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the magazine exploring

Europe's special spaces

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post haste through the Åland Islands



The little port of Grisslehamn is an amiable enough spot, but scarcely a travel destination in its own right. Its claims to fame are slight; some interesting associations with Albert Engström, Sweden's hard hitting satirical cartoonist, and a handsome mid-eighteenth century postmaster's house that looks out over the Baltic.

The morning Eckerö Linjen ferry leaves Grisslehamn with its customary very Swedish punctuality. Naturally, there is entertainment for the kids, so the under-aged are detained by a clown and conjuror while their parents ravage the duty free shops. The ferry is bound for Eckerö in the Åland Islands. And because it is headed for the Ålands, that means duty-free. Cigarettes, aquavit and snuff — yes, snuff, for

the Swedes have an appetite for ground tobacco unmatched by any other nation in Europe.

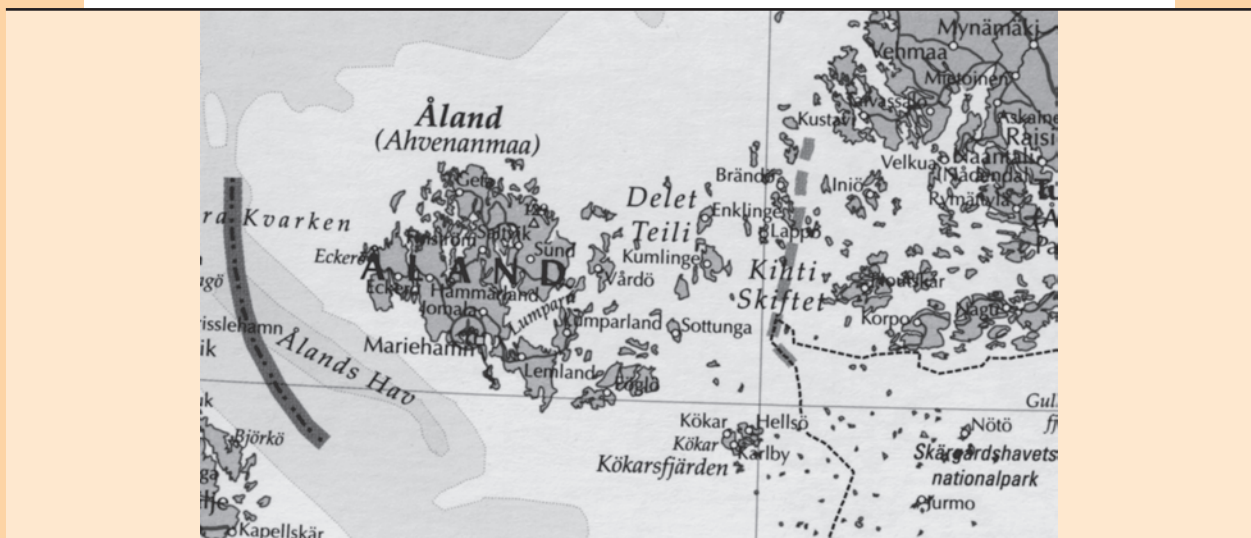
The Ålands are a complex archipelago of more than five thousand islands, rocky islets and skerries that lie between Finland and Sweden and, although part of the European Union, this scatter of islands lies outwith the EU's fiscal regime — a little accounting curiosity that the Åland Islands share with Mount Athos, the tiny theocratic polity on a peninsula that juts into the northern Aegean (and featured earlier this year in *hidden europe* 6).

The crossing from Grisslehamn to Eckerö is an exercise in Scandinavian comfort. A dozen variations of pickled herrings on the smörgåsbord! This is a far cry from the open rowing boats that used to leave Grisslehamn, carry-

ing over to Åland the mail that was eventually bound for Russia. For the modern Eckerö Linjen ferry plies one of the most historic of Europe's old mail routes. From 1638, this was part of the postal route from Stockholm to the Swedish city of Åbo (now Turku in southwest Finland). After Sweden ceded Finland and Åland to Russia in 1809, the Åland mail route became one of the main arteries for conveying post to St Petersburg — the safe passage of the mail was entrusted to Åland's farmers and fishermen.



scale 1:5m



scale 1:1.6m

the thick broken line delimits the boundary between the autonomous Åland region and Finland proper

Once in the Åland Islands there are everywhere reminders of the old postal route. The Ålandstrafiken ferries that provide lifeline links to the remoter eastern islands in the archipelago, and on to Finland too, all carry the flag of the Åland postal service. Though nowadays, it must be admitted, on the ferry from the Ålands across to the Finnish island of Kustavi, one is much more likely to encounter a Russian refrigerated truck taking fish to St Petersburg than a sack of mail for Russia. On two of the smaller islands in the Åland archipelago, Vårdö and Kumlinge, there are wooden signposts which are denominated in Russian versta (верста), a unit of distance measurement that was used in Tsarist times. One versta was slightly more than one kilometre, and St Petersburg is recorded as being some seven hundred verst away to the east.

