

BALTIC BLAST

AN ADVENTURE CRUISE SPANNING THE BALTIC SEA ABOARD A HEARTY XO DFNDR 9 PROVES SCANDINAVIA TO BE A WILDLY UNDERRATED CRUISING DESTINATION.
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The XO DFNDR 9 preparing for a Baltic Crossing. The waters are not usually so calm. Right: Kevin lets the twin Mercurys breathe deep on a 70-mile passage between the coasts of Finland and Sweden.

A man has to have his priorities. Before Errki Talvela, CEO of Finland's XO Boats, built a series of houses for family and friends on his private island a few hours poke via boat from downtown Helsinki, he made sure to focus on the important stuff: a modest cottage with a wood-burning stove, a small dock, and of course, the sauna. Finns treat their saunas with religious fervency. For many in the country's past, the cedar hothouses were quite literally the beginning and the end—a place where births took place and where the dead were laid out before burial. (The walls in traditional saunas were lined with a naturally bacteria-resistant soot.) And even today a similar compartment is expected of one sitting on a sauna bench as in a church pew. There are 5.3 million people in Finland and somewhere between 2-to 3-million saunas. Indeed, sauna is the most common Finnish word to have found its way into the English lexicon. It is safe to say they are the beating heart of the country. And thus for Talvela, a tall and lanky 68-year-old with a hawkish face and a background in martial arts—the kind of man equally at ease running a company as he is eradicating his island of venomous European vipers using a pistol loaded with birdshot—the sauna mattered a lot. That same attitude is applied to his company's boats. They get the important stuff right. Without question, XO nails its hulls.

I know this because I recently took the XO DFNDR 9 from Stockholm to Helsinki on a sojourn that will not soon be forgotten. Along the way I'd repeatedly find myself smiling, not only because of the legendary scenery, but also because of the pure fun gleaned from driving the boat. The DFNDR 9 is a small (29 foot) and fast vessel that excels as a commuter, ferrying owners from





The Baltic is a place of dense forests and thousands of outcroppings of granite—above water—and below. The DFNDR XO 9's tough aluminum deep vee hulls are not only built to slice through waves, but survive encounters with the occasional micro-seamount or submerged log.

point A to point B. If you don't have a private island in Finland you need to get to, using a DFNDR 9 to zip across the Long Island Sound from Greenwich to Montauk would suffice. It's also ideal for navigating from downtown Stockholm to the resort island of Sandhamn on a gray and rainy morning, which is exactly what we did.

Americans tend to sleep on Stockholm as a destination and I've never understood why. It's long been one of my favorite cities in the world. The museums, architecture and restaurants are world class, the populace speaks English fluently (and is taller than you), and best of all, it's fully navigable by water. The Stockholm Archipelago is a boater's dream, save for a few crags I'll address in a bit. It contains about 24,000 islands lush with Norwegian spruce and mattresses of moss. Sensibly sized domiciles dot the terrain, split nearly equally between the cold, glass rectangles associated with modern Scandinavian design and traditional fish camps with wooden structures painted white and falu red.

In the initial part of our journey, I was pleased to learn that the XO's pilothouse was big enough for three. It's meant for four (with two shock-absorbing chairs forward and a bench aft) but I think you'd have to be awfully comfortable with your company for four grown men to occupy that space for very long. Regardless, three of us were on board and we remained dry and comfortable as we cruised through the densely populated heart of the city and out into the surrounding islands.

If I ever disappear, and no one can find me, check hospitals, morgues, jails and Sandhamn. It's where I plan to finish my novel. But I wouldn't be all that original. Mikael Blomkvist, a central character and journalist in the Millennium trilogy by Stieg Larsson (think *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) uses Sandhamn as a place to write. It's easy to see why. The small, sandy island covered in long grass and wildflowers expertly toes the line between vibrant and sleepy. Upon our entrance into port, there was live music outside the cavernous yacht club near the harbor, the tendrils of which flowed over gentle hills lined with footpaths frequented by electric bicycles towing carts overflowing with goods from the small marketplace near the water's edge. Here, young people sip tall glasses of cold pilsner well into the summer nights that never quite arrive this far north. And cozy falu red cottages lie tucked into the countryside, the perfect place to sit by a fire with a glass of whatever warms you, read and write and be unbothered.

