

Raid Finland 2003

by Richard Wynne

Raid Finland 2003 followed the Great Glen Raid 2002 and Morbihan Week 2003, in giving me, my son Mike, and my 15ft 6 inch (4.7m) David Moss canoe yawl, Bunny, a far greater breadth of experience than we might otherwise have organized independently. Some 14 boats from throughout western Europe took part, and we gathered at the jumping-off point, Airisto in SW Finland, over the two days before the start, allowing plenty of time for a gear check-out and shake-down, and to get acquainted with other craft and their crews.

At Airisto we took over the Finnish Sea Safety Training Centre, where those of us not camping or sleeping on board were comfortably accommodated in the quarters normally used by visiting members of the merchant marine. To keep us fed Mike Hanyi, the Raid's organizer, had for the second year secured the services of Janne Lansipuro who runs an organic farm and guest house in western Finland. These initial accommodation and dining arrangements established the high standard to be experienced throughout the week - Bunny's crew had clean comfortable bedrooms at every overnight stop, and the caterers stayed one step ahead of the fleet to be ready with a sumptuous series of freshly cooked meals at most of the lunch and evening locations, others being victualled by local providers. The fleet thus sailed happily each day on a combination of full stomach and a good night's sleep.

The Airisto centre proved useful in one way and entertaining in another. Useful because, it being a secure compound, we could safely leave trailers and unwanted gear until our return. Entertaining because we were invited to experience a lifeboat launch, whereby a pod-like motorised craft and its occupants are unceremoniously dumped into the water from a height of around 7m - something better viewed than endured, the British contingent decided.

Our initial briefing established the course for the first couple of days and explained safety procedure. All boats would be subject to a gear inspection according to a checklist provided in advance; three motor boats would keep watch over the fleet, members of which could raise attention in an emergency or if requiring a tow, using a brightly coloured flag on a stick provided for the purpose. To the question 'what about VHF?' from one participant, I was unable to resist suggesting 'wave the flag faster'. Combined with the eagle eyes of the motor boat crews, this system was to work very well.

The entire event was competitive, for those so inclined, and consisted of two racing legs on each day. A handicapping scheme had been chosen and implemented by Csaba Hanyi, Mike's father and a septuagenarian of some energy; in addition boats were divided into two classes, cruising and racing, for the purposes of final ranking. The disparate nature of the fleet would present a challenge to any handicapper, but I believe all agreed that the final overall prize was very well deserved - but we are getting ahead of ourselves. The start of each of the two legs each day was divided into two groups, the slower craft leaving some 15-20 minutes before the rest, to reduce the spread of arrival times and help keep the fleet together as the racers overhauled the cruisers. Craft would occasionally be re-allocated to a different start group in the light of their performance.

So on Saturday 26 July, in winds which were to be generally from the south and in record temperatures which would often be in the 30s, the fleet set out on a (very) roughly circular course which would take it west into the Åland (pronounced auland, the au as in autumn) archipelago of some 6,500 islands, then eventually north, east, and south-east to finish at the charming town of Naantali, a few kilometres from the start, an overall distance of some 100 nautical miles.

The Baltic, and the archipelago in particular, were a completely new experience; no tides for one thing, a welcome change after the washing machines, complete with spin cycles, of Morbihan. The elimination of tides as a factor in passage planning represents either a great bonus, or the removal of half the fun, depending on your point of view. The sea level can change by a foot or two over a period of days, but purely in response to wind direction over the entire Baltic, and without, I believe, any discernible current. The water itself was unusual in being brackish rather than overtly salty - it had the smell and the taste of rivers and lakes, and caused us to float lower on our marks when swimming, than in the sea off the UK.

Navigating the archipelago proved not to be too taxing, given that the leading boat generally knew the way! It has to be said that one forested granite island much resembles another, however the main channels are indicated by an excellent system of purpose-built leading marks, and the more confusing areas are a veritable soup of clear alphabetical signs, which locate you immediately on the chart. One unavoidable fly in the ointment for serious racers: The area abounds in ferries, protocol and common sense dictating that we wait for them to complete their passage, which they make by pulling themselves along submerged cables.

