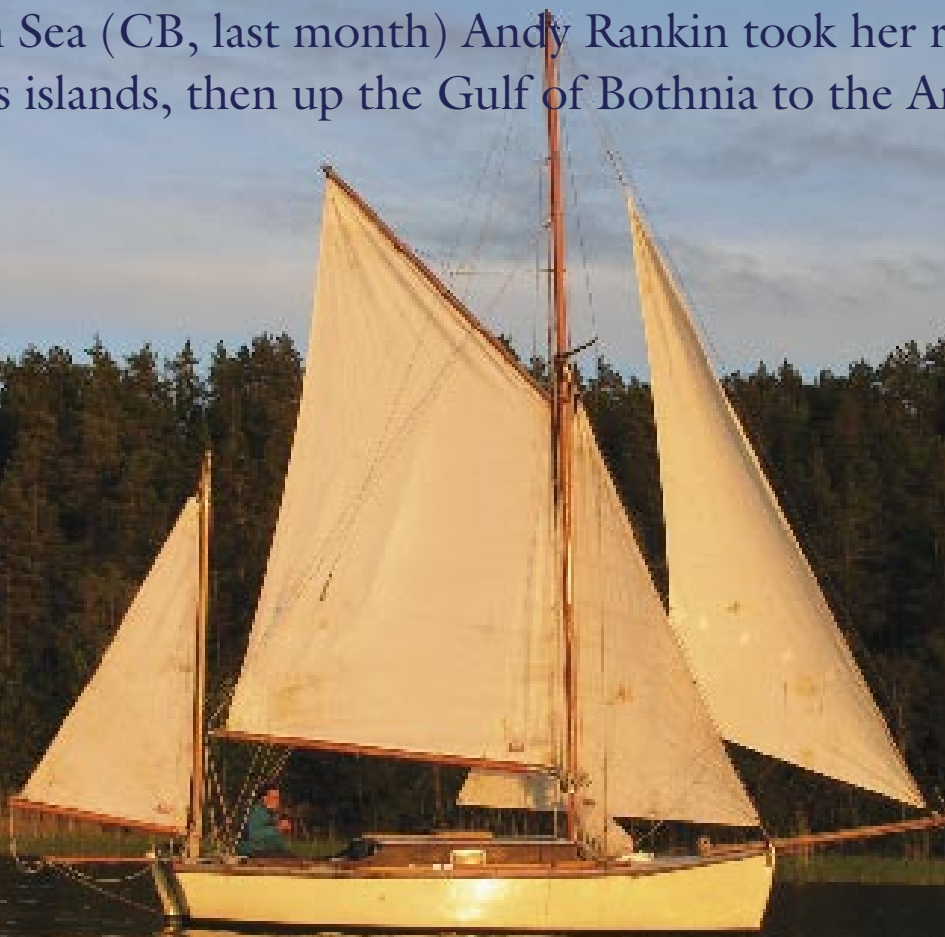


IN RACUNDRA'S WAKE Teal in the Baltic

Having fixed up his 21ft Falmouth Quay Punt and crossed the North Sea (CB, last month) Andy Rankin took her round Estonia and its islands, then up the Gulf of Bothnia to the Arctic Circle





Row, row your boat gently
down th estream
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“Houses are but badly built boats so firmly aground that you cannot think of moving them.... I admit, doubtfully, as exceptions, snail-shells and caravans.” So begins Arthur Ransome’s account of the maiden voyage of his yacht *Racundra*, from the Gulf of Riga to Helsinki and back, through the lonely forested archipelago that lies off the western coast of Estonia.

Like Ransome, I had been unable to resist the urge to uproot for a time from a solid, firmly grounded home, and trust instead to a floating snail-shell. My little Falmouth Quay Punt *Teal* (already eight years old when *Racundra* was launched) and I were in Helsinki, and trying to decide where to sail to next. I had no guide-book on board, but I did have a copy of *Racundra’s First Cruise*, and that decided me. We would turn *Teal’s* bows south to Estonia’s quiet, forested islands and see how they had changed.

