Into the Baltic States aboard an Albin Vega

1,400 Nautical Miles among Islands, History and the Present Day

Sail & Hike – a Summer Voyage
with Time for Places and People



In the Curonian Lagoon, at the Russian border

Text and photographs: Lars Evers

Baltic Voyage 2026 – The Route



Outbound route to Nida

Return to Loftahammar

Total distance: approximately 1,400 nautical miles

Over the past few years, my voyages aboard the Albin Vega have almost imperceptibly become a continuing exploration of the Baltic Sea. My aim was never simply to rack up as many nautical miles as possible. Quite the opposite: the farther I sailed, the more curious I became about the countries, landscapes and people beyond the harbour walls. The Vega was never an end in itself. She was the small, sturdy means of opening up this world.

In 2017, a voyage aboard the Vega Nordlicht took me along the Göta Canal, across Lake Vänern and through the Trollhätte Canal to Gothenburg. From there we returned to Germany via the Kattegat and the islands of southern Denmark. That journey left me with a lasting love of Sweden, and especially of its archipelagos.

There was not always much time for sailing in the years that followed. A thorough refit of my own Vega consumed considerable resources, turning more than one summer into a mixture of boatyard work and short trips among the skerries. The major work was finished in 2021, partly thanks to fellow Vega sailor Dieter Främbs, who came to visit me at my Swedish home port. In 2022 I was able to head farther north again, all the way to Stockholm. On islands such as Harstena and Ägnö, I increasingly realised that going ashore mattered at least as much to me as the passage itself. A quick stop could easily become a long hike. In time, that idea developed naturally into “Sail & Hike.”

In 2023, at a meeting of the Vega owners’ association, I met Niklas Dürchting, the new owner of my former boat, Nordlicht. We struck up a friendship as fellow Vega sailors. That very summer Niklas visited me in Loftahammar during his Swedish cruise, and for the first time we sailed our two Vegas together. A chance encounter with my old boat had turned into a friendship that would accompany many later voyages. In 2024 I took Hulda on a major Baltic circuit via Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallinn, Riga and Gotland. Much of it was new to me; other places left me wanting to return with more time to explore. Rather than bringing anything to a close, the voyage was an invitation to keep going.

Towards the end of 2024, I briefly entered an entirely different world of sailing. Aboard the 51-foot yacht Karibu, I travelled from Hamburg through the North Sea and English Channel, across the Bay of Biscay and along the Portuguese and Spanish Atlantic coasts—through waters particularly feared by sailors at the time because of encounters with orcas—all the way to the Canary Islands. In Las Palmas, Karibu was moored among the boats preparing for the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers. The ARC is not a conventional race where speed is everything, but an organised Atlantic crossing for cruising yachts. The route from Gran Canaria to Saint Lucia covers some 2,700 nautical miles. What stayed with me most was the sense of anticipation in Las Palmas: crews preparing for the crossing, some of them about to set off around the world. Excitement was everywhere.

More deliveries followed in 2025, aboard very different boats. On the cutter Anne I travelled via Heligoland and the mast-up route through the Dutch canals into the IJsselmeer; on the 47-foot Beneteau Skiathos I sailed from Loftahammar to Hamburg. A first non-stop leg of 386 nautical miles in just 52 hours, including the Kiel Canal, showed me how efficient sailing can be when a fixed schedule takes priority. Delivering the racing yacht JuxBox to the Gotland Runt was another part of that period. All of it was exciting—but for summer 2026 I deliberately wanted to return to a different kind of travel: aboard my own boat, without deadlines, with enough time to stay longer whenever a hike, a museum or simply a beautiful place tempted me to linger.

So the motto came easily: Sail & Hike. Sailing would connect the stages of the journey. Ashore I wanted to walk, explore towns, understand their history, meet people and, of course, discover the culinary side of the Baltic countries.

I had long felt a personal connection with the region. In the 2000s, my father had undertaken an extended walk along the Baltic coast as far as St Petersburg. He documented his travels in detail and later wrote a book about the people he had met along the way. I already knew many of the landscapes and places I hoped to reach by sea from his stories. The prospect of seeing that same region from a completely different perspective appealed to me.

That was how the plan for a two-month summer voyage into the Baltic countries took shape. By the end, the logbook showed roughly 1,400 nautical miles. Just as important, though, were all the miles covered on foot—and everything that happened between one harbour entrance and the next.

A Swedish beginning – Midsummer and the route to Stockholm

As every year, we reached my home port of Loftahammar in good time for Swedish Midsummer and set about preparing the Vega for her summer voyage. Rigging and launching have become routine by now; experience suggests that a few liquid gifts for the harbour staff also help things along.

Before casting off on the big voyage, there was a highlight that has become an essential part of my Swedish summers: Midsommar. It is far more than a picturesque tourist tradition of flower crowns and dancing. The celebration has evolved over centuries, blending older solstice customs with Christian and Swedish folk traditions. But the history matters less than the feeling: summer is at its height, daylight seems almost endless, and life moves outdoors.

We were lucky enough to be invited by a Swedish family to their private island in the archipelago. Friends and relatives arrived by boat; together we decorated the Midsommarstång, the maypole-like midsummer pole, with flowers and birch branches before the dancing and singing began. There were new potatoes, herring, sour cream, strawberries and, naturally, a glass or two of schnapps. The family gathering stretched into a long, bright summer night filled with music and conversation. With boats lying off the island, the sun dipping below the horizon only briefly and the light lingering over the water, it is easy to understand why Midsummer means so much in Sweden.

For me, it was exactly the right beginning to a voyage that was meant to be about more than sailing. We set off on 20 June—not straight for the Baltic countries, however, but first north through familiar Swedish waters.



Hulda in the Swedish archipelago – moored to the rocks and surrounded by the landscape.



Lunch by the water – the pleasures of a voyage are not measured in nautical miles alone.



At every new anchorage, the first order of business is fishing.

Our first stops took us to Harstena, Nyköping, Trosa and Södertälje. To me, Harstena captures the very essence of the archipelago: smooth bare rocks, old trees, little bays and a picturesque fishing village. In Nyköping and Trosa, meanwhile, there naturally had to be time for my beloved dagens lunch, the Swedish daily lunch special. Dagens lunch and fika, the ritual coffee break, are much more than ways of satisfying hunger or a caffeine craving. They are part of the Swedish way of life and, for me, as essential to a summer cruise as anchoring and sailing.

At Södertälje we left the Baltic Sea and entered Lake Mälaren. Sweden's third-largest lake stretches far inland through a maze of bays and islands, forming a cruising ground in its own right. Our next destination was Birka, one of Scandinavia's most important trading centres between the eighth and tenth centuries. Merchants from around the Baltic gathered here; today, excavations, a museum and reconstructed buildings recall its Viking past.

We spent a long evening around a campfire with a historical re-enactment group in the Viking village. Among old-style tents, firelight and stories, past and present mingled in a way that would recur throughout the voyage. We had no idea then that, a few weeks later, we would meet some of those very "Vikings" again—not on Birka, but in Visby.

Stockholm from the water

From Lake Mälaren we carried on to Drottningholm. The royal palace stands on Lovön, west of Stockholm, and has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1991. For a sailor it has a special appeal: rather than approaching a conventional city attraction, you arrive by water, anchor in front of the palace and suddenly find a royal backdrop just beyond your own small boat.

I was able to anchor the Vega directly in front of Drottningholm and cover the final distance on my stand-up paddleboard. Approaching from the water changes your view of the palace completely. Its extensive gardens, palace theatre and Chinese Pavilion form an ensemble that reveals centuries of courtly culture. After the visit, I was particularly drawn to the great park. Among old trees, avenues, lawns and waterways, the bustle of the nearby capital fades remarkably quickly.

