

# The Allure and Autonomy of the Ålands

by John Bechtel  
Freelance culture and travel writer

The world is full of interesting, beautiful, even jaw-dropping destinations, more than anyone could cram into a lifetime to see. But travel itself is often stressful and tiring. There are lines everywhere, in the airports, bus stations, and even at the destinations themselves. It is necessary at times to remind yourself to breathe deeply, let your shoulders relax, and remind yourself why you are doing this. And remember that while you are rushing to the other side of the world to see other people and places, thousands or hundreds of thousands are traveling to see your stuff.

If however, you are in need of a place less traveled, less known, and perfectly suited for letting go in the

enjoyment of the moment, why not try Finland's Åland islands?

There are over 6700 of them in an archipelago, of which only 80 are inhabited. Most are quite small, some barely more than a large rock outcropping above the surface of the Baltic Sea. It doesn't take much imagination to realize that in this part of the Baltic there are rock formations that didn't quite rise high enough to break the surface of the water over a large area, and the spots that did became these thousands of islands.

## Glaciers and Islands

As we have discussed elsewhere, Finland was one of the last parts of the planet to emerge from a glacial Ice Age about 10,000 years ago, and



those remaining glaciers had much to do with the current topography of the country. As those glaciers receded by slowly melting, the terrain that had been compacted beneath their unimaginable weight began to rise, a process that still continues to this day. Finland continues to rise in elevation from the sea each year, and this includes the area of the Åland archipelago. Seven thousand years ago there were only a few islands.

The largest island is often referred to as Fasta Åland, which means "Mainland Åland." The combined population of all the islands is only 28,649, and 90% of those live on the main island with the capital of Mariehamn. There are many towns listed on maps of the islands, but beware that many of these are little more than a crossroads with perhaps a few buildings. Access to the islands is possible by ferries from either Stockholm or Helsinki and Turku, Finland's second largest city, and the best form of transportation on an island is by bicycle. There are even ferries exclusively for bicycles.

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One of modern-day Mariehamn's busy harbors.



**A slower pace: biking offers a great way to get around on the islands.**



**Busy docks welcome residents and visitors.**



**St. Michael's Church, in Finström, on the main island.**



**Ferries from Finland and Sweden make regular trips to Åland.**

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## An Autonomous Region of Finland

Politically, Åland is an autonomous region that is Swedish in culture and language, but legally belongs to Finland. The word autonomous means freedom from an external authority. The term is usually applied to a place that is distant from a country and/or that is populated by a national minority, and has been granted a special status including legislative powers. You may be more familiar with other examples of such autonomous regions, such as Easter Island (Chile), Corsica (France), the Azores (Portugal), Cayman Islands (United Kingdom), Greenland (Denmark), or Puerto Rico (U.S.)

The Ålanders (*please don't refer to them as Finns*) have their own parliament, publish their own postage stamps, and are exempt from military service. How this all happened is an interesting story. The Ålanders sought independence from Finland beginning in the same year that Finland sought (and gained) independence from Russia. There was a lot going on in the area that fateful year of 1917. But let's start at the beginning.

## Åland in the Middle Ages

There was a large migration of people from a valley near Stockholm in the fifth century A.D., and we know

**Åland Parliament House, Mariehamn.**



that many Vikings settled in the islands because there are 380 documented Viking burial sites from the Viking Age (800-1000 CE), which ended with the advent of Christianity in the region. The oldest churches are closest to pagan burial grounds. Eventually small Christian churches were built for sailors along old trade routes. Both Åland and Finland were autonomous regions during the Middle Ages. In

the 1200s Åland and Finland were incorporated into the Swedish empire. From 1634 onward it was an official part of the 'Turku and Pori County' and Åland was considered a Swedish chiefdom.

The most important medieval building in the Ålands is the castle of Kastelholm. It first appears in written history in 1388 and has been rebuilt and enlarged many times. The Swedish king often stayed there when he visited, and it was where the all-important tax revenues from the region were brought. As an administrative and military center on Sweden's eastern frontier, it was besieged and burned. It was one of Finland's earlier experiences with the high price of belonging to someone else's empire. It was Finland's curse to be strategically located on the margins of competing empires.



**Kastelholm—the most important medieval building in the Ålands.**



**View from Fort Bomarsund ruins—now a tourist attraction.**

## The Painful Road to Autonomy

During the Great Northern War (1713–21), Russia attacked Finland, and the population fled to Sweden. Many of the refugees were captured, and the villages of the islands were deserted for another eight years.

In 1808, Russia attacked again, which resulted in epidemics and great violence—and Sweden surrendered. Finland and Åland went to Russia.

Åland became the western outpost of the Russian empire. In 1829 Russia decided to build a fort at Bomarsund as a base for their growing Imperial navy. Construction workers came from all over the world on the big project, and an international community of many cultures and religions developed.

Construction on the naval center was interrupted by the Crimean War of 1853–56, which pitted the Russians against the French, British, and Ottoman Turkey. Bomarsund was attacked in August 1854, and the Russian forces surrendered. Åland was declared a demilitarized zone (DMZ) and still is.

The main town of Mariehamn was founded in 1861 by Russia's Emperor Alexander II and was named after his wife, Maria Alexandrovna. Tourism in Mariehamn began in 1889 with its famous baths, but came to an abrupt halt in 1916 when the bathhouse burned down.

