

SEA·KAYAKER

April 2004



Destination: Fjords of Southeast Alaska • Tune-up your T-Rescue
Baltic Sea Solo Expedition • Commuting by Kayak



Above: Surfing ahead of a Force-7 tailwind. Upper right: The kayak and outrigger in a more peaceful setting.

SOLO ON THE

BALTIC SEA



The sun burned into my tent at 4:00 A.M. and heightened the unearthly odor of my clothes. I'd worn them continuously for the past 16 days, and they were ripe for washing. As I wormed myself out of my sleeping bag, a kievit flew off my tent, leaving behind a big splash of white on the nylon flap. "Maybe that's supposed to be lucky," I mused.

With the strength of character I'm occasionally able to conjure up, I set aside the image of the bird droppings and looked forward to the day's paddle from Malmö to Trelleborg, Sweden. Besides needing to shop for stuff like

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DETLEV HENSCHEL



methanol for my stove and new stakes for the tent, I had run out of cooking oil, honey and toilet tissue. I thought I should also launder my clothes, lest my skin start decomposing, and a bath would do the rest of me good, too.

I was on the second leg of a 1,400-nautical-mile (nm) expedition starting in Flensburg, Germany, and ending in the Arctic Circle, just south of Haparanda, Sweden. My ultimate intention was to circumnavigate the whole Baltic Sea, living only off the



I began to feel a strange weakness creeping into my bones. I wasn't able to focus on the beach close by.

land. As with the 229 nm I had already completed with my outrigger-and-sail-equipped kayak, I was about to embark on the next 1,200 nm alone. I had been on the water for 19 days and had about 80 ahead of me.

The wind filled my sail as I launched my kayak, and jumping horn pikes accompanied me to Falster Peninsula, the entrance to the southern Baltic Sea. Buoys showed me the way into the two-kilometer-long man-made water-

Clockwise from top: The Ales Stones of Käseberga; a fjällräven (polar fox) in its summer fur; the harbors of coastal villages provided welcome rests; the pike that towed me.

way that would cut about 10 nm off my route. On the other side, the Baltic Sea welcomed me with its daily noontime breeze of a Force 4 and clapotis churning past the breakwater.

As my kayak wobbled through that bumpy mess along the granite jetty to the rocky beach, I began to feel a strange weakness creeping into my bones. I wasn't able to focus on the beach close by. Shaking my head to clarify my view, I realized that I must have blacked out briefly—but perhaps for only seconds because I woke to find myself still bobbing up and down in the same spot. Fortunately, my outrigger had kept me from capsizing.

Without thinking, I turned and, with



I rolled onto my belly like a rabbit and poked my way across the meadow, chewing dandelion leaves and roots. Dirt caked between my teeth and around my mouth. Grinning to myself, I was glad that nobody else was there.



swiftly rotating arms, ran the kayak onto the rocky beach. I pushed myself out of the boat, crawled onto the meadow just beyond the tide line and collapsed. It was not clear how long I had been passed out, but when the burning sun woke me, I was relieved to find that the universe was no longer spinning.

I assumed my condition wasn't seri-

ous, and was perhaps just a function of hunger. I sat up and directed my thoughts toward finding some food. I had been having headaches most afternoons of the past week, so a drop in blood sugar may have been the cause of my delirium. I rolled onto my belly like a rabbit and poked my way across the meadow, chewing dandelion leaves

Top: Dinnertime was always the best time of the day. Above: Garden angelika made an effective tonic.

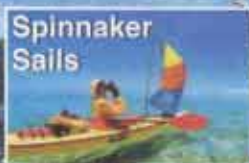
and roots. Dirt caked between my teeth and around my mouth. Grinning to myself, I was glad that nobody else was there. After two hours of grazing, I felt much better.

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During the final 10 nm to the Trelleborg campground, I was as slow as the westbound sun. To stay awake and keep my energy up, I chewed on dandelion buds and sea kale sprouts constantly. Later that evening, while alone in the sauna, I brought my full weight to bear on a scale and realized I had lost 22 pounds in three weeks. I was relieved that my condition was not likely a tumor in my brain but just a big hole in my stomach.

