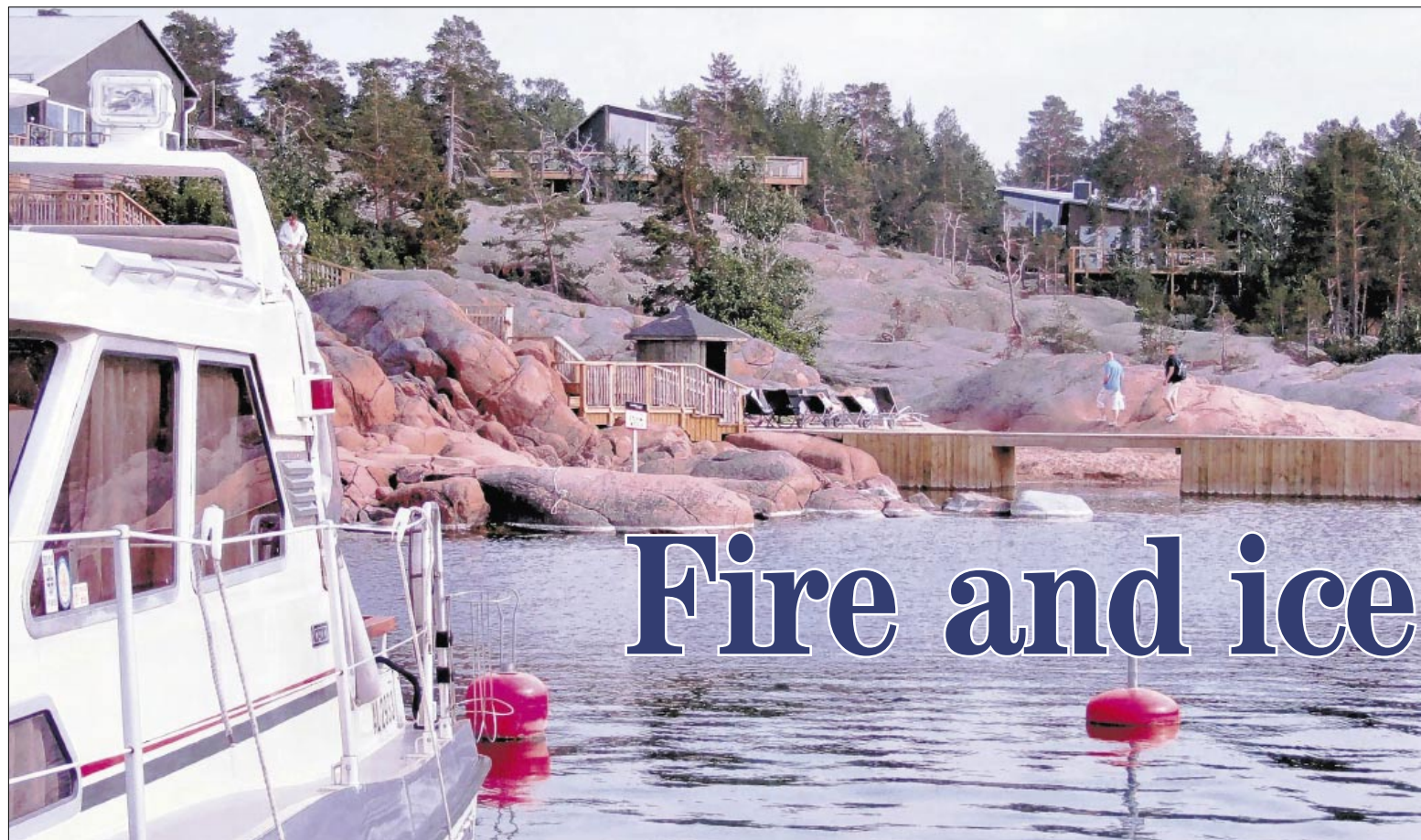


Travel

Finland



The hotel and leisure complex at Havsvidden includes bracing swimming, a private marina, excellent food and a range of luxury holiday homes

by Alan Watkins

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YOU may not have heard of Turku, but it is Finland's ancient capital. It is also Europe's current City of Culture.