That evening I sat aboard the Vega again, a glass of wine in hand, as the sun set behind Drottningholm. Moments like these explain why a small yacht can sometimes offer more than the grandest itinerary: you are not merely staying somewhere nearby; you are living on your own boat right in front of the place itself.

A different kind of dinghy

The SUP I used to reach the palace has become a permanent part of my travelling kit. It serves as tender, sports equipment and exploration craft all in one. For longer distances, I can attach an electric drive of my own design to the fin. Powerful model-making motors propel the board at around ten kilometres an hour, and depending on how I use it, the batteries last for up to ten hours of motoring. Suddenly, routes that would be too far for an ordinary paddleboard are within reach.



The SUP is tender, exercise equipment and exploration craft in one – ideal for narrow channels and skerry passages.



Paddling among classic wooden boats – a different pace, but the same pleasure of discovering places from the water.

Cities threaded with waterways are particularly rewarding to explore this way. In Trosa I travelled along the little river right through town; in Nyköping I was able to venture quite a distance inland. Later, the SUP would prove an ideal way of getting around Riga too.

The sporting side matters just as much to me. After long hours aboard, some exercise feels wonderful. Without the motor, the SUP becomes a training machine for a circuit around the nearest skerry. I also keep a suspension trainer attached to the mast. In sheltered archipelago waters and calm conditions, I can even use it during longer passages, provided I keep checking my course and surroundings. Space aboard a small yacht is precious, which is why I like equipment that serves several purposes. On longer open-sea crossings, the rolled-up SUP disappears into the cockpit locker; at anchor, it is quickly ready for use again.

That sums up my idea of Sail & Hike: the boat is a starting point, not the final destination. It takes me somewhere, and from there I explore farther on foot, on the SUP or by other means.

Sailing the Vega right through Stockholm

Stockholm is lovely to visit on land. Sailing through it aboard your own Vega is something else entirely. With a gentle following breeze, we made our way in from Lake Mälaren through the inner waterways. The city slid past on either side until a lock brought us back into the Baltic Sea.

Our route then took us through the eastern part of the city centre, past the Royal Palace and along Gamla Stan, the old town. Seen from the water, the city takes on a different shape. Waterfronts become façades and bridges become gateways; suddenly it becomes much clearer that Stockholm is, at heart, a maritime city.



Drottningholm from the Vega: anchored before the palace, with the SUP taking me the last few metres ashore.



Stockholm from the water: our little Vega right in front of the Nationalmuseum.

I still make a point of visiting the Nationalmuseum whenever I am in Stockholm. Its imposing nineteenth-century building, with Renaissance and Venetian influences, is impressive even from the water. But I have a particular favourite inside: the marble sculptures of the Norse gods in the foyer. Standing among Odin, Thor and other figures from Nordic mythology while my own Vega waits outside for her next leg across the Baltic somehow feels exactly right on a voyage like this.

From Stockholm we headed back out into the skerries. Just a few nautical miles beyond the city centre, streets and houses give way to rocks, pines, islands and narrow channels.



Norse history at the Nationalmuseum – now an essential stop on every visit I make to Stockholm.

Vaxholm – taking the Vega into the fortress harbour

Vaxholm is known as the gateway to the Stockholm archipelago. Just off the town stands a fortress whose origins date back to the sixteenth century and which was expanded repeatedly over the centuries. Its purpose was clear: anyone approaching Stockholm from the sea had to pass this strategic point. Today the fortress is above all a monument to Sweden’s military and seafaring history. It is also a place where the Vega shows one of her most endearing strengths. Her shallow draft and modest dimensions let her reach places that are awkward for larger yachts.

I could sail right into the tiny fortress harbour. Most visitors arrive by ferry and leave again a few hours later, but for the Vega the fortress almost becomes a private harbour. Outside visiting hours, the island falls quiet: old walls, water and your own boat. I have even spent the night there before. When the last excursion boats disappear in the evening and stillness settles over the island, this historic place belongs almost entirely to the few boats lying in its harbour.



Waxholmen Fortress from the air – our own exclusive berth in the fortress harbour.

These are precisely the moments that make the Vega so appealing to me. You do not simply visit a place; you can sail your little boat right into the middle of it.

Sandhamn – racing, the KSSS and another side of the Vega

The atmosphere changed abruptly in Sandhamn. We had arranged to meet the German racing yacht JuxBox, an X-46 that had competed in the 2026 Gotland Runt. Marion, who later joined me as crew, had sailed in the race herself and had also helped deliver the yacht to Sweden.

The Gotland Runt is one of the Baltic's great offshore classics. The first official race around Gotland was held in 1937. Today its main course covers some 350 nautical miles, starting near Sandhamn, heading out through the outer archipelago and across the open Baltic, around Gotland and back. During race week, Sandhamn is transformed. An already lively summer resort becomes a stage for the sailing world: crews, sponsors, racing boats, spectators and endless discussions of weather, tactics and equipment.

At the heart of it all is the Kungliga Svenska Segel Sällskapet, or KSSS, the Royal Swedish Yacht Club. Founded in 1830, it is now Sweden's largest sailing club, with around 6,000 members. Its Sandhamn premises are special because nearly two centuries of Swedish sailing tradition meet modern offshore racing right here. Once the race is over, the whole place turns into a party. JuxBox had finished successfully, and we were able to enjoy the atmosphere around the clubhouse at close quarters.



Meeting the racing yacht JuxBox in the Swedish archipelago.

For a Vega sailor, however, the Gotland Runt has another significance. Looking at today's large, technically sophisticated racers, it is easy to forget that the Albin Vega was once an important racing class in Sweden. In the early 1970s, more than forty Vegas sometimes entered the Baltic Race, the shorter Gotland Runt course; the Lidingö Runt attracted over fifty. The Swedish Vega fleet became something of a training ground for cruising and offshore sailors.

That seems fitting for a boat that is often underestimated. The Vega is primarily a small cruising yacht, but her slender lines, long keel and solid construction have repeatedly proved that she has much more to offer.

As a very young man, Jarle Andhøy sailed his 27-foot Berserk around Cape Horn to the Antarctic Peninsula. His voyage later became the subject of a film and book. To me, Matt Rutherford's achievement is even more remarkable: in 2011–12 he sailed the Albin Vega St Brendan single-handed and non-stop around North and South America. Over 310 days and more than 43,000 kilometres, the route took him through the Northwest Passage, across the Pacific, around Cape Horn and back to Annapolis. Guinness World Records lists him as the first person to complete this circuit of the Americas solo and non-stop. At the time, St Brendan was also the smallest boat ever to have navigated the Northwest Passage.

Of course, such extreme voyages do not prove that every Vega is indestructible. No boat is. But they do demonstrate the reserves built into a design originally conceived for the Baltic Sea—and help explain why so many of us have such faith in this little yacht.

From Sandhamn, the Baltic leg of our voyage truly began. Beyond the sheltered skerries, the open sea lay ahead.

Ninety nautical miles to Estonia – and finally some Sail & Hike

With a strong south-westerly behind us, we crossed the Baltic towards Hiiumaa. About ninety nautical miles separated Sandhamn from the Estonian island. After roughly twenty hours we reached Kalana on its western tip. This is no extraordinary passage for a Vega, but it still marked a transition: Sweden was astern, and ahead lay a region still surprisingly little visited by many German sailors.

Kalana's harbour was superbly equipped, and naturally there was a sauna for the evening. This was where the Sail & Hike part of the journey really began. We stayed three days—not because the weather trapped us, but because we wanted time to discover the island.