The next day, I washed my clothes and had a bath at the Dalsbadet campground near Trelleborg, then went shopping in the town. After the smooth sounds of the sea and the spring chirping birds, the smell of a town with cars along with the traffic and commotion created a sense of imbalance I had not expected, and I soon ached to get back to the solitude of paddling.

With my weight plummeting as a result of my goal to sustain myself with the food I could find alongshore, I realized that I would either have to cut my daily paddling distances and spend more time foraging veggies or buy additional carbohydrates like rice, noodles and potatoes. I was determined to continue my journey, so I bought some rice and fish so I could spend my time eating sea miles instead of weeds. The next day, a Force 6 wind blew across an endless blue sky and made the water too rough for easy paddling, so I took the opportunity to go fishing. I caught three horn pikes that I grilled up and matched with broiled chervil I found in the neighborhood and, for the first time on this trip, rice.

Feast or Famine

My nutrient-replenished body grew stronger with the short break, and I propelled the kayak at a good clip along the sandy beaches of south Sweden. Tiny harbors such as Abbekås were tucked in the coast and offered shelter for the night and the opportunity to buy smoked fish like herring, mackerel and flatfish. Just when I was expecting the weather conditions to stabilize to the typical summer pattern—no winds except for the Force 2-to-Force 4 midday breeze—Swedish shortwave marine radio forecasted a new gale. I tried to find shelter in the harbor at Ystad to watch the storm blow through, but

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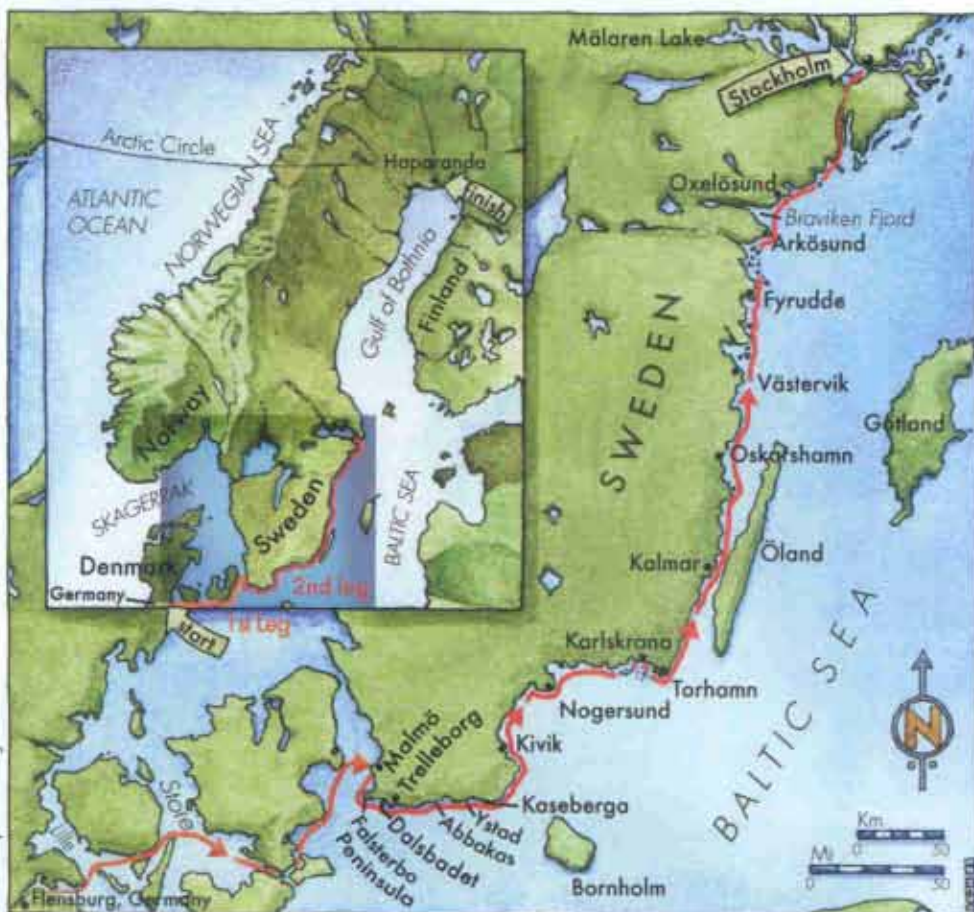
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unfortunately, the high concrete breakwater created dangerous wave sets, and the landing might have fractured the hull of my kayak, so I had to continue. The next bay offered a tempting, shallow, white-sand beach, but the wide funnel-like bay was catching the waves from the open sea and squeezing them onto the beach, and the wave faces were growing taller by the minute. I didn't want to take any chances continuing in that gale, especially with the weather deteriorating. I had to get off the water.