For the most part we were in fairly sheltered waters, but with a couple of more open crossings which proved less boisterous than expected, one being subject to a slight swell from the south-west and with a good reaching breeze, and the other imposing a long-legged beat. We had bouts of quite heavy rain on a couple of days, but the brisk sail in warm sea, under a warm shower, and in a warm breeze took very little getting used to.

As is common with these events, you get a race-within-a-race as friendly rivalries develop between the more closely-matched craft. Mike and I were repeatedly confounded to see Penni, a beautiful Finnish built Haven 12 ½, skipper Seppo Narinen's entire family of four on board, showing Bunny, only two up, a clean pair of heels. Anna, on the other hand, an immaculately turned-out wooden Drascombe Lugger, built by McNulty and the Owner consistently trailed us due to, I believe, a combination of modest sail area for her size, and poorer windward ability, skipper Hans claiming a tacking angle of only 120%, which I thought proved a bit pessimistic in the event.

For our part, the substantially-built Bunny fared better the stronger the wind, as we were to experience a few days later, but in very light airs, and with what wind there was on the nose, we were able to compensate somewhat by sitting right down on the floor of the boat to reduce our windage, and nursing tiller and sheets to outpoint the competition. Interesting though such experiments are, we were pretty relaxed speed-wise - as someone said, 'All boats are slow, some are just less slow than others'. If I were seriously concerned about absolute light-air performance I could get a larger headsail.

Der Griffioen, a Belgian-owned Dutch scow, proved slowest of the fleet, to the extent that she was allowed to begin each leg well in advance of the rest of us, yet still managed to trail us all in, to encouraging cheers. With her pram bow, low freeboard and absence of side-decks she could readily be forgiven for accepting a tow in choppier conditions or with the wind well ahead of the beam. Speaking to her skipper Walter at the end of the Raid I cautiously asked if the coffin-like nature of her shape had occurred to him. I needn't have spared his feelings; from the start he had been regularly regaled by another ebullient skipper, as the scow was overhauled, to the effect "Get that bloody coffin out of my way!"

The Raid was sponsored in part by a local oar manufacturer, Lahnakoski, who had generously provided each crew with new prototype oars they wanted thoroughly tested. These were, it appears, the world's first machine-made spoon-bladed wooden oars, and we found them excellent. One day was declared for rowing only, and on the 3.8 NM course Bunny, thanks in part to her slippery underwater shape fore and aft, took the honours for boats having one rowing position. Well, alright, Mike Hanyi in his Herreshoff design Coquina II beat us in, but was declared ineligible on a technicality - maybe because he had no crew aboard?!

Perhaps the epitome of the sail-and-oar ethic which inspires the Raid phenomenon was Kleiner Kerl, a charming varnished clinker double-ender of Norwegian design, sailed by German couple Stefan and Angelika. Her sprit rig, with split fore-triangle and topsail, made a magnificent sight on her length of around 5m. Stefan alleged poor windward performance, although we saw her pointing pretty high once or twice. With two rowing positions and a pretty slippery shape, her extremely fit crew had no hesitation in taking to the oars when the wind was less than favourable.

In addition to eating, and (moderate social) drinking well into the night, our time ashore was pleasantly punctuated with visits to a number of local museums recording the local culture and in particular the boats which supported fishing and inter-island trading. Our imagination was captured by the somewhat Tolkien-esque 'big boat', (stor-båt in Swedish) a beamy clinker of around 10-12m in length, gaff-rigged and open but for the enclosure of the rear few feet of the hull by a 'clinker-like' roof of longitudinal overlapping planks, the cabin entered by doors at its front. The owner and family would live in this space, the boat being used to carry cargo and livestock between the islands and nearby mainland of Finland, Sweden and even further afield. The stern-hung rudder was controlled by a long tiller reaching right across the cabin roof. Ballast was rocks. We were to see a number of these craft afloat, both the well preserved and the recently constructed.

Still on the cultural front, a visiting troubadour with guitar entertained us at one overnight stop, and at another we were captivated by an open-air recital by Tsakku, a well-known trio of three female singers, occasionally accompanying themselves with traditional instruments such as bone flute, drum and a form of lute or zither.

Among a miscellany of memories we took away: A flying door passing over our masthead one day proved to be a white-tailed, or sea, eagle. "It's got no beak" exclaimed Mike. "That's not it's head, it IS its beak" I replied, eyeing the fearsome appendage. We saw another (or maybe the same one again) next day.