Tallinn – or Reval, for Ransome used the old Swedish names in his account – was our first call, a lumpy day’s sailing south across the Gulf of Finland. The old town remains much as it was when *Racundra* warped up to the yacht club mole all those years ago, and outwardly little changed since the middle

ages. The gold-domed Russian church on the hill, the sturdy fortifications and Hanseatic merchants’ houses are just as described in the book, and we climbed to the same viewpoint that it describes, overlooking the old town and the harbour, with much the same white sails and bustling ferry traffic to Helsinki as have enlivened it for generations. The crowds of tourists from the near-daily cruise ships would be new to Ransome however, and outside the old town there would be little to recognise in the busy modern city that now surrounds it, with crumbling Soviet-era apartment blocks on the high ground to the east.

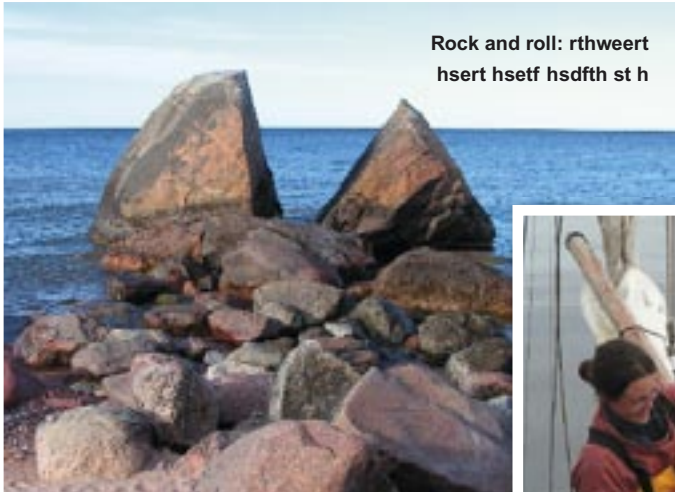
Across the bay on the island of Naisaare, we found far greater changes. Estonia’s history is pretty rumbustious. The German barons that built Tallinn were ousted in turn by the Swedes, the Danes and the Russians, and in both World Wars Estonia was bitterly fought over by the Germans and Russians. (*Racundra’s* cruise was undertaken during her brief period of independence between the wars.) After the Second World War came the cold war which changed the

Estonian islands utterly. Russia has little coast in the Baltic; they were further west and more accessible than the tricky shallow entrance to St Petersburg. So, the Russian military took over. The simple Swedish fishing folk who had lived there for centuries were evicted en masse.

Naisaare became a mine factory. Just as on the other islands, the little wooden farmsteads that Ransome and ‘the Cook’ (as he calls her in the book, although she was in fact his mistress) trudged up to get their milk can filled were razed or allowed to fall into ruin, and up sprang barrack blocks, barbed wire enclosures, factories and storage depots for the mines. No friendly farmers now; we were making do with UHT. No yachts visited Naisaare for fifty years; it is still little-visited by foreign boats.

With Estonia’s regained independence, the islands are partially returning to the way they used to be. Although subsistence farming and fishing have probably gone forever, some of the old wooden houses are being rebuilt in the old style as holiday homes - and some of the Swedish folk who lived here as children are returning and

*“Estonia was
bitterly fought
over by the
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Russians”*



Rock and roll: rthweert
hsert hseft hsdft st h



CAption s
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reclaiming their right to the land. An old lady stopped to chat to us as we sat on *Teal's* cabin top in the harbour eating our dinner. She had lived on the island as a child and been part of the exodus to Sweden. Now, she was rebuilding her old family home on the island amidst the piles of old mines the Russians had left, slowly disintegrating back to rust.

We made our way west from Tallinn on a hot, calm day, struck by the same curse that *Racundra* sailed under, for she too made a very slow passage along the coast, creeping along “in scarcely rippled water, across broad patches smooth as oil”.

Dissent was recorded among *Racundra's* crew as the Cook demanded that the engine be fired up, while Ransome and the ‘Ancient Mariner’ distrusted the new-fangled beast and when they were finally persuaded to give it a go were heartily relieved to find that it would not start. On *Teal* we had no engine, so harmony reigned between Jodie and me.

As night fell we drifted in towards Paldiski, the only port of any size on the northern coast west of Tallinn. Ransome knew it as Baltic Port, and lamented the

changes that were going on even as he visited, as it turned from a quiet little backwater to a busy naval port.