The Eckerö Linjen ship arrives at Eckerö two hours after leaving Grisslehamn. Eckerö is an impressive introduction to Åland, as it was, for over one hundred years, the western gateway to the Russian empire. It was here that the mail boats docked, bringing the post from Sweden bound for St Petersburg. So travellers on the modern ferry from Grisslehamn expecting to find in Eckerö no more than a remote island pier will be surprised. For Eckerö is the Baltic's answer to Odessa. True, the few steps up from Eckerö's pier cannot match Odessa's Potemkin stairs, yet in both places there is that well mannered civility of a port that set out to proclaim

OPPOSITE: bathouses along the shore of the island of Lappo; TOP: the Åland Islands lie in the Baltic at the southern end of the Gulf of Bothnia (maps © Collins Bartholomew Ltd)



the Åland Islands have their own postal administration, a mark of the archipelago's autonomous status

its status as a gateway to the empire of the Tsars. Eckerö's post and customs house in Storby, just north of the modern pier at Berghamn, is a neo-classical extravagance, designed by German architect Carl Ludvig Engel whose better known buildings include Helsinki's Lutheran cathedral (Helsingin tuomiokirkko) and the main building and library of the University of Helsinki.

Few of those who disembark will venture beyond the comfortable tranquillity of Eckerö and the neighbouring island of Fasta Åland. 'Fasta' means mainland and that gives a clue, for Fasta Åland is by far the largest of the Ålands, and home to the territory's capital at Mariehamn, a homely place founded by Tsar Alexander II, and named in honour of his consort Marie. Yes, these islands really do have a capital, just as they have their own parliament, flag, car licence plates and their own postage stamps. The Åland Islands are one of Europe's real geopolitical curiosities. Swedish speaking in the main, they are an autonomous territory of Finland. The modern Ålands manage to keep in touch with the ebb and flow of life in Finland proper, and yet somehow Åland is cut adrift from the detailed currents of Finnish politics. Uniquely privileged under international law, the autonomous status of the islands was first recognised by the League of Nations in 1921. The modern position of the Åland Islands with respect to Finland is in some measure comparable to that of the Faroe Islands vis-à-vis Denmark. Both island groupings have their own parliament, and both have the status of autonomous territories

within the Nordic Council. But when it comes to the European Union (EU), the parallels between the Faroes and the Ålands end. While the Faroes have studiously kept their distance from the EU, the Åland islanders voted to join the EU — but only after their neighbours in both Finland and Sweden had already opted for membership. But the canny folk on Åland have a very special position in the EU and retain a valued tax free status. Hence the snuff on the boat over to Eckerö. The Ålands' unusual fiscal regime has prompted a few quirky oddities in the Baltic ferry timetables (see 'context' opposite).

In the days when the mail from Sweden to Russia went via the Åland Islands and on across the water to the Finnish island of Kustavi, it fell to the locals to transport the mailbags through the islands. Plotting winter routes across icebound waters was no easy task, especially at the start and end of the season when thin ice conditions made for treacherous journeys. Nowadays, ferries ply the island routes all year round, complemented in the hardest winters by ice roads, which allow adventurous motorists to drive between islands across the frozen sea. But winter travel of yesteryear demanded a detailed understanding of the ice; nor was summer navigation much easier in this puzzling

There are commonplace threads to island life that we encounter in island communities all over Europe. One is the problem, in very remote island communities, of disposing of cars that have given up the ghost after a lifetime of service. The interlinked islands that make up the community of Brändö are no exception, and there are, scattered across the islands, but particularly on Torsholma, some fine examples of 1960s automobile design rusting away in ditches.

Medical services are always a challenge in some communities, and although Brändö has a resident nurse, for more serious illnesses and accidents a medical team has to be brought over by speedboat or helicopter from Finland proper. Dr Janne Castren, the local doctor, must surely be one of Europe's more interesting general practitioners, with a responsibility for providing medical services to several dozen island communities — some part of 'real Finland', others, like Brändö, in the Åland autonomous region. Not many doctors get to spend their professional lives being ferried in a chic Marino speedboat from one patient consultation to the next.

archipelago with its thousands of skerries and shallow seas.