At first glance, Hiiumaa looks like a classic Baltic nature paradise: forests, dunes, long beaches, little villages and hardly any traffic. Beneath that peaceful surface, however, lies a turbulent history. During the Soviet era, the western Estonian islands formed part of a strategically important border zone. Stretches of coast were used by the military, and observation posts and bunkers were built. Some of these relics now stand deep in the woods, waiting to be discovered on a hike.

This layering of history is precisely what makes the islands so fascinating to me. You walk through seemingly untouched countryside and suddenly come across a concrete structure that reminds you that, only a few decades ago, this coast was part of the heavily guarded outer frontier of the Soviet Union.



In Scandinavia, a sauna always calls for a beer.



A Soviet relic on the Estonian coast: a former observation tower on Hiiumaa.

Time and again we followed sections of the Baltic Coastal Hiking Trail. Part of European long-distance route E9, it runs for 1,419 kilometres from the Lithuanian–Russian border near Nida to Tallinn: 216 kilometres in Lithuania, 581 in Latvia and 622 in Estonia. The route does not always hug the shoreline. Reed beds, river mouths, lagoons and other features frequently take it inland, giving walkers a richer impression of the coast than a simple beach walk could.



Sail & Hike along the Baltic coast: the Vega links the harbours, while walking opens up the country between them.

For a sailing trip, it is ideal. The Vega carries you from harbour to harbour, and ashore you can explore individual stretches on foot. Sea and land often tell two very different stories about the same place.

On 6 July we moved on to Orjaku, also on Hiiumaa. Again we found a clean, well-equipped harbour—and another sauna. Two days later we sailed to Kõiguste on Saaremaa. One memorable evening was spent in the sauna with the crew of a Finnish yacht. Encounters like these are among the things I enjoy most about cruising: very different boats share a tiny harbour, their crews meet in the sauna or on the jetty, and within minutes everyone is talking.

We reached Kuressaare, formerly Arensburg, on 9 July. A mighty bishop's castle towers above the town, one of the most impressive surviving medieval fortifications in the Baltic region. It recalls how closely the islands were tied into the Baltic's networks of trade and power even in the Middle Ages. Today Kuressaare is a pleasant spa and holiday town, with wooden houses, villas, restaurants and plenty of wellness hotels.

One rainy day was therefore very sensibly spent at a hotel spa. After several days of hiking, it was an exceptionally pleasant way to wait out the bad weather. This, too, is part of travelling without a rigid plan: there is no need to battle through wind and rain every single day. Sometimes the best seamanship is simply to head for the spa.

Throughout Estonia we were struck by the standard of many harbours and public facilities. Bathrooms were often excellent, marinas clean and modern, and many coastal towns had freely accessible sports facilities. The food, too, bore little resemblance to the old cliché of Baltic cuisine as nothing but heavy, hearty fare. Good food is an essential part of a successful voyage for me, and in Kuressaare we had several opportunities to put that theory to the test.

From Saaremaa we headed towards Riga. Not directly, of course. First there was another island to visit—one that had made a lasting impression on me when I first came in 2024: Ruhnu.

Ruhnu – a time capsule in the Gulf of Riga

Ruhnu covers less than twelve square kilometres and lies in the middle of the Gulf of Riga, much closer to Latvia than to mainland Estonia. Around sixty people live there year-round. Summer brings more visitors, but the island never feels particularly busy. Having visited in 2024, I was curious to see how it would feel the second time around.

Ruhnu is difficult to describe in a single word. "Beautiful" does not begin to do it justice. The island feels remote, almost suspended in time. Much of that has to do with its history. For centuries it was inhabited mainly by Swedish-speaking coastal people. In 1944 most fled to Sweden, leaving their homeland behind. An island culture built up over generations vanished in a remarkably short time. Under Soviet rule, Ruhnu was also part of a tightly controlled border zone. As a result, many things changed less here than elsewhere, and the island really did become a kind of time capsule.

Its small museum tells this story without grand displays. Tools, household objects, photographs and documents offer glimpses into the former inhabitants' everyday lives. Some exhibits reach astonishingly far back in time: tools used by seal hunters thousands of years ago, a seventeenth-century weather vane and a seal-hunting gun made by islanders themselves. The mix of ordinary objects and ancient finds makes clear how long people have lived on this little patch of the Baltic.

Especially impressive is Korsi Farm, an almost completely preserved traditional farmstead. Its great longhouse is about 43 metres long and eight metres wide; tree-ring dating places the northern section in 1686. Barns, granaries, stables, cellars and other outbuildings preserve not just an old house but an entire way of life. What makes the farm so striking is its completeness: living, working and storing provisions can still be understood as parts of one whole.

Then there is the little Church of St Mary Magdalene. Construction began in 1643, and it is regarded as Estonia's oldest surviving wooden building. After the Swedish-speaking islanders fled in 1944, the church lost the community that had given it meaning for centuries. It was not reconsecrated until 1999. Standing inside today, knowing that the people who worshipped there for generations were almost all forced to leave their home, makes Ruhnu's history feel suddenly very personal.



Ruhnu's historic wooden church – a quiet witness to the island's extraordinary past.

The bear of Ruhnu

Fortunately, the island has stories that are rather less sombre. One sounds almost made up. In 2006 a brown bear suddenly appeared on Ruhnu, apparently having crossed the ice from the Latvian coast. A fully grown brown bear was not exactly an easy summer guest for such a small island community. A major search began; the animal repeatedly vanished into the woods and kept officials and the media busy for weeks.

Eventually the bear was caught and taken back to the mainland. That might have been the end of the story. But it was not. The island was then presented with an enormous chocolate bear as a memento. It was considerably easier to look after than the real one—and eventually disappeared too. Not into the forest this time, but into the stomachs of the islanders. Stories like this suit Ruhnu. They do nothing to diminish its historical depth, but they ensure that it never turns into an open-air museum weighed down by too much reverence.

And then, beside the Vega, Karibu again

There was another surprise waiting in the harbour. Moored right next to little Hulda was SY Karibu, the 51-foot yacht that had been my home for roughly six weeks at the end of 2024. Suddenly two very different chapters of my recent sailing life were lying side by side: a large ocean cruiser that had carried me to the Canary Islands, and the 27-foot Vega in which we were exploring the Baltic countries.



Reunited on Ruhnu: the 51-foot Karibu beside little Hulda – two very different boats, the same horizon.

Ruhnu did not need to tell me the whole Atlantic story again. One glance at the boats was enough. Both could travel far and open up new horizons, but in completely different ways. Perhaps that is another reason I love the Vega. After weeks aboard a large yacht, you realise all the more clearly how little boat you actually need to go travelling.

Riga – under spinnaker and on a motorised SUP

From Ruhnu we intended to sail to Riga, but the wind had other ideas. Southerlies initially made the direct course unattractive, so we diverted to Skulte. As so often on this trip, the unplanned stop proved a stroke of luck. We found lovely hiking routes along the coast and river, and another pattern of the summer emerged: a harbour you never intended to visit can turn out to be more interesting than your original destination.

When the wind finally shifted, we continued. For the final six nautical miles we sailed up the Daugava into the centre of Riga—and actually managed the river passage under spinnaker. On 15 July the Vega was moored in the heart of Latvia's capital. This time, we intended to give the city plenty of time.



The final miles into Riga under spinnaker – sailing up the Daugava and into the city.



A Viking ship moored alongside us in Riga harbour.

Riga is the largest city in the Baltic states and has been a trading centre between East and West for centuries. An important Hanseatic city in the Middle Ages, it grew into a major industrial centre of the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century. Those layers remain visible today: the medieval old town, monumental stone buildings, timber architecture, Art Nouveau façades and harbour installations. From the river, it becomes immediately clear why Riga grew here. The Daugava connected the hinterland with the Baltic and with trading networks extending far beyond the region.