We arrived after dark, and tied up to a crumbling rotten concrete wharf, empty but for a small, tired customs launch. Baltic Port has undergone two further massive changes since Ransome's time. The Russians moved in to build a huge submarine base, and then they left. Their coming replaced the old wooden houses with rows of ugly concrete shoeboxes – only the pretty old train station remains – and their going left the buildings crumbling, and full of now-jobless Russian immigrants.

We left Paldiski into the teeth of a northeasterly Force 6, with the sheets hard in to clear the headland to the west. Like *Racundra*, we were bound through the sinuous channel that separates the little island of Vormsi from the mainland. Unlike *Racundra*, who beat through the narrow, shallow passage – a feat for which I take my hat off to her skipper and crew – the northeaster was well behind *Teal's* beam as we approached. That gave us quite a different problem though, as picking up the first

buoy was going to be tricky, and there were plenty of rocks to pound ourselves to pieces on should we miss it. We were approaching fast, the sun was dancing on the waves ahead, and we just HAD to pick up a spindly little stick poking up somewhere in these miles of water. Several times I nervously took bearings of the end of the island and the headland on the mainland – the only identifiable features – and plotted our positions getting nearer and nearer to the shoals. Still no sign of the little channel that should lead us safely through. Then suddenly, there it was, a little black and yellow stick waving merrily in the foamy whitecaps. Beyond it we soon picked up the next marker, and then the next, only half a mile or so apart and easy to follow now as they led us through the twisty channel. Beyond Vormsi we turned east, down another little channel that looped and swung through to Haapsalu on the mainland.

Haapsalu is the Estonian answer to Blackpool; a bathing town where the burghers of Tallinn would deposit their families during long summer breaks. Like our own seaside resorts it has changed little in the last hundred years, and has just the same reassuring faint tinge of complacent decay as holidays are increasingly taken in

“Still no sign of the little channel that should lead us safely through”

CREDIT



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the south of Spain instead. The same wooden buildings greeted us that Ransome found, although on a Sunday we had less success in buying provisions than he and the Cook, who wandered into town to buy bread, milk, meat, matches and a cabbage. The famous ruined castle did however have a blues festival on, so we weren't bored.

We carried on into Moon Sound, visiting the islands of Vormsi, Hiiumaa and Muhu, racing jellyfish on the calm days when they gloopily pulsed past us as we drifted, admiring the Erik stone poking out of Moon Sound that Ransome's friend Captain Konga had painted red (the paint has worn off, I am sad to relate), and enjoying the quiet, peaceful islands in the early evenings. The only flies in the ointment were of the biting variety, for come dusk the discordant droning swarms of a billion hungry mosquitoes would drive us insane as they feasted on our exotic foreign skin, for which they seemed to develop a taste.

It would have been good to to carry on to Riga and *Racundra's* home port on the Dvina river, but I was running out of time, So instead we turned *Teal's* bowsprit north once again, and on a blustery day we blew in record time back across to Finland, and left the quiet islands to themselves.

The Gulf of Bothnia

Teal wintered in Estonia, and I flew out with two friends, Jamie and Carrie, at the beginning of June. Our plan was simple, after a week cruising west through the magnificent southern Finnish archipelago, to sail as far north as we could in the Baltic, following the coast of Finland to the furthest limits of the Gulf of Bothnia, and back down the Swedish coast.

Unfortunately, in my planning I had neglected to take into account the Coriolis effect. As the seabreezes began to blow onshore, the wind would be deflected to the right, blowing nearly parallel to the shore and giving us headwinds rather than a beam reach. I only worked this out what when we were three-quarters of the way round; if I had been clever I would have done a clockwise rather than anti-clockwise circuit of the Gulf.

We did slowly draw north though, enjoying the incredible evening light as the sun skimmed the sea, the quiet low islands, the peace and the solitude. We sailed past

bare, rounded outer skerries of ice-worn granite, and anchored off the sheltered inner islands where the moss and bilberry softened the stone to a mottled grey-green carpet under a canopy of birch and pine.

Hardly anyone comes up here, though the islands are as beautiful as those further south. One reason, perhaps, is the rocks. I could never have believed that any sea could hold as many rocks as Bothnia does.