At Lappo, our westernmost port of call, one of a yachtful visiting young Londoners heading for the Tall Ships Race tentatively approached Mike for local directions, asking if he lived there. "No mate, I'm from Reading," Mike took pleasure in informing him.

Also on Lappo, one of our number visited the local blacksmith and purchased an ingenious iron clasp used for securing clothing. Uncertain of exactly how to operate it, he asked the craftsman to show him a second time, and was advised "Just look on my web site..."

The younger crew members hit it off together from the start, and the high point of their week was perhaps the midnight raid on Woge, a lake racer of uncertain years and prodigious sail area expertly sailed by Manfred and his young son from Germany. Woge took line honours on (I think) every leg and it was resolved to slow her crew down a bit by relocating her (as they slept on board) some metres out in the small harbour which we occupied, and securing her between piles in such a way that release would necessitate a swim in the balmy waters; all of which was taken in very good part by her confused occupants next morning.

In the interests of journalistic balance I should find something negative to say. Well, it's difficult, but I would single out the mosquitos, legislation against which is surely a priority for this Swedish-speaking autonomous region of Finland. In fairness, they are most active only from dusk (10pm or so in these latitudes at this time of year) and the prudent use of long-sleeved and long-legged clothing, allied to bug-repellent, takes care of things. I of course took neither precaution at first, and as a result my legs came to resemble the surface of Mars and were the subject of much morbid interest. The natives appear relatively unbothered, and possibly have developed an immunity. The mosquitos are aided and abetted during the day out on the water by the occasional fearsome horse-fly, one of which Mike interrupted in the act of snipping out a chunk of his leg, presumably to take home for the youngsters.

The Raid came to an end following a brisk sail close-hauled against a southerly into Naantali, where we gathered that evening at a dockside restaurant for the announcement of results and prize-giving, at which the award of overall winner to Kleiner Kerl was well received by all. The various prizes were ingeniously fashioned from oar-blades made by our sponsor, with the exception of Kleiner Kerl's returnable trophy, an impressive wooden sculpture which may have given rise to an excess baggage charge had they not been driving home. We made our farewells to those departing immediately, resolving to meet again on what is becoming the 'Raid Circuit'.

Some crews then occupied themselves with boat recovery and departure, while half a dozen, Bunny's included, were to stay and take part next day in an annual local regatta. On this day Bunny came into her own; we were three-up this time, Johan, one of the Raid's volunteer organizers being our helmsman and tactician, I getting my 100kg where it was required outboard amidships and handling the mainsheet, and Mike taking care of the jib. Thus manned, we romped around the 5NM course unreefed and reasonably upright in winds gusting to force 6. The potential for ducking to windward was as strong as to leeward, as the sudden disappearance of the wind would occasion a frantic scramble inboard. One or two raiders of lower freeboard and tender nature wisely pulled out, and I believe there was one dismasting and a flooding among the traditional craft, who were sailing their own course within easier reach of assistance. The lake racer Woge beat everyone in of course, but was occasionally recognised from afar with mast all-but-parallel with the water surface.

On the logistical front, I chose to ship Bunny to Turku (very near the Raid launching point) with Mann Lines out of Harwich, Mike and I flying out later to join her. I had been worried in advance about arranging tows in Finland, but Mike Hanyi assured me that 'your boat going swimming will not be a problem'. The considerable saving in car ferry cost and time off work proved worthwhile, and in the event we were able to secure tows to and from the launch and recovery sites from other participants for the bargain price of a dinner and the cost of the fuel. For the record, the return shipping cost for boat on trailer, length around 6m, was L900. Combined with a couple of flights this compared very favourably with the extra time and cost involved in taking the car along.

Raid Finland may, by comparison to the Great Glen Raid and Morbihan Week, be a modest affair in terms of its cost base and level of advance promotion, but this in no way impaired the quality of organisation both ashore and afloat, nor the safety arrangements. I take my hat off to Mike Hanyi, his wife Susa, and the team of volunteer helpers who worked so hard over the preceding months to ensure a repeat of last year's success. As an indication of 'customer satisfaction', a number of this year's participants were veterans of 2002, a trend which is very likely to continue.