Riga has become one of those cities I look forward to long before arriving. Architecture is only part of the reason. I had fallen for its food in 2024, and 2026 was no different.

Market halls instead of tinned food

The Riga Central Market is always on my itinerary. Its five enormous halls were built using parts of former Zeppelin hangars and converted into market buildings in the 1920s. Today the indoor and outdoor market is one of Europe's largest food markets, covering more than 100,000 square metres; it forms part of Riga's UNESCO-listed historic centre. Meat, fish, cheese, vegetables, baked goods, spices and countless local specialities fill the stalls. For us it was less a cultural excursion than a culinary expedition: taste something here, buy something there, move on and find another surprise.

That contrast is one of the things I love about travelling on a small boat. After a few days of simple living aboard, you suddenly find yourself in the middle of a major city, eating your way through a market that seems to sell absolutely everything. Local produce, smoked fish, rye bread, berries, mushrooms, dairy products and contemporary Baltic cooking make it obvious how unfair the old culinary stereotypes are.

Naturally, I wanted to discover Riga from the water again too. On the motorised SUP I made a long circuit along the old town. Once you are on the river, cars and traffic seem to disappear, and the city rearranges itself before your eyes. Bridges, embankments and the old town's skyline become the defining view. That is exactly why I love the SUP: it extends the Vega's range of exploration far beyond the harbour.

Excellent harbours, without the crowds

The farther we travelled through the Baltic countries, the more the infrastructure impressed me. Estonia in particular offered a close-knit chain of modern, clean marinas with good facilities, frequently a sauna, and often small touches missing from far more expensive cruising grounds. In many places we also found free outdoor exercise equipment right by the beach or promenade—almost suspiciously well suited to my Sail & Hike philosophy.



Riga from the water – harbour, bridges and the old town beyond the masts.

At the same time, even in high summer, many places were remarkably peaceful. The Baltic countries are hardly an undiscovered tourist destination, but the marinas rarely felt full. Sailors accustomed to German, Danish or Swedish summer harbours, where berths can be scarce by mid-afternoon, will often find Estonia and Latvia much more relaxed.

The proximity to Russia inevitably influences how the region is perceived today. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are members of the EU and NATO, while the war in Ukraine affects security throughout the Baltic Sea. For travellers, the main thing is to take current advice and restricted areas seriously. Our day-to-day experience, by contrast, could hardly have been simpler: people welcomed us, we could travel freely and English worked virtually everywhere.

That was part of the appeal for me. The region is exceptionally well served without feeling like a crowded holiday resort at every turn. For cruising sailors who enjoy going ashore, hiking, eating well and still finding peaceful harbours, the Baltic countries are a fascinating sailing ground.

From Latvia to Lithuania – letting the wind draw the route

Our next major destination was Klaipėda. First, however, simply getting out of the Gulf of Riga proved harder than expected. Northerly and north-easterly winds forced us to abandon one attempt and put in at Roja. Entering such a small harbour in waves of a good two metres certainly demanded our full attention.

Roja, too, confirmed the rule of this voyage: an unplanned harbour can be a very good idea. We found beautiful paths along the coast and riverbank, and a stop forced on us by the weather became another proper day of travelling. To me, that is the difference between delivering a boat and cruising for pleasure. If your mind is fixed only on the next destination, you resent the wind. If you have time, the wind gives you somewhere new.

Eventually the weather window opened, although time was becoming a little tighter. We had around 180 nautical miles to Klaipėda ahead of us. We cast off for the long passage. Despite the distance, much of it was pleasant. The Vega moved steadily through the Baltic; the hours settled into the ordinary rhythm of life aboard, and at some point 180 nautical miles no longer felt like an exceptional distance, merely another day at sea.

Klaipėda – arriving in the middle of the Sea Festival

On Friday 24 July, after just over 42 hours at sea, we reached Klaipėda. The Lithuanian coastguard gave us a thorough inspection as we entered—one officer even crawled into the Vega's cockpit lockers. After a conversation about our travels, though, we were officially and warmly welcomed, and almost immediately found ourselves in the middle of a major celebration.

We had arrived just in time for the 67th Jūros šventė, Klaipėda's great Sea Festival. In 2026 it took place from 24 to 26 July under the theme "Kaip kine"—"Like in the Movies." For three days, harbour and city centre became a maritime festival of music, markets, parades, traditional and historic vessels, and all kinds of seafaring events. Tying up after a 180-mile passage and walking straight into this lively scene was quite a contrast with the night at sea.



Jūros šventė in Klaipėda – a maritime festival of traditional vessels, harbour life and city celebrations.

Klaipėda is also a place where the Baltic region's complicated history is especially visible. Its German name, Memel, is still familiar to many Germans from their national anthem. The town and surrounding Memelland belonged for long periods to Prussia and later the German Empire. Memel even served briefly as the capital of Prussia. After the First World War, the territory was detached and initially placed under international administration; Lithuania took control in 1923. The area was reincorporated into Germany in 1939 and became part of a Soviet republic in 1945.

To understand the Baltic states' present fears of Russian occupation, it is worth looking back. The past century brought terrible experiences to people in this region. Fighting continued bitterly in the Baltic long after the official end of the First World War, with the involvement of the so-called Freikorps, German volunteer military units. Writers such as Ernst von Salomon left extensive accounts of those events.

I found this passage between eras particularly compelling. You sail into a modern Lithuanian port city, yet all around are names and traces of a completely different political and cultural Baltic world. Here, history is not abstract; it is right there beside the quay.

The Curonian Spit – between sea, lagoon and border

We left Klaipėda on 28 July. Only about 26 nautical miles separated us from Nida, but we faced the strongest wind of the entire voyage. The Curonian Spit shielded the lagoon from most of the waves, so even under storm jib we made surprisingly fast and relatively comfortable progress.

The Curonian Spit is one of the Baltic's most extraordinary landscapes: a ribbon of sand roughly 98 kilometres long and in places only a few hundred metres wide, separating the Baltic Sea from the Curonian Lagoon. About half belongs to Lithuania; the southern part lies in Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast, formerly Königsberg. Since 2000, the spit has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site as a transboundary cultural landscape.



Strong wind on the Curonian Lagoon – dunes in sight and plenty of pressure in the sails.

At first it hardly looks like a cultural landscape. The dunes, pinewoods and endless beaches appear entirely natural. In fact, the scenery we see today has been profoundly shaped by people. Extensive logging in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries set the dunes in motion, threatening or burying entire settlements. From the nineteenth century onward, local people tried to stabilise the sands through planting and dune reinforcement. The apparently wild spit is also the result of generations of care.

For us, it was wonderful walking country. From the boat you see little more than a thin line between lagoon and sea. On foot, its scale becomes apparent: long forest trails, steep sandy slopes, dune ridges and constant changes of view between two very different expanses of water.



The dunes of the Curonian Spit – a great sweep of sand between lagoon and Baltic Sea.