“Hardly anyone comes up here. One reason, perhaps, is the rocks”

Finnish charts use various symbols to denote the different types of rock you might meet. There is one variety of cross for a rock that just pokes its head above the water, meaning that

there is a fair chance that you might see it before you hit it. A slightly different cross means a rock that is awash so you are very unlikely to see it, and there is yet another cross that means the rock is just below water, so you don't have a snowball's chance. Around the Vaasa archipelago, halfway up the Gulf, the chart has more crosses than a war cemetery.

Finally, after stopping at Oulu, a lively university town, for a crew-change, we made it to Kemi, as far north in the Baltic as it is possible to go. Here, we were just a short distance south of the Arctic circle, and it seemed a shame to be so close but not be able to sail there. So we decided to take the ship's dinghy up a river until we reached the Arctic circle. The 'dinghy' is hardly fit to grace the pages of this magazine, being far from classic – a manky old plastic 17ft (5.2m) Canadian canoe that I had chopped into three sections so that she could sit on *Teal's* coachroof. But gamely she bore us 70 miles up the Kemijoki river (much of it under a jury-rigged sail made from a large bin-bag) and 70 miles back down again.

After this epic adventure, it was time to turn *Teal's* bows south again. We crossed to the Swedish side of the Gulf, passing through more densely-packed, forested rocky islands around Lulea, mottled with a hundred hues of moss and lichen.

The sea had changed complexion up here in the sun-softened northern summer. We had left Tollesbury on a brown tide, earthy with the silt of east coast rivers. The North Sea had faded from grey-brown to a sparkling, multi-faceted grey-blue where the fresh combers washed against the Danish coast. Further south in Denmark it became glass-clear, tinged with green, and amongst the southern Finnish islands con-

gealed into pea soup where the algae bloomed. But here, towards the north, as the low sun span slowly along the horizon, it turned the water into amber; fossilised sunlight redolent with the smell of pines.


As we approached the southern end of the Gulf, about to pass again into the Aland archipelago, Bothnia, often so peaceful and calm, had one parting shot on our final day.

It had started unsettled, and as we set off a black towering thunderstorm passed close. It cleared, but we were caught by another, the lightning spitting closer and closer and the thunder cracking the heavens accompanied by torrential rain. It became dark as the cloud slowly blotted out the skies above us, and the rain increased in density until we were curtained into a world only yards across, drenched under the streaming skies of the heaviest downpour I have ever experienced.

Then, only a few yards away, and approaching at walking pace, we saw a dark line on the water. I had wondered whether these clouds might have some wind under them, so we only had the small jib up, despite the wind staying very light up to this point. But I was totally unprepared for the sudden ferocity of the wind that hit us then. In just a few seconds it swung 90°, catching us aback, and rose from a near calm to strong gale force. With the jib on the wrong side and the staysail and main sheets hard in we were pushed over until

the water on the lee side was within inches of coming over the cockpit coaming and swamping us. I thrust the tiller at Stephane, shouting at him to keep us pointing into wind as much as possible, while I wrestled with the jib and staysail sheets to let them fly. With those loosed I climbed along the sidedeck and hauled the main down as fast as I could, then the staysail, which with the jib was flogging violently and shaking the whole boat. The gear on *Teal* is very easy to handle, so I probably had them down in less than a minute, but the jib was whipping itself to ribbons meanwhile. I let fly the traveller outhaul and stood on the very bow of the boat to grab the flogging mass, as a loose sheet tore my spectacles from my face. Another lurch pulled me off my feet and for a moment I swung out over the black water and white foam, until I found my footing again and managed to wrestle the ruined sail to the deck and stuff it into the canoe with the staysail.

The squall didn't last long, but we decided to head back to the nearest safe anchorage anyway. Suddenly, there was a flash that seared our retinas, a crack that split our eardrums and a yelp from Stephane... "Ahhh, sheet! Eet heet my arm!" For a moment I feared my gallant crewmate was frazzled into a little pile of French fries, but it merely gave him a good dead arm for a couple of hours.

We anchored soon after, and the following day we had a very pleasant sail down to the Aland islands. Bothnia was behind us. 

*"here in the north
the low sun
turned the water
into amber"*



Sailing by day and night?

