

FAST FINNISH FUN

A trip from Sweden to Finland aboard
XO Boats' DFNDR 9 provides a taste of the
Baltic and fine Finnish hospitality

By Pim Van Hemmen



Opening spread: The DFNDR 9 in the Finnish Archipelago. Right (clockwise from top left): You can put an aluminum hull against the granite; Kobba Klintar still feels desolate; the boat makes a great dive platform; Toast Skagen

I

I had planned to go for a swim in the Baltic, but not like this.

We'd just docked for lunch at Fjäderholmarna, a Swedish island not far from Stockholm's city center. I'd jumped ashore to tie off the bow and was marching down the 1-foot-wide pier to tie up the stern when I realized the dock was sinking beneath my feet. I stopped walking, but then the dock, which I now saw was only supported by a tiny float, started simultaneously bobbing, weaving and oscillating.

I was trapped on a wooden tightrope, and the diners inside the restaurant were about to get some free entertainment. I was also about to make a fool of myself in front of the three Finns I'd just met, and with whom I'd be spending the next four days.

It was an inauspicious start to my first crossing of the Baltic Sea. The journey had just begun a couple of hours before in front of the Viking Museum in downtown Stockholm. Erkki Talvela, CEO of the Finnish builder XO Boats, had invited four marine journalists to cross the Baltic Sea from Sweden to Finland using two of the company's models: an inboard version of the best-selling EXPLR 9, and the prototype of its newest model, the outboard-powered DFNDR 9. Along for the ride were DFNDR 9 designer Jaakko Kantola and adventure photographer Valter Hirvonen.

We'd gotten to our lunch spot after slowly cruising through Stockholm's inner harbor, past its historic ships, beneath the many bridges that connect Stockholm's Islands and past the Royal Palace where we'd watched a naval parade—complete with marching band and dress uniforms—march through the streets.

In Stockholm's suburbs Jaakko had brought the DFNDR up to 30-plus knots to get us to the 17th-century castle and fishing cottages in Vaxholm's harbor. After checking out Vaxholm, we'd docked at the island restaurant for lunch where fortunately for me, my swim in the

Baltic would be postponed. I managed to get onto the DFNDR 9 and joined the others inside Restaurant Rökeriet where I had my first encounter with Toast Skagen, the Swedish appetizer that over the next four days would become a minor obsession for most of our crew.

Legend has it that Swedish culinary hero Tore Wretman first concocted Toast Skagen while racing a sailboat off northern Denmark in 1956. Wretman and his crew were well ahead and discussing how they were going to celebrate their win when the wind suddenly died, and they had to watch as their competition passed them on the other side of the course. To get his crewmembers out of their funk, the chef went into the galley, found oil and eggs, turned it into mayo, mixed it with shrimp, put it on toasted bread and topped it with fish roe and dill. When they asked for the dish's name, Wretman purportedly looked over the water toward Skagen and said, "don't you know that this is the legendary Toast Skagen?" He subsequently added the appetizer to the menu at his popular Stockholm restaurant and today it can be found in almost any Nordic restaurant around the Baltic Sea.

But the tiny shrimp in Toast Skagen come from the North Sea and the North Atlantic. They don't live in the Baltic. The Baltic has little or no tide. The narrow inlet and the shallow sills between Sweden and Denmark prevent most of the North Sea's salt water from entering while a massive influx of fresh water from the 14 countries in the Baltic basin keeps the salt water at bay. It takes 25 to 35 years for the North Sea's saltwater to displace all the water in the Baltic Sea and it is the largest brackish water system in the world.

But like other seas, the Baltic is under duress, from nature and the millions of people who live around it. Increased runoff and net rainfall are lowering its salinity; eutrophication is decreasing its oxygen levels; overfishing has decimated its fish populations; and pollution has



increased PCB levels in the Baltic salmon—a staple of the Scandinavian diet.

