

Booze Cruises on the Baltic

They call them 'drunk boats'. You leave sober and drain the bar of the last duty free paradise

by Mara Gergolet

There are 'captains' logs'. There are photos. There are hundreds of first-person accounts, thinly disguised behind nicknames, posted on Internet forums that the uninitiated and those hungry for Scandinavian traditions can read to get an idea of the phenomenon, and many articles on travel sites.

David Whitley of the *Grumpy Traveller* writes: "Maintaining all the dignity of a bawling spinster at her umpteenth friend's wedding, the three lads are slumped against the wall of the ferry terminal with impressively vacant expressions. Next to them is a tremendous haul; case on case of cheap lager and a glittering array of empty bottles. They may be waiting for a taxi... They are adorned with thick enough beer coats to keep them warm for the winter, have eyes that tell sorry tales and are drooling like excitable Labradors. This is perfect; even better than the rumours would have me believe. If the people coming back on the early ferry are utterly bloated, then heaven knows how fun the party boat is going to be."

The ship was sailing from Helsinki to Tallinn. But it could just as easily have been Stockholm, Turku or some other Baltic Sea port. These enormous ferries are cruise ships. Floating luxury hotels that offer a cheap day of relaxation or escape, cradled by the sea and alcohol, where the trip is more important than the destination. And each year 17 million people take one of these trips, for a 'break' that lasts from two to 48 hours.

It's no surprise, then, that these cruise ships are known as 'drunk boats' (with apologies to Rimbaud and the psychophysical transport of his *bateau ivre*). Students, another large group



of regular passengers, call them party boats or drill boats (for drilling of a purely carnal nature).

To understand this Scandinavian institution, one needs to read up on their strict alcohol control systems. And how in the 1920s, to temper the flow of brandy that accompanied all that herring and cured meats in rural areas, a Lutheran alternative to Prohibition and alcoholism was introduced: state alcohol monopolies.

Called the *Systembolaget* in Sweden, *Alko* in Finland and *Vinmonopolet* in Norway, these



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☒ A 'drunk boat' sailing near the town of Tartu, in Estonia.

government-run liquor stores still control most of the alcohol distribution in their countries. The rules are ironclad: no wine for minors under 18, and stores stay open until 6 pm, 3 pm on Saturdays and are closed on Sundays. Most importantly: they place an extremely high tax on alcohol. Which means that, in Finland, 77% of the cost of a cheap bottle of vodka is tax (VAT included); in Sweden, it's 84% (52% of the price of an average wine, and 49% of a strong beer); and Norway is the worst of all. If an alcoholic

beverage in the EU costs, say, 100 units, in Norway that'll be 229.

What better solution then, than to get hammered on the high seas, and tax-free? Yet the entire system almost ran aground in 1999 when Sweden and Finland entered the EU: with the common economic space, there was no more duty-free shopping on ships. But a handy way to sidestep the problem was found: the Åland Islands. With a population of 30,000 plus sundry sheep, they are under Finnish rule yet semi-independent, thus outside the EU treaty and tax-free. All the ships had to do was stopover briefly.

Another solution was Estonia. Although it has been a fully-fledged EU Member State since 2004, alcohol tax in the country is low, and so is applied on the ships.

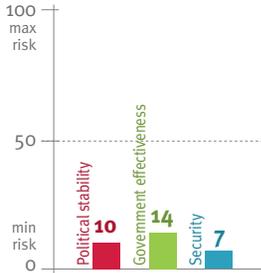
The cruise ferries' two main routes were charted accordingly: Stockholm-Helsinki (via the Åland islands) and Helsinki-Tallinn. There are some variations: Stockholm-Turku (via the Ålands); Stockholm-Ålands-Tallinn; and even Stockholm-Riga. Plus dozens of other combinations that take advantage of lower taxation in the neighboring country.

Two large cruise lines – the Tallink Silja and Viking – have cornered nearly 70% of the market. The former, with its flagship Silja Symphony



DANIEL ROSENTHAL/UMF/CONTRASTO

Finnish passengers drink on a ship that set sail from Helsinki.

 <p>Sweden</p> <p>AREA: 450,295 Km² POPULATION: 9,119,423</p> <hr/> <p>MEDIAN AGE: 42.4 years</p> <p>RELIGIONS: Lutherans 87%, other 13%</p> <p>FORM OF GOVERNMENT: Constitutional Monarchy</p> <p>SUFFRAGE: Universal (18 years)</p> <p>CHIEF OF STATE: King CARL XVI GUSTAF (September 1973)</p> <hr/> <p>HEAD OF GOVERNMENT: Fredrik REINFELDT (October 2006)</p> <p>GDP NOMINAL: € 385.1 bln (2012)</p> <p>INFLATION: 0.9% (2012)</p> <p>UNEMPLOYMENT: 8% (2012)</p> <p>PUBLIC DEBT/GDP: 38.2% (2012)</p>	<p>Political indicators Europeye Research Team</p>  <p>100 max risk 50 min risk 0</p> <p>Political stability 10 Government effectiveness 14 Security 7</p> <p>▶ The centre-right Alliance for Sweden coalition should run the country until the next elections in September 2014.</p> <p>Reference values: first country Norway, last country Somalia</p> <hr/> <p>Corruption 3 out of 177 countries</p> <p>Judicial independence 9 out of 148 countries</p> <p>Quality of bureaucracy min risk 0 max risk</p> <p>EIU, ONU, WB, WEF, WHO, Heritage Foundation, Transparency International, ICPS</p>
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(over 200 metres long, 995 cabins, 2,850 seats), is reputed to be the more elegant, while Viking is preferred by students on weekends.

So, if you're curious to set sail from Stockholm, here's a simple guide:

- 1) the ship sails in the evening, at around 6 pm.
- 2) take in one of the great smorgasbord dinners, preferably next to a window.
- 3) if you really want to get sloshed, you can stock up on supplies in the ship's supermarket (note: sometimes it only opens on the return journey).
- 4) then proceed to one of the on-board bars or discos, open hunting grounds.
- 5) the party (or whatever else you're doing) can then continue in a cabin.
- 6) do not go ashore at 6:30 am on the Åland Islands.
- 7) if feasible, go up on deck to see the red roofs of Helsinki slowly

appear, or the spectacular mooring along the fjords of Stockholm, with the water reflecting the façades of the buildings on the island of Djurgarden;

- 8) Do some sightseeing in the city, before heading back.

So why do these companies tolerate drunks on their beautiful ships? Why do courteous security men abound? And why do they have holding cells for the rowdiest passengers? The answer is simple. Just think of Viking and Tallink Silja as giant, floating duty-free shops. In the eight Baltic states, the duty-free industry brings in €3 billion, half of which comes from the ships. Transactions aboard the Silja line create more revenue than either Bangkok or Gatwick airport – because 95% of passengers will buy something.

Those who have had a taste of the trips have their memories, and some have written about them. Like 'Eras-

mus', a student who took a cruise with 1,200 other university students from all over Sweden ("A pretty decent party"). Or the guy who ended up in a holding cell and could recall nothing, thinking he'd been stuck in a lift for two hours. Yet many, particularly on the short passage to Tallinn (six million passengers yearly), are greeted by the soothing sight of middle-aged folks with little to look forward to.

David Whitley, who had such high expectations for his trip, writes that Finns spend their evenings on the ships singing karaoke: slow-tempo, obscure Finnish songs, sung by people who can actually sing. "How you'd imagine karaoke to be if it had been invented in the 1920s". **E**

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