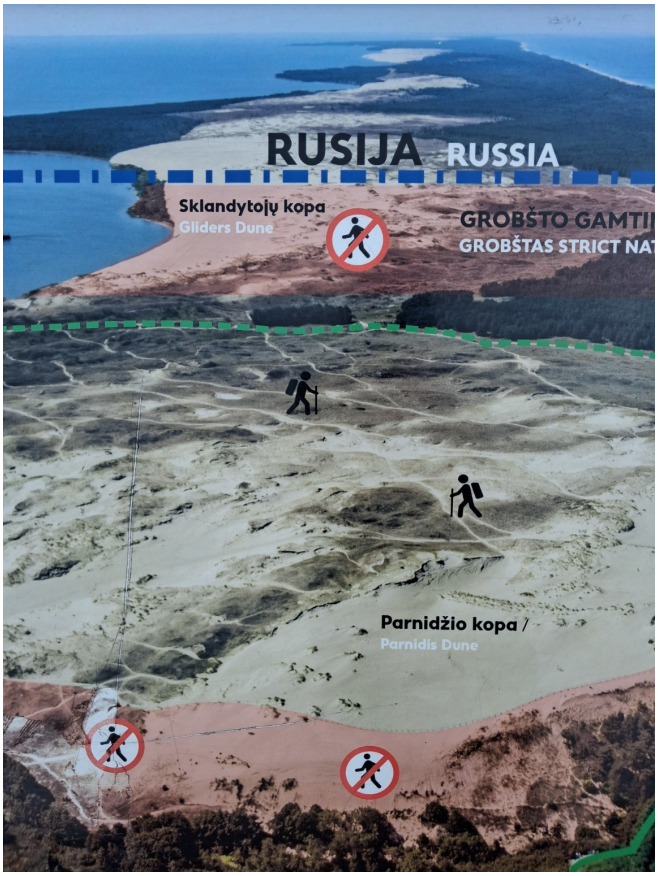
Nida – the southernmost point of the voyage

At Nida we reached the southernmost point of our trip. Only a few kilometres farther on, the border with Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast cuts straight across the spit. The contrast is peculiar. Nida is a well-kept Lithuanian holiday village full of restaurants, yachts and hikers, yet one of Europe's most politically and militarily sensitive regions is almost within sight.

One hike took us close to the border. I also wanted to see the landscape from the water, so I set off south on the SUP. The excursion ended with a brief encounter with a Russian coastguard patrol. The message was friendly but unmistakable: turn back towards Nida. That settled the trip, and gave me a very clear idea of how far my urge to explore could take me that day.

One night at anchor off the great dune remains especially vivid. By evening everything was completely still. The sun disappeared behind the land; in the morning, light returned across the lagoon. In moments like that, travelling is reduced to very little: a small boat, sand, forest and water. Yet you also know that for centuries Germans, Lithuanians, Curonians and later Soviet citizens have inhabited and shaped this landscape. Today an external EU and NATO border runs straight through it.

On the way back we stopped at Juodkrantė, formerly Schwarzort. There is a long jetty where, in the right wind, mooring is sheltered and wonderfully straightforward. Naturally we went for another hike. Our destination was the Hill of Witches, a sculpture park filled with figures from Lithuanian mythology and folklore. Among the trees, witches, devils and legendary creatures appear without warning. After days of political borders, wartime history and modern navigation, this very distinctive strand of Baltic mythology was a welcome change.



Just south of Nida lies the Russian border – geography becomes very real on the Curonian Spit.



The Hill of Witches near Schwarzort – Baltic folklore and sculpture among the pines.

History beneath and beyond the keel

The farther south we sailed, the more I realised how closely a modern summer cruise across the Baltic is connected to the history of these same waters. For us, passages of ninety or 180 nautical miles are sporting challenges but perfectly normal stages. For people fleeing Estonia, East Prussia and other parts of the eastern Baltic in 1944 and 1945, similar distances were matters of life and death.

In late summer and autumn 1944, tens of thousands of people escaped from Estonia across the Baltic, many in small fishing boats and sailing craft bound for Sweden or Finland. Ruhnu is a particularly striking example, as much of its Swedish-speaking population left their homeland at that time. What is now a short open-water passage for us became a life-threatening escape for families crammed into small boats in autumn weather.

Sitting in the cockpit at night, you see things differently when you know that history. Hiiumaa is no longer simply a hiking destination, Ruhnu not just an eccentric little island, and the Baltic Sea not merely a beautiful cruising ground. The same landscape meant something entirely different to earlier generations.

The Wilhelm Gustloff

At the Lithuanian Sea Museum on Smiltynė, visitors encounter one of the darkest chapters in Baltic maritime history: the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff on 30 January 1945. The former Nazi-era “Strength Through Joy” cruise ship was being used to evacuate people from the east during the final phase of the war. More than 10,000 people were aboard on her last voyage from Gotenhafen, now Gdynia, predominantly women and children.

The Soviet submarine S-13 torpedoed her in the Baltic. Three torpedoes struck, and Wilhelm Gustloff sank within a short time. The exact number of victims remains uncertain, but estimates generally exceed 9,000. It was therefore one of the deadliest maritime disasters in history. For comparison, about 1,500 people died when Titanic sank.

The event has been remembered very differently in different countries. In Germany, the civilian tragedy is usually central. In the Soviet Union, S-13’s commander Alexander Marinesko was celebrated as a highly successful submarine captain and later awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union. The contrast shows how differently the same event can appear in national cultures of remembrance.

For me, the Wilhelm Gustloff was therefore not simply another historical fact encountered in a museum. Sailing along the coast of former East Prussia changes the sense of distance. Places familiar from history books suddenly lie along your own course.

Navigating in the shadow of Königsberg

On the Curonian Spit, past and present also met in very practical ways. Our GPS was unreliable at times. The Vega was not at fault. Major disruption of satellite-based navigation has been documented across the Baltic region for several years. Lithuanian security and regulatory authorities attribute much of the interference to electronic warfare emanating from the Kaliningrad area; measurements in the south-eastern Baltic have located powerful sources there. Russia has repeatedly rejected the corresponding Western accusations.

Two effects matter to sailors: jamming overwhelms satellite signals, while spoofing creates false position data. The latter is particularly awkward because the equipment may not simply fail; it can continue displaying a perfectly plausible but incorrect position.

For us, the situation remained manageable. The channel through the Curonian Lagoon is well marked with buoys. Charts, compass, visual navigation and a little traditional seamanship still work when the chartplotter suddenly starts talking nonsense.

The shadow fleet – between headline and genuine risk

Another subject that kept cropping up during the voyage was the so-called Russian shadow fleet. The term refers to ships used, among other things, to carry Russian oil and allegedly evade sanctions or price caps. The EU has imposed measures on hundreds of such vessels. Many are older tankers sailing under third-country flags, with complicated ownership structures and sometimes opaque insurance and operating arrangements.

For someone in a small sailing boat, the political classification is initially of secondary importance. What matters is that enormous ships operate in the Baltic and that AIS should never be trusted as the sole source of information. Shortly before Klaipėda, we had a strange experience at night that

stayed with us. For quite some time we could see the navigation lights of a larger vessel. As we drew closer, the lights went out. We still do not know why—and precisely for that reason, the incident proves nothing about any theory. It was simply a useful reminder to keep a proper lookout and not mistake the targets on a screen for the whole of reality.

Other sailors told us stories of alleged incidents involving Russian naval units, demands for money or deliberately provoked border violations. Nobody could provide solid evidence. The waters around Kaliningrad are militarily sensitive, with exercises and restricted areas, and the current situation calls for vigilance. There is no need to make more of it than that. Keep your distance, respect exclusion zones, consult up-to-date charts and warnings, and never place blind faith in GPS or AIS.

The Baltic Sea as an underwater archive

There is yet another layer of history beneath our keel. Since Viking times, the Baltic has been a great artery of transport and trade. Later, Hanseatic routes linked Lübeck, Visby, Riga, Tallinn, Danzig and many other cities. Furs, wax, timber, grain, salt and herring travelled across the same waters we now navigate with GPS, weather apps and autopilots.