The next morning we caffeinated ourselves heartily in preparation for the meat of our trip, a 70-mile hop from Sandhamn to the Finnish islands of Aland. I would drive the whole way, and it was here that I became enamored with the XO's charms. The DFNDR 9 is built for the Baltic. The aluminum hull is rigid and strong and the metal allows XO the elasticity to tweak the design when it sees fit. A strong hull is an absolute necessity in this patch of the world, where an unending phalanx of granite islets hangs low at the sur-



The XO fleet from our journey sits at the dock on Talvela's private island. This is the view from just outside his sauna.

face, each like the rostrum of a surfacing whale, willing and able to bash any vessel into submission. When navigating the Baltic Sea, rigorous attention to maps is required and a knowledgeable guide is recommended.

The J&J-designed deep-V hull with 22.5 degrees of deadrise at the transom is also made to dance with another peculiarity of the Baltic. Because the sea is connected to saltier bodies of water to the west only through the narrow Danish straits, and because there is so much runoff from the surrounding coast, the Baltic is one of the largest brackish seas in the world. The sharp and fractured wave patterns behave as they would in lake water. The XO hull is built to penetrate these pelting conditions—and it does so while going really, really fast. I zipped the boat over the two-foot beam sea at 38 knots, and with the hammer down, the twin 225-hp Mercurys got her up to 46. In a tight hardover turn she exerted real G forces—you actually had to hold on or risk getting launched—and exuded super-fun, roller-coaster vibes without ever feeling unsafe.

Midway through the journey, I was able to dive overboard into the deep heart of the Baltic. The water was indeed close to fresh and required extra treading to stay afloat. But it was bracingly cool on a hot summer's day and as an added bonus there was no Jaws theme song playing in my head as I backstroked through open ocean. The low salt content here means the most fearsome animal swimming in these depths is a harbor seal. Paddling that hard gets tiring fast

though, and I was happy for the easy access back into the XO via its extendable swim ladder.

Back in the boat and dried off, we made haste for Aland—an autonomous splotch of 4,600 islands mid-way between Sweden and Finland. The history of Aland is complex and confusing and rife with treaties and protocols. It's officially under the aegis of Finland, but the people mostly speak Swedish and have their own culture. To many, Aland's peaceful autonomous state serves as an example for other disputed areas, such as Northern Ireland, Israel-Palestine and the South Caucasus. As Talvela elegantly put it, "Aland picks the cherries off two cakes."

In Aland, I noted a sea change, not in the Baltic, but among the people. I'm familiar with Swedes as I've been to their country a handful of times before. The clichéd Swede is blonde, stylish and often blessed with a genteel serenity that is enviable. But the people in Aland look different, despite speaking the same tongue. They are a bit fiercer in the face, a little wilder in the eye. The two countries calved from one another into separate states centuries ago and still foster a playful but staunch sibling rivalry. I had been asking the Finns on our trip what the differences between Swedes and Finns were, and had been getting no satisfying answers. But it would be Talvela again to the rescue with his laconic wit when, finally, after much inquiry he let slip with a wry smile, "In Finland men don't cry, in Sweden, they do nothing else but cry."



LOA: 28'9"
 Beam: 8'6"
 Draft: 3'4"
 Fuel: 119 gal.
 Water: 26 gal.
 Displ.: 5,974 lb.
 Power: 2/225-hp Mercurys,
 2/450-hp Mercurys
 Price: \$250,000

RPM	KNOTS	GPH	RANGE
1500	6.1	3.1	234
2000	8.2	5.5	177
3000	16.8	11.3	177
4000	29.9	17.4	184
5000	38.7	32.7	141
5630	46.3	37.2	148



Above: A rugged commuter that can pound through rough seas, the XO DFNDR 9's cabin even has a small berth for sleeping in a pinch.

From the side the XO's rugged appearance is evident, as are the thoughtfully placed handrails for safety and comfort.

