous skerry coast of east Sweden. We’ve spent time gunkholing between rocks, islands, villages and national parks. Often we see the remains of a Medieval fortress in the distance. Memories of Vikings are never far away. Each night our anchor falls in the thick mud of a beautiful bay. Slowly, summer starts. Our foulweather gear is no longer necessary, the amount of boats in each bay increases. In and around Stockholm it is madness on the water with ferries, cruise ships and fast motorboats. We sail onto the Lake Mälaren and enjoy the peace and quiet that descends on you there.

### *Summer in the skerries*

In Stockholm we have to go to the Vasamuseum, no doubt about that. It is so impressive to see the historic ship Vasa there. It was too high, too heavy and sank in the first mile. For over 300 years she lay in the mud of the harbour. Only in the sixties of the last century she was found and raised to the surface again. Perfectly preserved. And now, we (and thousands of other visitors) get to admire the beautiful woodcarvings. So many details can still be seen!

After the traditional midsummerlunch with schnapps and herring, we cast off again for the continuation of our trip in the Stockholm skerries. Amazing sunny and hot days. Anchoring bays are full near sleepy towns on remote islands. Like bees the ferries zip back and forth: every island seems to be a ferry stop. When we arrive in Arholma, we are at the northernmost island of the Stockholm skerries. With great satisfaction we look back on our trip through this amazing cruising area. “Tomorrow we go sailing again, to Åland” Wietze says happily.

### *Åland*

It is a crossing to remember: nice breeze from aft, hardly any swell and sunny skies. We say “ah, isn’t this great” at least ten times during the day. Wietze enjoys handsteering, just for the fun of it. He is afraid to miss one moment of the fun. Thirty miles zip underneath our keel and before we know it, we squeeze into the narrow channel to the capital Marihamn. We share the channel with some massive ferries, so we need to be vigilant. The wind howls across the ASS marina; a harbourmaster comes out in a RIB. “Follow me” he says and moments later we’re at a great spot alongside the dock.

“Look” Wietze says. “We have never been in a harbour where every boat flies a courtesy flag”. Åland is Finnish, but it is an autonomous area within Finland with their own flag, laws, rules and language. They speak Swedish and not Finnish.

The next day we walk into town, curious what we find. Straight tree-lined avenues, grand wooden houses and here and there a park. “The whole archipelago has 30.000 inhabitants,

of which 12.000 live in Mariehamn” I recite the information that I read earlier that morning. In the east of Mariehamn there is another marina. It’s also busy there. We walk to the nautical quarter that is next to the marina: beautiful old boathouses, a cute little chapel and all sorts of sheds where historic ships are being restored.

### *A warm welcome*

“Welcome to Aland!” We have coffee with Jan-Erik Rask, the honorary consul of the Netherlands in Aland; in daily life he is the director of the Chamber of Commerce. A great conversation, in which he tells about the good life on Aland. “You see, we live on an island here, but because of the big ferries we can travel easily to the big cities like Stockholm and Helsinki. It’s quite normal for Alanders to go back and forth in the weekend to go to the theatre for instance. We have the best of two worlds here: the strong community and independence of an island and the connection with the rest of the world”. If you read through the history books, you see what a special place this is. The most important companies are shipping companies. In the previous centuries, fast square-rigged clippers joined the Grain Race: to get as fast as possible from Australia to Europe with a fully laden ship. Alanders were very prominent in the transport of goods all over the world. In the harbour is the big ship Pommern, the last of the great grainships. “The sea is always close and plays a big role in our lives” Erik-Jan continues. “Swimming is part of a healthy lifestyle here. Each day, the whole year, I go swimming in the sea in the morning”. “In winter too?” Wietze asks surprised. “Yes, the local government makes sure that there is a hole in the ice every day”.

“Alands population grows” Jan-Erik explains proudly. “Many Alanders come back, but also Finns and Swedes like to move here”. We spread the map on the table and he points us some interesting locations to visit. The next day we take a rental car and drive to Kastelholmen: a 14<sup>th</sup> century castle from the time that Finland (and Aland) was a duchy within Sweden. Then on to Bomarsund: in the time that Finland was occupied by the Russians, they built an enormous fortress here. During the Crimean war it was blown up by the French and the British. The stones were used to build Mariehamn. There was an international agreement that Aland will always be a de-militarized area. Up to today that is still the case. Quietly we walk through the ruins. “That is only 170 years ago” Wietze muses. I nod and look up: a beautiful sailboat sails right along the fortress wall through the narrow sund.

### *Choice*

ASS Harbourmanager Brage Jansson is equally enthousiastic. “We have a nice crowd here again. During the pandemic we had only Finnish boats here, but how they come from everywhere again”. The summer season is short: they are open from May to September, but the majority of the visiting yachts comes in July. “It’s just a little too far for a weekend trip” he explains. “That is why people plan a whole vacation to the Aland archipelago. And they are right: there is so much to see here, especially when you have a boat that is not deeper than 1.8 meters and about 35 feet. That is the ideal size to go and explore the bays and islands”. He continues: “Did you know that we have five Dutch boats in the harbour today? Normally we get about ten per year. We have the impression that more and more Dutch boatowners leave their boat in Sweden during the winter, so that they have a nice long season the next year”. When I ask him about the other harbour in Mariehamn, he explains: “that harbour is slightly shallower and is more popular with motorboats. The majority of the sailboats comes here. Both harbours are fine of course”.

## Puzzle

We stay a few more days in the attractive harbour: long walks on the peninsula, trying Alands specialities (pankaka!) and doing our homework. We're going from here to Helsinki and that is a track of almost 200 miles through the skerries again. It is a complicated puzzle to find a track that is deep enough for our keel and offers enough safe spots so spend the night. Every now and then we feel like drawing a straight line out to see again: if we go back out and sail through one night, we'll be in Helsinki. "But then you skip the best!" Jan-Erik says. So we keep puzzling.

One night we sit in the cockpit with a drink. Dutch Martijn walks past with his sons Lucas and Noah; they've lived on Aland in the past five years. Lucas chats about the sailing lessons he takes at the club. "The best of both worlds?" I ask Martijn. He smiles and nods: "a beautiful place to live and it's wonderful for the children too. I work in Stockholm and from home here".

The sun sets after another beautiful day. "Shall we try again in the skerries tomorrow?" Wietze asks. I nod.

Mariehamn, Aland. July 2022

(below: the links that have been added to the article)

Klik hier voor meer informatie over de Stockholmse scheren:

<https://www.stockholmarchipelago.se/en/>

Klik hier voor meer informatie over het Vasamuseum: <https://www.vasamuseet.se/nl>

Klik hier voor een video over Aland: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNEqYfqqPts>

Klik hier voor meer toeristische informatie over Aland: <https://visitaland.com/en/>

Klik hier voor informatie over de westelijke haven in Mariehamn: <https://www.segel.ax/en/>

Klik hier voor informatie over de oostelijke haven in Mariehamn:

<http://www.gasthamn.ax/en/guest-harbour>