The waves were pounding in from the open sea, slamming my starboard side, slapping my cheek and nearly rolling the kayak in spite of the outrigger. I turned into the breakers to speed up and catch a cresting wave in order to surf as close to the beach as possible. I landed safely, but a last big wave of icy water splashed in the boat just as I released my spray skirt. I set

up camp close to the military area known as Ravlunda. Protected by the high sandy dunes, the area was littered with yellow-and-red signs warning "Caution: Mines." A sickening knot of fear in my gut was superseded only by my dread of relaunching into the brewing storm. I spent the stormy drizzling Pentecost marooned between the crashing surf and the minefields. Food was sparse, as spring comes only slowly up north, and to be honest, I wasn't ready to run around for tidbits and check the accuracy of those yellow signs. So, while the dumping waves assaulted the beach, I sat and watched with the pleasure of knowing they couldn't reach me.

After an evening of gnawing on my frugal rice diet and watching the endless waves hit the beach, I was bored to the bone, I wanted to launch as soon as possible. The wind died in the morning and I paddled for three hours along the wind-shattered dune coast, dreaming about smoked mackerels, when out of the corner of my eye a flicker of movement caught my attention. I turned my head slowly. Seeing a paddler coming up from behind in these deserted regions was wholly unexpected. Even

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more unusual was that I knew this paddler. It was the legendary Scandinavian kayaker Jim Danielsson, founder of the "Blue Ribbon Race" spanning the Swedish Coast.

He spoke few words as he passed me. He was paddling up the coast for the third time and on a mission to beat his old record. I mentioned the forecast for a storm coming in and he replied simply, "But it's not here, yet." Then he sped up and vanished into the distance, leaving me behind with the reassuring feeling that I was not the only idiot freezing his way up to the Arctic Circle.

In Käseberga, another diminutive harbor on Sweden's south coast, I hiked to the high dunes where Vikings had built a huge settlement. Now all that is left is an arrangement of huge stones in the outline of a great ship, over 200 feet long and 65 feet wide. This ring of stone remains as a memorial to the forgotten Vikings. An expansive view of the coastline was my reward for the grueling walk up the dunes, my legs weak from four weeks of sitting in the kayak, and I spent the day watching the sea as it worked with Sisyphian patience continually chewing on the dunes below.

In the shade of a huge oak tree in the harbor of the village of Kivik, my camp seemed idyllic—until morning, when the manic cooing of amorous pigeons woke me. After hassling with grandma's old coffee mill and a feeble attempt at breakfast, I jumped in my kayak and rushed into the mirrored sea. The calm weather seemed to be propelling me forward, and for the first time in days, my brain seemed to be running on all cylinders. I carved a few circles in the glassy sea to watch my "tracks" vanish, just for fun.

I found shelter for the night at the fishing harbor of Nogersund, and when I came back from veggie hunting in the forest, a fishing-boat crew sponsored my frugal dinner with five fat spring herring. "I could get to like this kind of paddling adventure," I thought later, lying stuffed in my tent.

