



"The Divorce Ditch" as the Swedes call the Göta Canal, is a series of joys interspersed with frissons of excitement and surprises. Without constraining my enthusiasm with technical detail or chronology - "don't let facts spoil a good story" as they say, I here recall a handful of them - not the least being the song of the Swedish language, its tonal purity and the way a word emphasis is never where you expect it to be. For me it comes a close second to Italian in the "love to listen to" league and Masfield would have been in ecstasy over place names like Ljunsbro, Borensberg, Viken and Vadstena.....

The uninitiate will see nothing more than a suspension bridge built in that modern minimalist style, slim, elegant and functional but there is one feature about Denmark's Little Belt bridge at Middelfart – the road soars 44 mtrs above the sea enabling ships to pass beneath, and supporting that road are pylons reaching higher, well over 100 mtrs metres. Now if you have taken the canal system which cuts across Sweden from coast to coast, you may later look at the top of those pylons, as I did, and say "up there, near the low cloud, that's how high our mast reached at Forsvik on the Göta Canal." - what a thought.

But let me start with a snake. He was on a path, a long stone block wall in fact, laid along a passage through the rocky shallows of Lake Viken to guide boats safely where lily ponds and half submerged trees lay to one side or the other. He was still. Warming his body on a moss covered block just above the water's edge in a garden of wild flowers and ferns where frogs and insects provided his daily bread, his scales gleaming like chain mail in the morning sun. A coal black Grass Snake who sensing my presence, flicked his tongue and moved his head in a weaving motion before slipping into the safety of a dark rock crevasse. A rare pleasure, a gift in fact, to see such life in the wild. Later, on the same wall, a fine fat lizard sunbathed just two blocks farther on.



Travelling through the interior of Sweden a land of rock, water and forests unfolds. You could write its history just thinking about what they have on offer - minerals, fish, timber and rolling fields down to silage or grain with colossal red painted wooden barns where the animals seem to live most of the time and

stacks of timber everywhere. I like to remind friends that the Viking boat builders exported wooden fishing boats to The Faroe and Shetland Islands where timber was scarce - and they would have taken them as kits to be assembled on arrival, in fact "Flat Packed." So it is hardly surprising that IKEA is Swedish.



All the locks and bridges along the canal are controlled by university students on vacation during the summer time. This is surprising when I consider that of all the locks I've passed through in England, France, Germany, Portugal, Holland, Belgium and Sweden I have to say that the rising locks on the Göta Canal are the most challenging and provide some of the best opportunities of screwing up big time if you really want to. But these charming and often beautiful young people look after you and give advice so that the whole procedure becomes a doddle easily done by two. There is a technique which is explained before you start and it is helpful to watch others doing it before you try so that the power, surge and back eddies caused when the rising locks fill does not come as a surprise. There is a

video link at the end of this article which shows better than words how it is.

After discovering the most exquisite Rodin sculpture in Stockholm last year I was delighted and amused at two bronze pieces found along the canal. Well, three actually since in Söderköping one work is in two parts, one on either side of the canal where a group - herd - flock - band of rabbits were crossing the water, one diving in while those behind were getting ready. On the other side, those already across were pulling the next one out of the water. Then at Motala a beautiful performing bear riding a monocycle - as they do, of course. You have to stop and look and want to touch. So much better than a plump monarch or pompous military man forever frozen on his arch necked prancing horse.



It is extraordinary to see the ordinary out of context - a bit like seeing people in town who are wearing clothes when you only know them from the local swimming bath - Lupins grow untamed and spectacularly at every opportunity in the most unlikely places, certainly all along the roads, up banks, through woodland and so on and you have to ask why this wonderful show of colour only seems to happen in Sweden.

All along the canal there are a good number of lovely marinas as well as simple stopping places offering the tranquility, natural beauty and a way into unexplored countryside much cherished by "Pirate" the intrepid live-aboard swashbuckling

sailing cat from a French boat who travelled with us for much of the way - we had first met them two years ago and have since shared many meals and adventures, not to mention worrying if the cat would be back by the next morning. - he always was.



It was the day before "Midsommar" - an important drinking opportunity for the Swedes - when a trail of pretty young girls traipsed along the canal path laden with armfuls of wild flowers, gathered from the canal bank as they went and all the while tunefully chattering to each other. Flowers to decorate the maypole and for all to wear in the hair - including the men.



Wonderful lakes along the canal system enhance the ever changing experience - an Osprey wheels way above the mast, "loose lazy wings calling itself home" as the poem says, and Läckö Castle is a wow where yachts moor at its foot - through the massively thick castle wall into the inner courtyard I was swept away by a young Swedish *a cappella* quartet singing a haunting piece from centuries ago - I was spellbound and just had to stop and listen, and in that moment it was as if every other thought in my mind drained away, the voices resonating from the huge ancient stone walls to conjure up an time of fabulous costumes, feasts and a simple life. It was another age.

We are mid lake now, in a very sheltered horseshoe bay within a group of islands in the Ljuro Skärgård, one of the many natural harbours in Lake Vanern, which at the moment we share with two other boats some distance away, one at anchor, the other, stern out and bow tied to a tree. How can I tell you what total peace is? We relax in comfort on deck warmed by the afternoon sun with nothing to do other than absorb this extraordinary sense of "something else." The trees are silent, the boat is hushed, not even a bird call can be heard, the water is calm and its undulations barely caress the rock 100 mtrs away. I can feel my ears strain, literally, for absolutely any sound. I look at Jane and we smile knowing we are sharing this same rare experience - suspended in a complete absence of sound for just a while - then as an evening finale, bathed in golden light, a herd of cattle emerge in slow procession from the trees, down to the waters edge where they drink and slowly raise their heavy heads to look at us strangers in their world miles from anywhere.



It's kind of neat to start and finish with a snake - or signs of snakes like that at Dalbergså, a super quiet slow river winding out of the interior into Lake Vanern with a beautiful entrance dog legging through low pink rock shoulders and rickety home made boat staging along the grassy banks where red finned river fish glide among aquatic leaves just below the surface. And just where you tie up is the sign which I am told reads "Be good to our snakes, Alma, Cissi, Artur and Tage, they only eat frogs and stuff." - So Swedish - so respectful and so much in love with the natural world.



LINKS

Video of locks

www.vimeo.com/138055615

Poem "The Osprey"

www.clivewilliams.co.uk/Osprey.htm

a cappella song

www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbmTyeT-Cvc