Many of those ships never reached their destinations. Thousands of known wrecks from almost every era of seafaring lie on the Baltic seabed. The cold, brackish water can preserve wooden vessels exceptionally well. As a result, the seafloor is a vast historical archive whose full contents are still unknown.

Not everything in that archive is of archaeological interest. Wrecks from the world wars may still contain fuel and pollutants. There are also mines and dumped ammunition. Official estimates suggest that enormous quantities of old ordnance remain in German North Sea and Baltic waters alone. The likelihood of a cruising yacht coming directly into contact with any of it is low, but exclusion zones, warnings and chart notes should be taken seriously—especially when anchoring.

I have already experienced how troublesome even a relatively harmless historical find can be. When your anchor catches on a wreck and, after a long struggle, finally brings up pieces of an old ship, the phrase “underwater archive” takes on an unexpectedly practical meaning.

It is precisely this mixture that fascinates me about the Baltic. Ashore, there are medieval walls, Hanseatic towns and old churches. Beneath the boat are ancient trading routes, wrecks and traces of twentieth-century wars. You see none of it while sailing, yet you know the stories continue beneath your keel.

Perhaps that is one of cruising’s greatest pleasures: you travel not just through geography, but through time.

One Baltic world, countless stories

After several weeks, the connections between our different stops became increasingly clear. Visby, Riga and Klaipėda were not isolated cities; for centuries they belonged to shared trading networks. German merchants shaped many Baltic towns, Swedish-speaking coastal communities lived on islands such as Ruhnu and in western Estonia, and later extensive areas became part of the Russian Empire. New national borders emerged after the First World War, only to be shifted again by the Second. Occupation, flight and expulsion were followed by decades of Soviet rule in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

All three countries now belong to the European Union and NATO. That is a fundamentally different political order from just a few decades ago, but the older layers have not vanished. They survive in place names, castles and churches, in family stories and museums—and sometimes in an old German building down by the harbour.

That is why I never experienced the Baltic countries as some “foreign East,” but as an unmistakably European region whose history is closely entwined with Sweden and Germany. On a chart, the distances between harbours may be only a few dozen or a hundred nautical miles. On land, several centuries of history can separate one place from the next.

On to Gotland – returning to Visby

After our stay on the Curonian Spit, we waited at the Smiltynė Yacht Club marina for suitable winds to cross to Gotland. Smiltynė was a good place to wait. The Lithuanian Sea Museum occupies a former Prussian fortress and brings together maritime exhibits, natural history and military history—a combination that could hardly be more appropriate for this coast. Even beyond the museum, buildings and old place names recall Memelland’s German past. The former Kurhaus at Sandkrug is just one of the structures that preserve something of the era when this stretch of coast belonged to the resort culture of East Prussia.

Finally, the wind was right. Ahead lay roughly 140 nautical miles of open Baltic to Gotland’s southern tip. The crossing took 29 hours. We put into Burgsvik for a rest, then continued the next morning: following wind, spinnaker, and another 46 nautical miles to Visby. Twelve hours later the medieval city came into view. We tied up on 4 August—just in time for Medieval Week.

Visby – the city I keep coming back to

Visby has long been more than a holiday destination for me. By now I have visited almost every year, especially during Medeltidsveckan, Medieval Week. Eventually, repeated visits change how you see a city. You know the narrow streets, certain restaurants and your way around inside the walls. You know where the mornings are still quiet and where music starts in the evenings. Yet every time there is something new to discover.

Perhaps that is exactly why Visby suits a recurring Baltic voyage so well. It feels familiar without ever becoming dull.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995, Visby has an exceptionally well-preserved town wall 3.4 kilometres long. More than 200 medieval merchants’ houses and warehouses testify to its former importance as one of northern Europe’s leading trading centres. Gotland’s position in the middle of the Baltic made it a natural crossroads between Scandinavia, the Baltic countries, Russia and mainland Europe.

For sailors, there is another dimension: Visby is a city you approach from the sea. After many hours afloat, Gotland first appears on the horizon, then the outlines of the walls and towers. You have covered nearly 200 nautical miles from Klaipėda, tied up, walked through a city gate—and within minutes stepped into a world that feels centuries removed from the harbour.

A city of ruined churches

Medieval Visby had fifteen churches inside its walls and two more outside. Many were abandoned after the Reformation and fell into ruin, leaving their walls and towers standing. Only St Mary's Cathedral is still in regular use.

For me, those ruins are central to Visby's atmosphere. They are not reconstructed stage sets. Gothic arches open onto the sky, empty windows frame clouds and stars, and grass grows between the walls. The past does not feel sealed off in a museum, but woven naturally into the city as it is today.

During Medieval Week, many of these spaces become stages and meeting places once again. In 2026 the festival ran from 2 to 9 August, with over forty venues and more than 800 events around Visby and elsewhere on Gotland. There are markets, craftspeople, music, talks, theatre, historical encampments and jousting tournaments. But the real magic is not confined to one festival site: the entire city is transformed.

People in period costume wander the lanes, musicians play in little squares, camps spring up outside the walls, and merchants and artisans fill the streets. You can go to the bakery in the morning and pass knights, monks, traders and Vikings without anyone finding it the least bit remarkable.

And in Visby we really did meet some of the "Vikings" with whom we had sat around the campfire on Birka weeks before. A small circle in our journey had closed. What began as a chance encounter on Lake Mälaren reappeared at the other end of the voyage.

Music beneath the open sky

My favourite moments usually begin in the evening. As the sun sinks, the limestone takes on a warm glow, and concerts, fire performances and acrobatics begin inside the ruins. Where a church roof once enclosed the space, there is now only sky. Music echoes from the old walls, and stars shine above the Gothic arches.







Impressions of Visby.

After a long passage, that contrast is hard to beat. By day you spend hours in the cockpit, occupied with wind, course and sails; by evening you are sitting inside a centuries-old church ruin in the heart of a lively town. It is exactly the combination I seek on journeys like this.

Sometimes the strongest moment is not even the performance, but the silence afterwards. When the music stops, the torches burn low and you sit for a few minutes longer, the ruins seem almost to return to their usual state outside festival week: quiet, open to the sky, and full of history.

Visby and the Hanseatic League

With all the romance of the Middle Ages, it is easy to forget that Visby was not built as a backdrop for knights and minstrels. It was an enormously important trading city. Merchants from Gotland, the German lands, Livonia, Russia and Scandinavia met here. The Treaty of Artlenburg of 1161, between Gotland and Henry the Lion, is considered a significant step towards the trading relationships from which the Hanseatic League later developed. By the thirteenth century, Visby even had separate Gotlandic and German town representatives.

The great warehouses and merchants' houses recall that prosperity. Visby gradually lost economic importance during the fourteenth century. In 1361, the Danish king Valdemar Atterdag conquered Gotland, and a bloody battle took place outside the walls. Paradoxically, the city's later decline helped spare much of its medieval fabric from being built over completely.

Visby brings together so much of what shaped this voyage: the Hanseatic League and Baltic trade, Swedish history, travel between East and West, medieval traces, and a present in which people bring it all to life again with extraordinary joy.

The final big passage – back to the Swedish archipelago

We finally had to leave Visby on 9 August. The return to the Swedish mainland turned into a real test. Strong south-westerly winds forced us hard on the wind as we made for Västervik. The sea was rough, and waves repeatedly broke over the Vega and into the cockpit. For the first time on this voyage, we even had water coming in.



I do not want to make it sound more dramatic than it was. But after so many long and relatively pleasant passages, this one reminded us forcefully that even a robust boat has its limits—and that a minor leak takes on a different significance when there is a lot of water on deck. Around eleven hours later, we entered Västervik safely.