The old rail workshops have been converted into a 3,000 seat theatre and concert hall, an art gallery and exhibition centre called Logomo.

Here you can work a traditional fire hand pump and find out what it's like to walk through a blazing inferno. The Turku residents should know: the city has been destroyed by fire on 30 occasions.

The river waterfront is teeming with activity, museums, ships ancient and modern and - when I was there - crowds of students celebrating their graduation with beer battles from passing lorries. Moving around the archipelagos relies on ferries.

You could hire a kayak but travelling from Stockholm to Aland (pronounced 'olland) I preferred a 34,000-tonne cruise ship, the Birka Paradise.

Nightly it threads its way to Mariehamn in the Aland archipelago, providing excellent food, a well-stocked whisky bar, saunas, swimming, and live bands.

Its destination is squeezed between two harbours.

The one where the ferries from Helsinki, Stockholm and Turku turn, load and hurry on their way has a century-old Glaswegian windjammer, the Pommern. It seemed ready to round the Capes once more, carrying grain from Australia to England in 140 days.

A range of small ferries cruise the island villages. They provide a mobile bridge across rocky straits with journeys lasting two minutes to five hours. There's even a 240km tour you can spend a couple of days exploring the archipelago.



Alan Watkins walking through fire in Turku at the old rail workshops, but it's all an illusion

What do you expect when in Aland alone there are 6,500 islands and an estimated 100,000 shipwrecks?

The staple food around the three archipelagos is fish.

It ranges from moist, tender, tasty salmon fresh out of the adjacent lake to succulent perch with shellfish from the same source.

Meat is also on the menu (though I missed the elk).

There are plenty of pubs serving excellent food.

One surprise is the wide range of fruit served as an accompaniment with the main dish. In the summer

it is a vital means of topping up the Finns' vitamins.

Have a go at the soused herring washed down with slugs of local aquavit. If you don't have too many, it is memorable.

Also noteworthy are the black breads, deceptively sweet and delightful with local soft cheeses and butter served with salt.

Three archipelagos provide the visitors to the Scandinavian Islands with plenty to see and do.

There are huge sea eagles, lime green eider ducks and velvet scoters, woods, water, and unbelievable peace.

Destination is well worth the effort

THE tourist information department at Mariehamn arranged my accommodation.

It ranged from cabins in woods to a sea-view cabin aboard the Birka Paradise.

I dined at the Havsvidden complex in northern Aland, and passed the night at the Hotel Nestor in Galpo.

Frank, the Nestor's owner, took me swimming. No garden pool, instead an icy lake followed by a picnic on the rocks in 31C sunshine.

Dinner that night was at the Restaurant Buffalo where the herring, aquavit, steaks and Stallhagen beer were extra special.

■ GETTING to the archipelagos is worth the effort, though.

Daily flights operate from Heathrow to Stockholm or Helsinki (SAS). Hire a car from the airport - or bus it to the ferry then hire your car or bike when you reach Mariehamn.

You can travel Birka, Silja, Eckero Linjen or Viking Line.

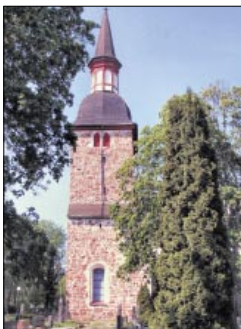
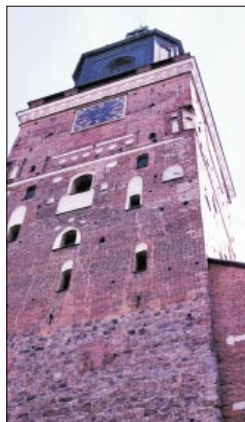
Choose where you want to stay, then contact the tourist board.

Useful addresses

1) Daily bike hire: www.rono.ax/ varies from 8 - 25 euro.

2) Tourist office: www.mariehamn.ax

3) Cottages in Marbyfjardens stugor www.marbyfjarden.ax/



The archbishop's cathedral at Turku; Turku Castle; the church of Sankt Olaf at Jomala is 12th century

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