Foraging Forward

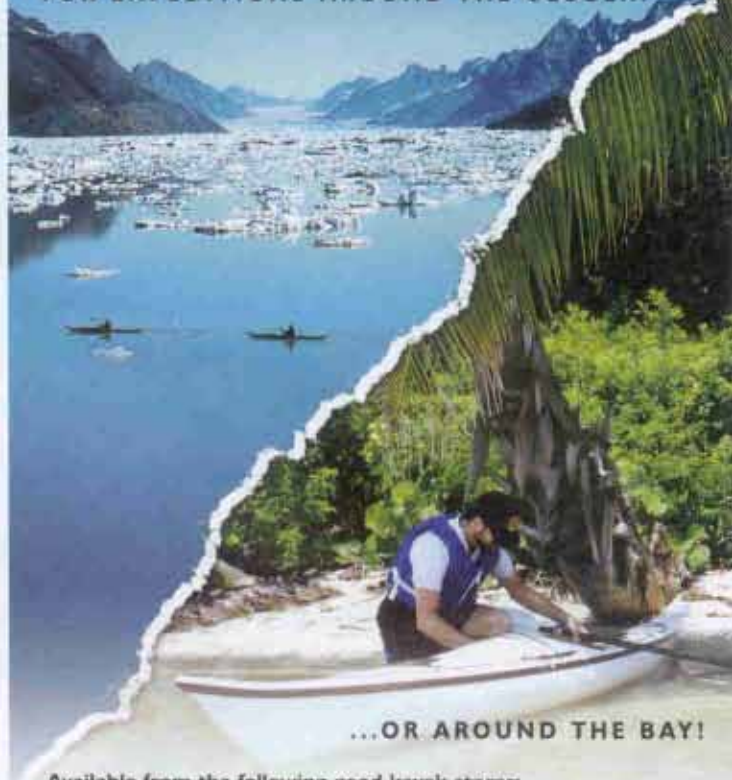
Entering the world of the Swedish islands, I passed the city of Karlskrona with little wind, no rain and endless skies. It is so difficult to navigate this area that a Russian submarine was stranded here a few years ago. But in my compact craft, it felt more like paddling on a lake than on the Baltic Sea. It was the first day I didn't wear neoprene or a spray skirt, and still the sweat was running in rivulets down my body and soaking my seat. A Swedish Marine speed boat emerged from its hidden base to check on me and disappeared after a brief greeting.

I landed on a small island within the Karlskrona archipelago, and when camp was set up, I set out to discover the fruits of my temporary home. I found a field of chives and dug out a couple of pounds of the slender onions to fill my veggie cache. Minutes later, strolling around a big boulder, I came upon a huge swan, just 10 yards away. I watched it with rapt attention (I hadn't had meat for quite a while) and envisioned it stuffed with Spanish chestnuts. A swan needs a long runway, I was thinking, so it could only make hissing sounds like a king cobra and shake its feathers at me. To this point it had been too good a day to spoil it in a showdown with an angry 35-pound swan. I decided to stick to

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I paddled to the side of the pond to find a spot to reach the road and ended up stuck in the mud with the rudder tangled in rotten reed. When I stepped out to free the kayak, I sank up to my hips in soft mud that reeked with the odor of rotten eggs.



my onions with rice. By the time I made it back to camp, my growling stomach had changed my mind. I returned to the boulder, but the swan was gone.

When I was preparing dinner, the full impact of my island seclusion hit me, and my ears rang with the silence. I was beginning to chew on an oversized mouthful of juniper-spiced rice with onions when a bone-rattling roar seemed to be running straight for my tent. My spoon froze halfway to my mouth. In an instant, I was out of the tent and saw a fighter plane disappear at low altitude. I had unwittingly made camp near an Air Force base at the end of the runway and the first of a night of deafening take-offs and landings had just begun.

Warming Up

The stabilized weather I was enjoying gave away sunny days for free with windless mornings and evenings and a perfectly timed breeze—up to Force 5—for the lunch break. Sprawled on the smooth granite rocks and baking in the bright sun, I could hang loose with the laziest of the Baltic seals lounging

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Top photo: An early morning calm.
Above: The fixed outrigger left plenty of room for paddling.

along the shore.