But despite all these challenges, the Baltic is an incredibly beautiful place. In summer, it can appear almost tranquil, which is why Baltic boaters get out on the water en masse for the four or five weeks after the summer solstice. The boating season is only about two months long, and in the shoulder seasons, when storms kick up, the Baltic can be a rough place. In winter, waves can reach heights of 35 or 40 feet and more, and the sea is

littered with thousands of wrecks and has claimed many more lives.

It is those unpredictable conditions that made Erkki start XO Boats with his friend Sakari Mattila in 2007. And it was Erkki's habit of breaking fiberglass boats that caused him to choose aluminum for the XO hulls. "I was an enthusiastic driver," Erkki said with typical Finnish understatement. "Sakari says I can drive any boat to pieces. I wanted a boat I couldn't break."

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Breaking a DFNDR 9 hull would not be

easy. The boats are built in Poland using military-grade aluminum. The keel is 5/16th of an inch thick, the bottom panels are 13/64th of an inch, the topsides are 5/32th of an inch, and the bottom is reinforced on the inside with an aluminum honeycomb structure. It's a lot of aluminum for a 28-foot, 8-inch boat. "You can't break it by driving it," Erkki said. "You have to hit the rocks to break it."

We were careful not to hit any rocks, which in the Baltic are everywhere, but Erkki and Jaakko were keen to show

how strong and capable the DFNDR was. After lunch, Jaakko announced we should "play a little." He took the boat to over 45 knots, then executed a hard turn that sent me sliding across the rear bench of the cabin. He then made a figure 8 that forced me to grab the center support with both hands and lean into the turns so I wouldn't fall over. We were pulling a lot of Gs.

After returning to the inboard-powered EXPLR 9 and cruising along at 30-plus knots (like the DFNDR, the out-



Above: The rocky islands of the Baltic Sea are sometimes reminiscent of the Maine coast, and the DFNDR 9's low draft is perfect for exploring them.

board version of the EXPLR can also bust 50 knots), it wasn't long before we arrived at Sandhamn. The easternmost island in the Swedish Archipelago is a pilot station for vessels traversing to and from Stockholm and a popular boating destination. It's also home to the Baltic's most prestigious offshore sailing event, the annual Round Gotland Race, which attracts more than 300 boats and is one reason why some people call Sandhamn the Swedish Newport.

We ate dinner at the high-spired, barn-red yacht club (hello, Toast Skagen), but other than the baronial proportions of its yacht club and the large marina, Sandhamn has little in common with Newport. Fifty miles from Stockholm, with just 100 year-round

residents, it is remote, has virtually no cars, features mostly sedate little houses and has just a handful of narrow gravel roads. To call it charming would be an understatement, but it felt more like Monhegan Island than Newport.

The next morning, over a Swedish breakfast of sliced bread, cold cuts, eggs, yogurt and fruit, Jaakko showed us the more westerly inland route we'd be taking through the Stockholm Archipelago before crossing the Åland Sea to Finland. At 91 nautical miles, that day's trip would be 21 miles longer than running on the outside but would be more comfortable and scenic.

Jaakko then showed us the Finnish Archipelago on his iPad. It appeared to have about 80 islands in

VALTTERI HRVONEN

it, but when he zoomed in, it revealed thousands of islands. With more than 20,000 islands, the Finnish Archipelago is the largest in the world. The iPad's screen was speckled with dots, most of them representing hunks of grey granite that barely rise above the Baltic's surface, covered in Norwegian spruce, pines, birches and other deciduous trees. Jaakko told us that there are islands with lakes inside them. And Valtteri added that there is an island with a lake that has an island in it.

If you want to explore those islands,

it's handy to have an aluminum hull. That morning while slowly gunkholing, Jaakko nosed the DFNDR's snubbed bow up to a rocky ledge so we could jump ashore. He then positioned the engines to keep the boat in place and hopped ashore himself.

To entertain us, Jaakko liked to play cat-and-mouse games with the in-board-powered EXPLR 9, which was no slouch, but couldn't keep up with the DFNDR 9 and its twin outboards. When the sun came out and the temperature rose, we raced ahead, and with no wind to cause the boat to drift, dove overboard in the middle of a placid stretch of water. The water wasn't as cold as I'd expected, and the azure sky and the white puffy clouds reflecting in the glassy water looked surreal. After the EXPLR passed us, we caught up to Erkki who was steadily driving toward Helsinki at 30 knots.

