

WOTAN'S LOG FOR DISTRIBUTION
HELSINKI - RIGA

We arrived in Helsinki on Tuesday 16th June. Our crew was David Beveridge, Adrian Woods and Sindbad. After some minor repairs we set off down the coast the next day to the NJK harbour at Hogholmen. We had a good sail under genoa until we had to start the motor to negotiate the squiggly small boat channel into Hogholmen. We were welcomed by Johan von Willebrand RCC, who had kindly stoked up the sauna for us. Adrian had a sauna and then jumped into the sea starters. We were all very impressed. The NJK have a delightful club house at Hogholmen where we had drinks with Johan and his wife Yumi.

Next morning, we slipped our moorings and head south through the rocky archipelago and off to Tallinn. The weather improved as we neared Tallinn so that we were able to shake out the reefs in the main and the rolls in the genny and to sail under blue skies. We had a booking in the Kloostri Ait, 14 Vene Street where we had planned to meet Mark Atkinson, who was flying out to join us, but sadly he missed his connection in Riga and did not arrive until midnight

Sindbad left early on Friday morning. David and Adrian went shopping in the supermarket while Mark and I went off in search of wine. You need to buy wine in Tallinn, if you are not to pay the exorbitant prices in the Swedish System Bolaget, state owned wine off. I managed to break the fresh water system, but Mark and I found an Aladdin's cave of a plumbers' merchant plumbers' merchant, where we found everything we needed. It was Adrian's birthday and he very kindly bought us all dinner at the Kloostri Ait.

On Saturday morning we awoke to a strong westerly wind. For several hours we bashed into wind under power, until we gave up the unequal and very unpleasant struggle and headed into Lohusalu, which proved to be the perfect haven. As it was Midsummer's Eve, there was a rock band playing at the yacht club. Several hundred people, mainly families, were dancing and having a barbecue. We were given complimentary tickets to the concert but instead we went to bed!

Out of three possible harbours on Hiiumaa, we chose Suursadam as our destination for Sunday night. Suursadam, is essentially a fishing boat repair yard. The harbour lies behind a spit, with a narrow entrance, the leading line for which is marked by a fortuitously placed church. We tied up in a quay well fendered with old Russian car tyres and provided with copious rusty mooring eyes. There has been shipyard at Suursadam (sadam means harbour) since 1680 when Erasmus Jacobson, a Dutchman set up a shipyard on the site. It was known in German as Tiefenhafen, or deep water port. The old three storied warehouse was very attractive, though sadly it was surrounded by communist era shipyard buildings. Soon after we tied up, the fog rolled in. We wondered how we would ever get out of the harbour in virtually nil visibility.

When we awoke on Monday morning all the fog had gone and the sky was blue. What was more, we had a favourable wind. We retraced our footsteps back out to the narrow entrance and headed south towards the Muhn channel. We enjoyed an hour's sailing before the wind dropped and we were back to motoring yet again. We reached the northern end of Muhn channel at 1500 and wound our way through the narrow part of the famous channel. We planned to spend the night in Virtsu, a ferry port on the mainland serving the islands of Muhn and Saaremaa.

As we approached the pontoon at Virtsu, the ferry, moored on the eastern dolphin, decided to start up its engines, The wash had Wotan careering all over the place. It took me some time to bring her back under control. Sadly, the depth inside the first pontoon, where we had planned to moor ran out much faster than advertised and we had to make as swift exit to reappraise the situation. There was a small Dutch yacht moored on the outside of the pontoon, leaving little room for us either in front of him or behind. He very kindly moved astern to let us in. Unbeknownst to us, there was the father and mother of all festivals on Saaremaa to celebrate Midsummer's Day and Estonian National Day. The result of which was that the ferries between Virtsu and Muhu were sailing 24/7 to cater for the demand. We did not have a very peaceful night!

We left Virtsu on Tuesday at 1000 and after following the entrance channel out for some way we turned down the Muhn Channel, before heading south west along the southern shores of Muhn and Saremaa towards Kuresaare. We had been warned by Ait our friendly Dutchman that Roomassaare had little to offer, being 6km from town, with not a taxi in sight and only a very average restaurant. Kuresaare is up a 3 mile channel, which is beautifully buoyed but very narrow. A ditch might be a more accurate description! However, despite protestations that there was 2.5 metres on the approach, Wotan hit the bottom repeatedly. The marina in Kuresaare is beautiful and just under the walls of its 14th century castle. We headed into town for dinner, where Adrian said that he was longing to taste local fare and promptly ordered a pizza!

We planned to spend Wednesday in Kuresaare. Adrian and Mark hired bicycles. Adrian was allocated a bike with a three speed Sturmey Archer, while Mark got one with 21 derailleur gears, much to his relief, as Adrian is horribly fit and was set to leave him for dead. They went to the meteorite crater, a ride of some 30 miles. David and I, on the other hand hired a Mitsubishi Colt, and headed off for a tour of the island. David is an ex army officer, so we had to go to see the ruined castle at Masalinn. On the way we passed Karla church. We heard music coming from inside, so we went into the church very quietly to find a highly professional choir singing a Bach Chorale, complete magic. Masalinn castle overlooks the channel between Muhn and Sareema. David, who was much braver than me, headed off down a dodgy spiral staircase. I said that I could not risk my knee falling down the staircase. Don't be a woof, he said, there are lights down here! I found myself in the vaulted main hall of the castle, beautifully lit by uplights and candles. It was lovely and well worth the drive!

On Thursday morning we bumped our way out of Kuressaare. Our goal was the little Estonian island of Ruhnu about 35 miles from Kuresaare as the crow flies. We had a great sail with the wind on the beam under blue skies. Ruhnu has a mere 65 inhabitants, but boasts an international airport (grass) and a lighthouse designed by Eiffel. They have built a very smart new harbour at the southern end of the island. Adrian, Mark and I hired bikes to visit the 17th century wooden church in the village. The church was beautiful, but sadly it was locked. We were able to peer in through the stained glass windows at the wooden pews with family names carved on the ends of the pews. At the turn of the last century, the wooden church was judged to be too small for the community, so a new stone church was built beside it. At the end of WWII the Swedish population fled back to Sweden to avoid the Russians.

The next morning we had a 60 mile sail down to Riga, so we set off at 0900. The wind rose to 28 knots at one point so we took in three reefs, which made little difference to our speed. Nicole our autopilot took us to the Riga fairway buoy unerringly. We dropped the main at the entrance and sailed down the Daugava river to Riga under genoa. The Daugava river has commercial docks on both banks, some like the container terminal were modern, but others were relics from the communist era. We moored up in the Andrejosta Yachting Centre which is only a few minutes walk from the old town of Riga.

The crew very kindly stood me a slap up dinner at the Palete, the smartest restaurant in town. On the way back we stopped off at a bar off the main square, where there was a rock/jazz band playing. Riga was alive and the cafe culture thriving. After a few enjoyable beers, we wound our weary way through the old town and home to bed.

On Saturday morning I went to the airport with my crew to say goodbye and to pick up my errant burgee stick. So ended a very enjoyable cruise.

Ant Fawcett

29th July 2009

A somewhat delayed log my apologies for those that have been anxiously waiting the 2009 instalments.