That onward journey, eastward from Eck-erö across the islands and on to Finland, can be retraced by the modern traveller in just a couple of days, but few who embark on the old Russian mail route ever complete it that quickly. Whether it be summer or winter, the haunting beauty of the Ålands' minor islands is seductive. In planning an Åland journey, Brändö, for example, may look like no more than a port of call along the way. Once ashore, Brändö's rocky landscapes of firs and lichens, convoluted coastlines and eerily silent bays are apt to confound the best laid plans. This little island is one of Europe's most remarkable outposts — like the rest of the Ålands, Brändö is a place that has been both Swedish and Russian and now doffs its cap at Finland. A thin strip of red tarmac weaves through Brändö, and a dozen other tiny islands that are linked to Brändö by causeways or modern bridges. Delicate slender birches contrive to find root in the crevices of great boulders, while simple red wooden houses cluster on the sea shore. Few places on our travels have been so beguilingly beautiful. Well provided with post boxes, with the ever-present reminder that only Åland stamps are valid, Brändö and the islands to which it is linked are not exactly bristling with the conventional tourist attractions. A massive wooden elk in the forest at Långö, and a memorial beside the road on the island of Baggholma are the only obvious 'sights' in this scatter of Baltic islands. This roadside stone plinth is a stark piece of Åland granite, bearing a simple text that reminds the traveller that, for more than three centuries, the postman passed this way on his regular journey through the Åland Islands. Nowadays, motorists bound for the ferry port at Åva, at Brändö's northern tip, speed past the stone. From Åva, it is but a short hop over to Kustavi in Finland on the *M/S Vigen*.

Alighting in Kustavi, the Finnish road sign on the quayside proclaims 'Varsinais-Suomi' — 'the real Finland'. It is a message that is unwittingly reinforced as a Finnish customs officer steps forward to check a Russian lorry carrying fish for St Petersburg. Åland really is a place apart.

Åland ferry connections

CONTEXT

If you have ever combed the Baltic ferry schedules — the sort of thing we do on winter evenings — and wondered what impels the Viking Line (www.vikingline.fi) night boat from Stockholm to the Finnish port of Turku to stop off for five minutes at three in the morning at the tiny port of Långnäs in the Åland Islands, think duty free! For tax free shopping is still available on all ferries between any two EU states that include the Åland Islands on their itinerary. An Åland stop, however brief, can reap rich rewards in a ship's on-board shops. It matters not that oftentimes no one boards or alights from the Viking Line ship during those few minutes in Långnäs. All that matters is that the ship stops.

Similarly, the Estonian company Tallink (www.tallink.ee), which introduced a Tallinn to Stockholm service in 2000, has always relied heavily upon duty free sales to assure the viability of its cross Baltic services. Revenues looked set to plummet when Estonia joined the EU in May 2004, and so, in the ordinary run of affairs, duty-free sales might then have been expected to stop. But some bright spark at Tallink suggested that

vernacular architecture on the island of Björnholma, part of the commune of Brändö in the Åland Islands



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Brändö boasts an interesting industrial innovation. Since 2001, Johan Sundqvist has been tussling with the Finnish and EU authorities over his endeavours to put Brändö on the map as a centre of snuff production. Taking snuff, known in Swedish as *snus*, is something of a habit in the Åland islands, as indeed it is in Sweden too, and the prospect of tax-free snuff seems too good a chance to miss.

if the ships could just make a slight diversion northward and include an extra port of call in the Åland Islands, then on-board sales of duty free cigarettes, alcohol and perfumes could continue. And so it is that every night, in the wee small hours, two Tallink vessels creep under cover of dark into Mariehamn harbour, berth for just ten minutes, before casting off and continuing on their night-time voyages across the Baltic.

Those bound for the Åland Islands, and who prefer not to arrive in the middle of the night, have several options. Eckerö Linjen (www.eckerolinjen.se) operate two to five services daily from Grisslehamn in Sweden to the Åland island of Eckerö. As on most ferry routes to Åland, fares are very cheap, with a return off-peak passenger fare of just €5.50. Cars cost from €11 return. From Finland, the *Silja Festival* morning sailing from Turku to the Åland capital of Mariehamn

is a fine option. Six hours aboard a vessel that seems more cruise liner than mundane car ferry, and all for a one-way fare that starts at just €10. The vehicle fare is presently €21. Departures are from Turku at 9.10 am daily (details on www.silja.com).

But infinitely more adventurous, and potentially even cheaper, are the various services run by the Ålands' own subsidised ferry company, Ålandstrafiken (www.alandstrafiken.aland.fi), which provides a comprehensive network of links between the islands of the Finnish archipelago and the Åland Islands. The same company also runs inter-island services within the Ålands. For foot passengers and cyclists, all services are entirely free. There can be few other places in Europe where a five hour ferry ride, on a comfortable modern ship, comes gratis. Car tariffs on Ålandstrafiken routes are very reasonable, but do check the tariff rules carefully. Some fares require that motorists make an overnight stop on minor islands — a way of boosting the economy in out-of-the-way parts of the Ålands. When the islands in question are as tantalisingly beautiful as Brändö, that enforced stop can scarcely be deemed an imposition. ■

skerry seashore in Brändö in the Åland Islands