Before crossing to Finland, we fortified ourselves at a waterfront restaurant (Toast Skagen, anyone?) and entered the Baltic Sea for our 26-mile crossing to the Finnish Archipelago. We encountered mild conditions, just 1- to 2-foot waves coming from abeam with 8- to 15-knot winds, and we sped across at over 30 knots.

In the middle of the Baltic Sea, we stopped the boats and jumped overboard to satisfy a bucket-list item. Twenty minutes later, after Jaakko had pushed the DFNDR over 40 knots, we set foot on Finnish soil at Kobba Klintar, an old pilot station in the Åland islands that was closed in 1972 but is now a museum open to visitors. A striking white pyramid had replaced a former beacon, but the location still felt raw and remote. It was easy to see how hard and lonely life on an island in the Baltic Sea could be. After we checked out the museum, Jaakko told us it was time to go. I thought it was 3 p.m., but it was 6 p.m. The northern summer days are long, and we were about to miss our dinner reservations at the yacht club in Mariehamn, Åland's capital.

Åland is an autonomous island territory under Finnish sovereignty, but its national identity has been disputed since Finland gained its independence from Russia in 1917. Eighty-eight percent of the residents are native Swedish speakers, and they are not obligated to serve in the Finnish armed forces, even

though Finland is obligated to defend them. During World War II, when Finland twice fought Russia, the islands were a battleground—the sea bottom is littered with WWII wrecks—and with Russia having invaded Ukraine, the Finns aren't particularly keen on Russian ownership of some of the Åland islands, nor the Swedish-speaking populations' reliance on the Finns to defend them.

After checking into the hotel, we took a taxi down the town's boulevard, which was lined with linden trees, and ate dinner at ÅSS, the Ålands sailing yacht club. Over dinner, Erkki told us how the DFNDR hull had been designed by J&J Design, the Slovenian naval architecture firm known for its work with Elan, Jeanneau, Bavaria and Greenline. The XO team had collaborated on the design and included Egil Ranvig, the Norwegian offshore racer behind the high-speed Hydrolift and Cormate hulls.

The next morning, after a huge breakfast buffet that included smoked, dried and raw salmon and herring, we set off for Turku, the former capital of Finland. While I was at the helm, Jaakko encouraged me to "play." Instead of sitting on the shock-absorbing seat, I popped it into bolster mode, took the boat up to 46 knots and put the DFNDR into a hard turn. The boat rode like she was on a rail. She would not skid, even when I turned her across Erkki's wake. It was like she was glued to the water. Its tracking was uncanny.

After wending our way at speed through the Finnish Archipelago we stopped at Nauvo island, where we ran through a downpour to get into the restaurant. I resisted the temptation to order another Toast Skagen and quickly came to regret it when Valtteri, a Toast Skagen aficionado, declared "this may be the best one yet."

As we finished our meal, three excited, 20-something Finnish sailors appeared at our table. They'd been sailing along in a Haj, a classic 1930s Finnish sailboat with huge overhangs, when we'd blown by them. Because of our speed and the XO's carbon fiber vinyl wraps they said we looked like "two black Mercedes," and they'd been convinced that we were transporting Finland's prime minister. Having discovered that the XOs were just carrying a

LOA (w/o engine): 28'8"
Beam: 8'7"
Draft (engines down): 3'0"
Displ. (w/o engines): 5,390 lbs.
Power: (2) 225-hp Mercury outboards



bunch of American journalists, they asked us about the boats.

Back onboard en route to Turku, we encountered a big, long wake that sent the DFNDR into hobby-horse mode and caused Jaakko and I to break out the Lone Ranger ditty. He adjusted the throttles to stop the motion, but we laughed at ourselves for acting like a bunch of little kids. We were all having fun, and Jaakko seemed to be enjoying himself too.