Friends were waiting there with a lavish dinner. After nearly two months on the move, the contrast could hardly have been better: in the morning,

hard beating to windward with water sweeping the deck; in the evening, good food ashore with friends. That is cruising for you.

The final long passage back to Sweden – sunshine, seas and a Vega riding the waves.

We still had a few days left, and spent them where the summer had begun: among the skerries off Loftahammar. There was time for small repairs and all the odd jobs that accumulate on a long voyage. After weeks of new harbours, open-water passages and constantly changing impressions, the familiar archipelago felt almost like coming home. There was time, too, for swimming, anchoring, hiking, saunas, good meals and long evenings outdoors. There was nothing left to achieve. The great circuit was complete, which meant the final days could become wonderfully small again.

That brought the voyage full circle. The Vega, though, was not quite finished with me. After 1,400 nautical miles, the question naturally arose: what does this little boat do particularly well on a journey like this, and what would I change for future voyages?

What remains after 1,400 nautical miles? The Vega.

I hardly need to tell members of the Vega owners' association that our boats are small. Twenty-seven feet did not make for a large yacht even in the 1970s, and alongside today's cruising boats a Vega looks positively modest. A modern boat of similar length usually offers more interior space, wider berths, greater headroom and a very different level of comfort. All the more reason to ask why, more than fifty years after her design, anyone would still choose a Vega for long-distance cruising.

This voyage has confirmed rather than changed my answer: the Vega is an exceptionally good boat for travelling.

She was designed for the Baltic, particularly for the world of the archipelagos. Her shape is very different from many modern production yachts designed primarily to maximise interior volume. The Vega is slender, comparatively low and almost delicate-looking alongside some modern 27-foot boats. The Vega handbook points to the elegant lines of Swedish skerry cruisers as a source of inspiration; those boats, in turn, belong to a boatbuilding tradition reaching back to Viking longships. Whether that often-repeated link should be taken as a strict matter of naval architectural history is open to debate. Visually, the idea makes sense: the Vega looks long, narrow and shaped to move through water—not to provide the greatest possible living space in harbour.

Yet her graceful appearance hides a remarkably substantial structure. The long keel, integral with the hull, simple layout and generously built fibreglass construction come from an era when saving weight was not the overriding priority. The result is practically a tank afloat.

The voyages of Berserk and St Brendan are extreme examples of what that means. My Vega does not have to visit Antarctica to prove her worth. It is enough that she reliably reaches Hiiumaa after twenty hours on the open Baltic, covers 180 miles to Klaipėda, picks her way through narrow archipelago channels and then takes an unpleasant beating from Visby to Västervik in her stride.

The most impressive thing is not that a handful of people have undertaken extraordinary expeditions in a Vega. It is that thousands of these small boats have carried ordinary sailors on ordinary long-distance voyages, reliably, for decades.

A lot of travelling in a little boat

For me, the Vega represents cruising on a manageable budget. Not because cheap is automatically good, but because the cost of a boat determines how much freedom you can afford beyond it.

A large, technically sophisticated yacht can be wonderful. Inevitably, though, it ties up more money, maintenance, berth space and energy. With the Vega, a larger share of the budget can go towards the actual journey: harbour dues, restaurants, museums, hikes, spare parts along the way—or simply the possibility of being away for two months rather than two weeks.

That is exactly what this voyage demonstrated once again. The aim was not to spend as much time as possible on a yacht. It was to experience as much of the world as possible with the yacht.

In Sweden, sound Vegas still come onto the market for relatively modest sums. There is also a sizeable market for used parts, spares and practical technical solutions. Much can be repaired at home or replaced with standard components. For a boat more than fifty years old, that is a major advantage. You are less dependent on proprietary systems and can improvise when necessary.

Simplicity should not, however, be confused with freedom from maintenance. An old Vega demands attention. On almost every long voyage, something breaks, wears out or needs adjustment. Anyone who wants to travel far in one must know the boat and be willing to get their hands dirty. Yet this very manageability inspires confidence. When something goes wrong, you can often work out why.



One voyage ends and another begins: Hulda ashore for inspections, maintenance and the next projects.

Machinery you can still understand

Many Vegas still run on older Volvo Penta diesels, including the MD6, which has served in countless boats for decades. To my mind, that generation of engine suits the yacht perfectly: little electronics, mechanical pumps and systems you can understand. You can even start an MD6 with a hand crank—a relic of a time when a flat domestic battery did not automatically mean the engine had gone off duty too. Modern engines are more comfortable and cleaner in many respects, but I love how directly understandable the old machinery remains.

At low revs, my Vega uses roughly 0.6 litres of diesel per hour. That does not make long spells under power any more enjoyable, but at least they remain affordable. More importantly, the engine is not the star of the show. It should start reliably, help us out of a tight harbour and move us along in a calm. The wind still does the real travelling.

The third tiller pilot gives up

An unexpectedly modern component showed that old-fashioned simplicity is not the answer to everything. On this voyage my third tiller pilot failed. So far I have used the Simrad TP10. Simrad specifies it for tiller-steered boats up to 32 feet; retailers quote a displacement of up to 3,700 kilograms and a maximum thrust of 65 kilograms. On paper, that is not remotely an absurd choice for a Vega. My practical experience on long passages has been rather less convincing.

I suspect that under certain conditions the Vega can develop relatively high pressure on the rudder, placing more strain on the small tiller pilot during prolonged use than her size would suggest. That is explicitly my working theory, not an engineering finding. Three failed units are enough of a field trial for me, though. For future long voyages I will switch to a substantially more powerful tiller pilot.

Naturally, balancing the boat properly remains just as important. An autopilot should not have to fight against badly trimmed sails all the time. On a small yacht, good sail trim and sensible weight distribution are often the cheapest “upgrades” available.

A proven boat, carefully chosen improvements

Even so, I have no intention of turning the Vega into a high-tech project. That would miss what I value most about her. The more interesting question is which improvements genuinely make a difference underway.

The mainsail is a good example. After my experiences on recent voyages, the Vega is getting a new fully battened main, cut slightly larger but with an additional reef point high up the sail. We had strong winds on many days this summer. My present mainsail has only one reef, which limits how much sail I can reduce as the breeze builds. In future I want to be able to reef earlier and far more deeply without immediately changing sails; in extreme conditions I want the remaining mainsail area to be very small indeed. On long passages, that extra range will bring a real improvement in both safety and comfort.

My view of the spinnaker has changed too. Sailing with Marion, whose racing experience is extensive, we covered a surprising number of miles under spinnaker this summer. In the right conditions the Vega sails beautifully that way. I therefore intend to carry a larger spinnaker—or at least one better tailored to the boat—in future.

Modern power aboard an old boat

I am considerably less nostalgic when it comes to electrics. My Vega’s electrical system has now been completely modernised. At its heart is a 180 Ah LiFePO4 battery with Victron charge controllers. A swivelling 120-watt solar panel can be angled towards the sun, while a 200-watt folding panel can also be hung from the mast during longer stays at anchor.

This allows us to live almost entirely independently of shore power. When needed, a 230-volt inverter runs a laptop and smaller devices; every light has been converted to LED; and phones, cameras and tablets charge through fast USB-C outlets. Even the fridge now has a tiny motion-activated light—utterly unnecessary from an engineering point of view, yet surprisingly pleasant on a dark boat.

Perhaps the greatest luxury of the summer, though, was not one of my own modifications. Thomas brought along a battery-powered espresso machine. Being able to make a decent espresso underway with almost no effort brings life aboard a 27-footer suspiciously close to superyacht territory. All that is missing now is an ice maker.