The harbor in Åland was lined with public saunas and a never-ending stream of middle-aged local men wearing nothing but towels wrapped around their round bellies, steam haunting their bare shoulders and bald heads as they took leisurely sips from green bottles of beer. At a nearby restaurant I tucked into a meal of fried herring and beef before enjoying the dreamless sleep of a man who had been at sea all day.

The next morning we'd make the push to Turku—"The Paris of Finland"—a cultural center of about 200,000 people situated at the mouth of the Aura River, which spills out of the bottom of Finland as if someone had drilled a hole in a cask of wine. As we pushed the boat through the sauna-lined inlet (I'm not kidding, they're all over the place) I began to hear the telltale boots-and-pants-and-boots-and-pants of electronic music bouncing off the surface of the still, gray water.

We had stumbled upon a massive, waterside music festival headlined by Megan Thee Stallion. Throngs of young Finns danced on a beach beside us. I moved to the foredeck of the XO and, carried by the music, started to do the same old two-step that sees me through weddings without embarrassing myself. But I couldn't

do it. The super-grippy SoftDeck sole on the deck made it nearly impossible to move your feet—terrible for dancing, excellent for safety when boarding and handling lines.

We breezed by the festival and up the Aura to a small harbor where we found a slip. It was immediately clear this was a fashionable city as model-types dressed in the breezy, loose-fitting creams and dark blues favored by Scandinavians lined a river walk, admiring the refined masculinity of the DFNDR's profile.

Shortly, it began to hail. I had been strolling the riverfront in the strange, purple-gold light of Finnish midsommar when a lightning bolt in the near distance ripped open the sky like a switchblade through a beanbag chair. As ice balls fell heavily from the heavens, I ducked into a riverboat that had been converted into a bustling Thai restaurant and watched hail the size of small jellybeans bounce angrily off the head of a massive, cartoonishly proportioned statue of a half-naked man doing yoga. Drunken music festival goers dressed like Winnie the Pooh and Tigger intermittently darted by on electric scooters looking for cover. It was a surreal way to work up an appetite, but it was effective. The XO team had booked a table for the tasting menu at Noaa, which

is a restaurant I would have lived for the rest of my life assuming it had a Michelin Star. The fact that it is ranked the 36th best restaurant in Turku on Yelp.com is rather astounding, because the food was remarkable, but it also speaks to Turku's prominence as the restaurant capital of Finland. The skilled staff walked us through a sumptuous meal of caviar with hummus, beef tartar with onion crisps, cured white fish, Iberico (a Spanish pork) neck with apple sauce, and vanilla ice cream with dehydrated strawberries. The following day one of my boatmate's caught me gazing off into the distance and asked me if all was OK. "Yeah," I responded, "I'm just thinking about that beef tartar."

The next day would be our last on the XO and we shoved off early, headed for Talvelä's island, and Helsinki after that, my point of departure back to the States. Back at the wheel, I got to slalom the boat through a stretch of water unencumbered by granite depth charges, and couldn't help but let out a "whoop!" as I admired the muscular agility of this boat's performance. She's simply a joy to drive, and beyond that, she'd proven herself as an able and rugged cruiser over a multi-day trip in varied weather conditions. She's also priced at a reasonable \$250,000 thanks in large part to

the low cost of labor and the production scale in Poland where these boats are built. There is certainly a market for this model among American boaters in search of a boat that champions both performance and minimalism. The DFNDR 9 is the water-borne equivalent of a Jeep Wrangler blessed with a V-8.

Once we pulled in to Talvelä's island, I was finally able to partake in a proper sauna. I sat there with the CEO in the purifying heat, speaking mostly of our common interest in jiu jitsu. (It's considered poor form to talk shop when sauna'ing.) As the conversation wound down, I ladled water onto the hot rocks that heat the space, and a wall of blistering steam reared up before us, so hot that I could feel it searing my lungs with every inhale. I endured the heat as long as I could before opening the door and jogging down the short dock out to the Baltic. I jumped in just off the port of our XO, and let the cold, dark water wash over my head as I slipped toward the bottom, my skin cooling in an extraordinarily pleasant manner. Pushing off the bottom toward the surface, I exploded into the cacophony of blues and greens that dominate the Finnish summer and sucked in a lungful of fresh, pine-scented air. At that moment, I'd have rather been nowhere else on earth. □