When I was done for the day after a good run of about 25 to 30 nm, I turned into a little harbor to stay for the night. Every small harbor seemed to have an old fisherman sitting on the pier and this one was no exception. As I landed, this dock denizen seemed to be expecting me, and we engaged in a long conversation. He, like the others I had met, had retired from but had never stopped fishing, and he gave better weather reports than any news broadcast.

Later in the evening, the whole village came to my tent to chat about my kayak and the sea. Spring was coming, and both the land and the people upon it were warming up.


During the subsequent days of paddling shallow and calm waters, I dragged my fishing tackle behind my kayak. I felt a steady tug and thought the tackle was stuck in seaweed, but when I stopped paddling, the kayak began moving in the opposite direction. A 3-foot pike was dragging me into the reeds, hooked on my tackle,

and memories of the movie *Jaws* surfaced. It wasn't so easy to catch a fish that size as it fought for its life. The pike was jumping and spinning out of the water, and it was yanking me and the boat in all directions. Without my outrigger, I wouldn't have had any hope of landing the fish while keeping my feet dry, but having the tackle in my hands after the first impact gave me a leg-up on the process. I stayed cool and waited until the fish was tired. I wound up the reel to get the pike close enough so I could stun it with the blunt end of my knife. It was almost seven


pounds and made a great meal, more than enough to stuff me.

The Going Gets Tough

If the paddling is divine and life becomes too easy, I seem destined to find a way to make things more complicated. On my way through the islands, I often met fishermen who told me the most efficient routes through their world of islands. One was supposed to be a really good shortcut between two islands—a channel through the reeds that would save me 10 nm. The channel was only six feet




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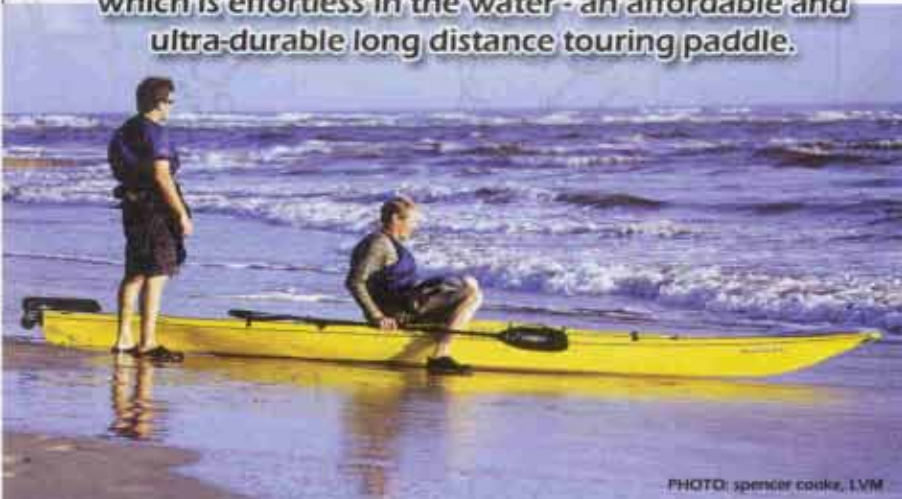


PHOTO: spencer cooke, LVM



Top photo: The shortcut to nowhere.
Above: The swan that got away.

wide, so there was no way to make a U-turn. I ended up in a pond in the middle of 15-foot reeds, and there was no exit. I stopped paddling to consider my options, when the spring hatch of mosquitoes descended on me.

After a few minutes of cursing and waving my arms, I was stunned to see a car passing by about 50 yards away like some kind of Flying Dutchman hovering over the reeds. I paddled to the side of the pond to find a spot to reach the road and ended up stuck in the mud with the rudder tangled in rotten reed. When I stepped out to free the kayak, I sank up to my hips in soft mud that reeked with the odor of rotten eggs.