That combination is exactly what I like: the foundation remains a simple, robust boat from another era. Modern technology is added where it genuinely improves range, safety or quality of life. You do not have to replace everything merely because it is old. But there is every reason to equip an old boat so that you still enjoy spending long periods aboard her today.

To me, the Vega is neither a floating holiday apartment nor a showcase for technology. She is a means of travel: small enough not to take over your entire life, robust enough for long passages, and affordable enough to leave money for the adventure itself.

Perhaps that is her timeless quality. The Vega asks relatively little of you—and gives an astonishing amount in return.

The Vega has a future

During our voyage through the Baltic countries, I noticed something that fitted this idea perfectly. In almost every sizeable harbour, there seemed to be an Albin Vega somewhere—sometimes carefully kept and almost original, sometimes visibly adapted into a practical working and travelling boat. And the owners were invariably younger sailors from Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania who had bought one of these old boats in Sweden.

I found that remarkable. You might expect a yacht that ceased production in the late 1970s to be slowly disappearing from the harbours. Instead, many Vegas are simply changing generations—and sometimes countries. A boat that can be bought for a manageable sum and maintained by its owner evidently appeals to people who want to sail as much as possible on a limited budget today.

Perhaps that is more logical than it first seems. Young sailors do not necessarily need a yacht with a vast saloon, an electric toilet and multiple screens at the helm. If the main priority is simply to set off, the Vega offers a concept that has remained remarkably relevant: understandable technology, an affordable size, good sailing qualities and a structure that does not rule out long journeys.

For us in the German Vega owners’ association, this generational change is particularly interesting. The association was founded in 1973 and now has more than 200 members. In fact, “German” is a slightly narrow description, because Vega sailors from Austria, Switzerland and Sweden also belong to it. It is more a German-speaking community than a strictly national one. It is not only about class rules and technical questions, but above all a network of people who sail very similar boats—and, crucially, keep them going.

For me, that community has long been part of owning the boat. People exchange experiences with electrics, gearboxes, deck repairs and sailing, helping one another with parts and contacts. Knowledge accumulated by individual owners over decades is preserved and passed on to the next generation.

The national associations are linked internationally through VODA. Usually the community comes together every two years for the International Friendship Regatta—a name it thoroughly deserves. Of course there is racing and competition for places, but meeting people, shared excursions and

technical conversations matter at least as much. The scale this community can reach was demonstrated at the 2004 IFR in Marstrand, attended by around seventy Vegas from seven countries; Vega enthusiasts from the USA and Mexico were there too. Those numbers seem almost unbelievable today and show just how international a community grew around this little sailing boat.

Germany has repeatedly played a part in that international history. The German association has hosted IFR meetings on numerous occasions. In 2026 the international Vega community returned to Germany. From 27 July to 2 August, nineteen Vegas from Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany gathered at Marina Baltica in Travemünde. Alongside the races, the programme included a visit to the historic sailing ship Passat, a cycle ride, excursions to Lübeck and the Hanseatic Museum, and evenings spent together. That same combination of sailing, travel, history and companionship reminds me strongly of what made my own voyage special.

Perhaps that really is where the Vega's future lies. She does not need to become younger to remain attractive. Her age has become part of her story. What matters is that people keep sailing her.

When young Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian crews take over Swedish Vegas, the boats are, in a sense, returning to the Baltic waters for which they seem so perfectly suited: short hops between islands, many sheltered bays, small harbours and enough open sea for proper passages. Perhaps a new Vega scene will develop there in the years ahead, with different people and different journeys from those of the 1970s—but the same little boat.

For me, that would be the loveliest way to preserve a tradition. The Vega would not become a museum piece. She would remain what she was always meant to be: a simple, sturdy yacht in which you can set sail under your own keel.

So the old Vegas are not disappearing from the harbours. They are simply passing into new hands.

Two books for the next Baltic voyage

For me, books belong on long journeys, and two were particularly well suited to this one.

Voltaire: The History of Charles XII, King of Sweden

Voltaire's account of Charles XII, first published in 1731, follows the Swedish king through the Great Northern War and his conflicts with Denmark, Poland–Lithuania and above all Russia. Of course it is not modern historical scholarship; it is a work of the early eighteenth century, written in the language and from the perspective of its time. That was precisely what made it such interesting travel reading for me.

As the Vega sailed through Swedish skerries, along Baltic coasts and past historic towns, I was reading about an age when Sweden was a European great power and these very waters were the setting for major struggles. Places that are at first only names on a nautical chart gain another dimension.

David Mercy: Berserk – My Voyage to the Antarctic in a Twenty-Seven-Foot Sailboat

David Mercy's account of the voyage of the Albin Vega Berserk with Jarle Andhøy is quite different. The little boat sails from South America via Tierra del Fuego towards Antarctica. Storms, cold, technical problems and tensions among the crew make it anything but a cosy cruising yarn.

For anyone who sails a Vega, the book is fascinating simply because your own kind of boat suddenly appears in an entirely different world. When you next sit in your Vega's cockpit, twenty-seven feet seem rather different. Antarctica is, of course, in another league from the Baltic Sea, and the book is not an invitation to imitate every risk. But it shows impressively what a small, sturdy yacht can withstand in the hands of determined sailors.

For that reason I regard it as almost essential reading for Vega owners—at least those who will not immediately start planning a winter voyage after finishing it.

Epilogue – travelling with the wind

What remains after 1,400 nautical miles? Above all, I have learned that what matters most on a successful voyage is neither the perfect route, nor the fastest boat, nor a meticulously detailed itinerary.

The most precious thing aboard is time.

Enough time not to be constantly racing the clock. Time to wait for the right wind. Time to stay an extra day in harbour because the hike was beautiful or because you met people over a drink the night before and want to share another beer. Time to change a planned route without feeling that the journey has somehow failed.

Once you stop trying to force your own plan through at any cost, cruising takes on a different quality. Eventually you find a rhythm, a flow. Wind and waves set the pace, the landscape slips slowly past, and one intended destination gives way to another. Not because anything has gone wrong, but because the sea has offered a better suggestion.

A rigid itinerary, by contrast, is a fairly reliable way of manufacturing stress. If you absolutely must be somewhere on a particular day, you may set off even with the wind blowing from the wrong direction. You beat into the weather, pound into the waves and spend hours fighting conditions you cannot change. Travelling turns into delivering.

This summer reminded me how delightful the opposite can be. When the wind was wrong, we stayed put or chose a different harbour. That is how we discovered Skulte and Roja. When it rained, hiking turned into a spa day. When the wind suited us, short planned stages suddenly became long passages. The route took shape as we travelled.

The Baltic is wonderfully suited to this approach. Distances between islands, bays and harbours are usually manageable, and there are almost always several sensible destinations to choose from. Rather than constantly planning against nature, you can travel with it.

Perhaps that is why I keep setting off in the little Vega. She is large enough for real journeys and small enough not to let the boat dominate the trip. She takes me across open water, slips into small harbours, can be maintained with a reasonable amount of work, and regularly reminds me that comfort and freedom are not the same thing.

After two months in the Baltic countries, I find myself thinking less about the 1,400 nautical miles than about everything in between: Midsummer evening on the skerry, the campfire on Birka, anchoring off Drottningholm, Vaxholm’s fortress walls, saunas in Estonia, the chocolate bear on Ruhnu, spinnaker sailing up the Daugava, an unexpected day of hiking in Roja, the dunes of Nida, stars above Visby’s ruined churches and dinner after that final hard passage to Västervik.

The Vega connected all these places. That is her greatest strength.

You do not have to arrive anywhere as quickly as possible. You simply need enough time to enjoy being on your way.

Perhaps that is the true luxury of cruising: not having more time, but having time that does not need to be scheduled.


The voyage will always continue.