In 1917 there were great upheavals in the Russian Empire. In Finland

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**Empress consort of Russia Maria Alexandrovna, for whom Mariehamn was named.**

and the Ålands, there were Russian soldiers everywhere. Finland saw Russia's Bolshevik revolution as their pass to independence, but there was great anxiety and tension between the Conservatives and the Communists. Sweden was considered the safest place at the moment and activism began for Åland's secession from Finland to be reunited with Sweden, commonly viewed as the mother country for Åland's almost total Swedish population.

Sweden even sent troops to the islands during the Finnish Civil War to join the fray with the Russians troops and the Finnish Whites and Reds. When German armies advanced to replace the retreating Russians in 1918, Sweden withdrew their forces and went home.

The issue of who 'owned' the Ålands was ultimately settled a few years later by the newly formed League of Nations, who gave it to Finland against the wishes of the vast majority of the islanders themselves. With the Ålands however, went the obligation to recognize their DMZ status. Today, their exemption from military service to any nation is undoubtedly one of the Åland islanders most prized possessions and a persuasive argument not to seek greater independence than they already have from Finland.



## About Visiting the Ålands

**C**ontact Visit Åland on their website or your preferred travel agent. Travel light. Transfer to Mariehamn from either Greater Stockholm or Helsinki, and then chill out. Be prepared to walk or ride a bike. Visit Viking burial sites, ancient churches, and Kastelholm. Eat the cheese and black bread with its culinary origins in the 16th century. Try the local beers, and don't miss the Åland pancakes, stewed plums on rice or semolina, topped with whipped cream.

You will have not have trouble communicating; English is a transition language here. Ålanders who don't speak Finnish will likely speak English, and Finns who don't speak Swedish will speak English.

Be prepared to pay with euros, because local exchange rates on the Swedish krona can be excessive. These are islands; everything has to be imported, so be prepared for higher prices than what you might find for similar products in Helsinki or Stockholm. Buy your souvenirs in the capitals, but by all means send your friends a post card or letter with an Åland postage stamp. There aren't many of those floating around out there.



### Do Not Miss

As a reflection of Mariehamn's maritime past, the town features a "Maritime Quarter". Smaller boats continue to be built here, and there is a smithy and facilities for other traditional handicrafts as well as a museum and a café. You will find the Maritime Quarter just north of Mariehamn's Eastern Harbor (on the opposite side of the town, when you arrive to the town on a cruise ship).

As you read earlier, the Russian army started the construction of the Bomarsund Fortress in 1832, reflecting an ambition to create a military outpost in the Baltic Sea. A British/French force captured the unfinished fortress in 1854. A small museum, the Bomarsundsmuseet (situated close to the fortress) tells the story about this period of time on the Åland Islands. Distance from Mariehamn: 21.5 miles (35 kilometers).

En route to the Bomarsund Fortress you will pass the Kastelholm Castle, which is the only mediaeval castle on the Åland Islands. It was

Bottom left: New intriguing finds from the Late Iron Age have been found in Kvarnbo, Saltvik, on the Åland Islands, within the framework of a project led by Dr Kristin Ilves. Finds, consisting mainly of personal ornaments of silver and bronze, were unearthed.

Overall, the results point towards the existence of an elite settlement at the site, comparable to only a handful of places in the Baltic Sea region.

mentioned for the first time in writing in 1388. Gustav Wasa, a Swedish king during the 16th century, spent some time at the castle, as did two of his sons (one of them as a prisoner to his younger brother). Over the years, the castle has also been under siege a couple of times. The distance to Bomarsund from Mariehamn: 14 miles (22.5 kilometers).

There are more reasons than the actual castle to visit the Kastelholm Castle. Nearby, you will find the Jan Karlsgården open-air museum, built as a typical Åland farm in the second half of the 19th century. Other attractions include a former prison, the Vita Björn, and a restaurant.

The Tjudö Vingård (Tjudö Vineyard) produces wines from fruits and berries picked on the farm. Tjudö also has a distillery, producing the so-called "Ålvados" – Ålandic Calvados. Distance from Mariehamn: 18 miles (29 kilometers).

For those interested in an outdoor experience, there are numerous opportunities for outdoor adventures. Whether you're into kayaking, fishing or mountain climbing, when it comes to the great outdoors, Åland has about everything you might wish for. There are also many opportunities for playing a round of golf for those so inclined.

Cruise ships dock at Mariehamn's Western Harbor. The distance to the town center is about 0.3 miles (500 meters). Mariehamn is situated on an isthmus between two bays. It is possible to walk from one side of the isthmus to the other in about 15 minutes. For passengers who prefer not to walk, the town of Mariehamn offers a complimentary shuttle service in connection with cruise ship calls.

Contact: [www.visitaland.com](http://www.visitaland.com) for more information.



Once home to the world's largest fleet of sailing ships in the early 1900s, only one remains moored at the port of Mariehamn—the Pommern, the only four-masted bark is the only one of its kind, worldwide, to still be in its original condition. The ship is now a museum, open to the public during the summer months.



The Jan Karlsgården open-air museum provides the visitor with a comprehensive view of the life and building traditions that once existed here, showing how life may have been at a farm on Åland in the late 1800s. Various activities are arranged here year 'round. Founded in the 1930s, the museum got its name from the Jan Karls farm in Finström—from where the main building was also moved. All buildings at Jan Karlsgården have been brought here from various parts of the Åland islands, giving the museum an authentic Åland appearance.