Fed up and cured of taking any more shortcuts, I slogged to the road and got directions from the next car. Seeing me covered up to my hips with stinking

I scooted around the reed bed separating the bay from the open fjord, escaping the waves and screaming out with relief. I drove the kayak onto the beach at full speed.

mud, standing in the middle of this road running through a reed ocean, they can hardly have wanted to stop, but Sweden is full of nice people.

The following day, I had calmed down with another grilled pike dinner and paddled the most beautiful part of my 1,400-nm adventure. Near the open sea, the previous day's events, with its endless reed fields, stinking mud and billions of mosquitoes, had brought to mind recollections of an African swamp. The seascape had changed to an island world more like the Chinese Sea, where high basalt islands covered with hanging ferns guided my route. No wind, no waves, *no* mosquitoes, and streaking seagulls took off and circled over me, watching my endeavors with alert interest. I paddled the island's tight passages and crossed tiny bays dotted with red summer huts on white beaches. After paddling 21 miles, I

decided to finish the day near tiny Fyrudde, which was little more than a gas station for motorboats in the middle of the islands.

I woke in the morning with a clear head and a sense of excitement, as though something nice was going to happen. The crossing of Bräviken Fjord, a 6-mile-wide bay, was on the docket for the day, and would bring me to the large town of Öxelösund. The barometric pressure was dropping, but I paddled on. I couldn't believe that summer was ending. Winding through small islands filled with summer houses, I realized that Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, was close. I passed Arkösund—the Nice of Sweden—and stopped at a crowded island for my lunch break to wait for the breeze to settle down before crossing Bräviken Fjord. Well-bronzed Swedes were sunning themselves on the round, water-

worn granite boulders, and everybody I spoke with told me that the breeze wouldn't die today—a gale was on its way. I had to either stay or make the crossing now. The view through my binoculars was not very inviting; steep 100-meter cliffs with exposed, weather-worn faces fell directly into the sea. The waves, if they were going to be kicked up by the wind, would be crashing right into my target shore. The Force 5 wind was steady and hitting my aft starboard quarter, showing no signs of growing stronger. I decided to launch and head straight across to a tiny bay on the other side of the fjord.

It was a scorching day, but I dressed for a possible capsize. I launched the kayak, but as I emerged from the island's shade, reality caught up with me as I left the lee of the land. I immediately regretted my decision to launch. The wind smashed my little sail with a blast so forceful, I was afraid the mast would break. Water plowed over my outrigger and pounded my right shoulder as the waves crested at nearly six feet. I feared that a U-turn would likely cause a capsize, so I kept on, gliding and surfing through the mess of the fjord. I couldn't drop my sail, so I continued gaining speed while surfing the waves. To take down the sail, I'd have to let go of the paddle and that was the only thing keeping the outrigger from driving the kayak into the swell and broaching. While on top of the waves, the wind gunned the kayak forward until I dipped into the next valley where the bow submerged and the spinnaker dumped into the water, my chest taking the full force of the rest of the wave. With the drop in speed, the next wave jerked me up again; wind filled the sail and the ordeal repeated.

I careened across the fjord, unable to slow down. My courage dwindled, and goose pimples rose on my skin, but not entirely from the chilly water. Just as I was considering my chances of surviving a dip in that boiling mess, a breaker punched down on my stern, burying it and throwing the bow into the air. I was launched skyward like a rocket. I let the paddle go and put my hands on the spray skirt, then braced for the backward catapult. The next slammer brought the stern back up, and

although the kayak creaked, it swung upright and was set on course again. The paddle was dangling on its tether; I grabbed it and set my eyes on the tiny reed-filled bay. The swell barely let me steer the kayak toward my goal; otherwise, the boxcar-sized breakers would have rolled me over and thrown me underwater.

When I was in range of the bay, the barren granite wall towered over me; I had to crane my neck to look up at it. In the clapotis charging back into the bay, my kayak lurched about in the foaming whitewater, veering off course like a drunken hippo.

I scooted around the reed bed separating the bay from the open fjord, escaping the waves and screaming out with relief. Sunbathers stared at me in disbelief. I drove the kayak onto the beach at full speed.