It was clear he was eager to show off the DFNDR, which he'd designed from the hull up. He told me they'd wanted to create an adventure boat that took her design cues from the Jeep Wrangler. Erkki had previously used a Land Rover Defender analogy, but the point was clear—the DFNDR's design had been inspired by off-road adventure vehicles. The aluminum cage inside the cabin, the thermo-plastic overhead liner, the windshield that lacked the typical Baltic boat's reverse rake, and the side doors that opened were offroad car elements. The prototype we were driving had originally been built with soft walls, but it had been retrofitted with the sliding glass doors now featured on the production boats.

During our trip, I asked Jaakko about features that they might want to change, correct or add to the DFNDR, and he would always smile, and say, "you'll see them on Erkki's DFNDR when we get to his island tomorrow."

That night we stayed in the historic city of Turku where we enjoyed a beer at a sidewalk café along the Aura River, hid from a massive summer thunderstorm that featured large hail balls, and had an outstanding a la carte meal in a top-notch restaurant. Turku is full of history, great restaurants and beautiful old vessels, and it was full of energetic young people in town for a 7-day music festival. We all would have liked to have spent more time there, but we had to move on.

When we got to Erkki's island the next day and boarded hull No. 3 of the DFNDR 9, which Erkki had purchased for himself, I could see that almost all



the items I had mentioned to Jaakko had been upgraded or added to the production boat. It was nicely finished and everything, including the doors, hatches and latches, some of which had deficiencies on the prototype, worked beautifully.

When I'd first boarded the DFNDR 9 in Stockholm, I'd found many of the boat's spaces small and tight. But as I spent more time aboard and saw how we were using the boat I began to appreciate its merits. The only two things that I still had trouble with were the tiny head, which was hard for a sizable guy like me to squeeze into, and how the sliding glass doors came out of the back of the cabin and narrowed the passage with the fender lockers on the stern.

I had to remind myself that this was an adventure boat and not a luxury cruiser. I'd come to love the excellent sightlines from the helm; the lack of bow rise; the open bow pulpit from which I'd dived into the Baltic; the high gunwales that kept us onboard; and the expansive side views through the sliding glass doors from which I'd admired the

low-lying islands, the hundreds of charming homes, and the thousands of swans that made the beautiful Baltic seem more like a lake than a sea.

I'd also be a liar if I said I didn't like the speed at which we'd traveled. At 60 years of age, I am no longer a speed demon, but there's something to be said for covering 400 nautical miles from Stockholm to Helsinki in four days on a high-performance hull and still have time for gunkholing, swimming, and great meals with fun-loving Finns.

It was our last day, but there was one quintessentially Finnish ritual we hadn't done: take a sauna. Finland has 5.5 million people and an estimated 3.3 million saunas, so Erkki fired up the sauna on his island home and showed us how it should be done. We then took our last cold dip in the Baltic and topped it off with a lonkero, also known as a long drink, the official 1952 Helsinki Olympics gin and grapefruit soda cocktail.

Sitting by the water, listening to the silence and watching the terns dip low to the surface, I could see myself spending more time in the Baltic, but there was a plane waiting in Helsinki to take me back to New York. It was time to go.

The sun was out, the sky was blue and the air was crisp as the DFNDR slid across the glassy water at 40-plus knots. As we sped towards the capital, Jaakko pointed off to starboard to the open waters of the Gulf of Finland. "OK. Last chance," he said. "Tallinn, Estonia, is just 50 miles away. We can be there in an hour."

Without missing a beat, Valtteri added drolly, "And they have cheap beer."

Have I mentioned that I love the Finns?

XO Boats is launching its 26-foot DFNDR 8 this year and in 2023 will be launching a DFNDR 12. If that 38-foot hull performs anything like the DFNDR 9 it should be an amazing adventure machine. 

Left: The DFNDR 9's aluminum hull can take a beating. Top: Jaakko Kantola and Valtteri Hirvonen on the DFNDR; XO Boats CEO Erkki Talvela on the EXPLR

VALTTERI HIRVONEN (LEFT); PIM VAN HEMMEN (RIGHT)