That evening, I searched for the bottle I had filled with a wine concoction I'd made from a 17th-century Swedish recipe that was supposed to strengthen the liver and prevent circulatory trouble. I'd found the recipe in a book about edible plants and about a week

earlier had put chopped garden angelica in the wine as the recipe instructed. I had decided to use twice the recommended amount of herb, so that if I used the wine, I could drink half the recommended dose but still enjoy its full benefits. Stretching the formula's curative powers for circulatory trouble, I decided that I had had enough strain during the crossing to have a glass or two.

After a mouthful of rice with wild carrots, I tried my medicinal wine. The midsummer sun was still a few degrees over the horizon but hidden behind a clump of granite wall. The reddish rays brought out the soft colors in the rocks. I sat on my mattress in front of my tent on the beach, leaning on my kayak and enjoying my wine. A diffuse, gentle warmth ran through my body. Confident that I had done well with the application of this ancient medicine, the warmth I was feeling was soon replaced by a tickling sensation creeping through my body starting at my belly. A big silver moon was wheeling up from the horizon in front of me. After a few additional sips, the moon



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I tried to push their boat away and braced myself with one arm against the slippery mole wall and the other on the side of their boat. Something in my left arm snapped, and I shouted for help.



Top photo: Sunset at the new bridge over Oresund. Above: Hammarby lock, Stockholm, just before the other boat squeezed me against the lock wall.

became a fat orange suspended in the mauve sky, and I had the feeling of walking on air. "Good medicine, great stuff..." I thought before falling into sleep, still leaning against my kayak.

Beyond Repair

The stunts of my crossing to Bråviken were already forgotten when I passed the end of Södertälje fjord, a man-made channel with a lock that leads into freshwater Mälaren Lake. A paddling day away on the other side of that lock was Stockholm.

A slight breeze from the aft pushed me toward the Stockholm skyline as it emerged above the dark forested islands. Hundreds of ships were making their way in the same direction. Their goal was Stockholm, but the traffic through this lock, which leads from freshwater into the sea again, goes both directions in midsummer, as most Swedes would pass through it to reach the sea for their holidays.

Nearing the Hammarby lock in the middle of Stockholm, I waited for a while, watching to see if there were any special order for boats entering the lock. Boats of all kinds lined up then recklessly entered like sheep herded

into a pen. I was concerned about my safety amid this wild horde. A member of the lock personnel was approaching the edge of the pier. I asked him how I should enter this mess, and he replied, shrugging his shoulders: "Midsummer? Just sneak in!" So I entered the lock as the last boat.

As the gates started to close, a motorboat approached and tried to squeeze into a small space against the concrete side of the lock. Water was already pouring into the lock with intense force, and the boat's crew was having serious problems tying up. The boat began drifting in my direction and soon bumped into my kayak. The people on the boat were still hassling with the fittings and not aware of me or my kayak. The lock's currents were pressing their two-ton boat toward the wall and forcing my outrigger underwater. I tried to push their boat away and braced myself with one arm against the slippery mole wall and the other on the side of their boat. Something in my left arm snapped. I thought it may have been a tendon and I shouted for help.

The bleary-eyed captain of the motorboat glanced at me over the railing, and I realized that he was as drunk

as could be. My kayak, sandwiched between the concrete and the motorboat, started to make a high-pitched cracking noise. I thought it would be a pretty good idea to get out of there, so I opened my spray skirt and climbed onto another powerboat near me. The other boaters then became aware of my problem but I realized that everybody was simply working to distance their boats from others to avoid a collision. My complaints to the captain were ignored as he just stared at me, boozed nearly unconscious.

As the flow of current slowed and I heard the signal for the lock opening, I climbed back into my kayak. I had problems attaching my spray skirt with my injured arm, and when the captain laid on his throttle, he flooded my cockpit with water before disappearing down the channel into the huge harbor of Stockholm.

I had to get out of the channel before the next load of maniacs stampeded into the lock. I wasn't in any pain, but my arm had lost almost all its strength.