

## Friendly Finland

I have been fascinated by Finland's history for a long time, and this year the opportunity arose to combine a classic motorcycle rally, touring on an Enfield and visiting several aviation museums. Mary agreed and so we started to book ferries - Harwich to Cuxhaven, ride across northern Germany and then take the ferry from Rostock to Hanko on the south western tip of Finland.

Research on the internet gave us plenty of information as virtually every town has its own website with versions in English. I also came across the Bullet MCC of Finland and posted a message on their website. With two of us and luggage for a fortnight on an overladen 500 Bullet, there was no room for camping gear, so we used the internet to find accommodation and booked up a couple of places. When we got to Finland we found that every hotel had a pad of street plans to give out free and there was always a lay-by with an information board as you approached a town.

We were very lucky to make three contacts in advance. David Bullivant lives near Helsinki and gave us lots of information and advice in advance, particularly about the Rally we wanted to attend. Christer Holmstrom is the chairman of the Bullet club and offered to meet us in Hanko and show us to our guesthouse, and Ilona Helske in Halli helped us with accommodation information in central Finland. We were also invited to the Bullet Club's Kings Road Rally, but unfortunately this was held a week before we were due to arrive.

On Monday 25<sup>th</sup> July, the day started wet! I went to fill up the Bullet before the trek down to Harwich and found that the Petseal "skin" inside the petrol tank had started to detach itself from the tank, forming a sort of bag within the tank. Not the best of omens, but as it was not obstructing the fuel flow, I decided we would have to ignore it. The ride down to Harwich was uneventful as the weather cleared and we chatted to other riders waiting to board the ferry. When we told one German rider we were headed for Finland, he just looked at the bike and burst into laughter.

The overnight crossing and was calm and the ride from Cuxhaven to Rostock of about 220 miles of main road and autobahn, was only enlivened by getting lost for a while in the outskirts of Hamburg. The Superfast ferry at Rostock proved to be a very modern conventional ferry and was very comfortable, especially as we had splashed out on an expensive cabin (it was our wedding anniversary).

The next evening we arrived in Hanko and found Christer waiting for us at the quayside on his Bullet. He escorted us to Villa Tellina where we were staying the night and stopped to chat for a while. We then wandered around the lovely old wooden houses which go right up to the beach and looked out over the dozens of rocky islets and islands. You may have guessed we liked Hanko!

Next day we paid the guest house bill and were shocked at the cost. However, it was a glorious day and we took the minor coast road that crossed several bridges on and off islands. At Piikkio we saw Moto Italia. Christer had told us that they were the Bullet importers for Finland, and so we called in to have a look at their stock – very similar to the models being sold in the UK, but with a military sidecar option with a locally produced chair. From there it was only a short distance into Turku, third largest city in Finland. We were lucky to get a reasonably priced hotel in the city centre as the Turku Festival was full swing and accommodation was at a premium. The rest of the day we spent walking along the river, visiting the impressive castle museum, having a drink in a bar which had been converted from a public toilet (no jokes about the beer thank you) and then a meal followed by marvelling at the huge crowds enjoying free concerts and bungee jumping along the riverside.

The following morning (Friday) we went down to breakfast, and noticed one of the other guests wearing a Bullets MCC T-shirt. I said hello, and it turned out to be Matti who had been on the King's Road Rally the week before, but was rather surprised to be accosted by an English Bullet rider at breakfast! Soon afterwards we were on the road to Rauma. We stopped in a lay-by just outside the town for a picnic lunch and were joined by a friendly van driver who had a long chat about classic bikes as he owns a BSA B50.

The town was well worth the visit. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site with the entire wooden-built town centre intact. Unlike a lot of such places it did not pander to tourists, as all the houses were lived in, the shops sold everyday items and the market sold vegetables. The friendly museum looked after our helmets and jackets while we toured the town on foot and watched the lace-making competition.

From Rauma we pressed on to Pori where we had booked a hotel for three days while the rally was on. Once we had left our luggage there, we went out to the Veteraaniralli site at the seaside campsite of Yyteri. We registered for the Ralli and then tried to find David and his wife Inkeri who had left a note for us at the Control office, but only succeeded in phoning them and arranging to meet up the next day.

Pori to Yyteri is about 12 miles and we got to know the road quite well over the three days of the Ralli, but we never succeeded in getting back to the hotel by the same route- thank goodness for those free street plans!

Next day was the main rally event. We met up with David and Inkeri at the large campsite which the club had taken over for the weekend and there was an opening ceremony with a parade of bikes followed by re-enactors in period uniform firing volleys from antique muskets and a miniature cannon. Then it was time to look at as many of the 1700 bikes as possible! The Veteraanimoottoripyöraklubi caters for any bikes over 25 years old, and so there was a selection of bikes from a wide range of years and different countries of origin. British bikes were well represented, and there were a number of Royal Enfields as they had been imported in some quantity in the 1950s. There were quite a few Model Gs and J2s, an Airflow Clipper and a pair of superb scrambles Bullets amongst the other British, American, Japanese, German, Russian, Czech machines.

David is well connected in the old bike world in Finland, and he introduced us to a number of people, all of whom were able to converse in good English – the norm in Finland! We stayed for the speeches in the marquee in the evening, and although I didn't understand any of the Finnish, I did recognise my name being mentioned. I had won a raffle prize – a large socket set! Later events proved that we were unable to carry the extra weight and bulk, so we have asked David to donate the set as a prize for next year! We left about 10 o'clock in the evening, when it was still broad daylight, to return to the hotel.

The Sunday was departure day from the rally, so we opted to go to the beach and have a swim in the sea. It was a superb sandy beach and the excellent weather ensured we got sun burned. So it was a surprise next morning to find it drizzling. We were heading towards Halli/Kuorevesi, a small town built almost exclusively around part of Finland's aviation industry and home to a fascinating museum and aircraft restoration workshop. One of our suspension units had been creeping off its rubber bush, so a volunteer in the aircraft restoration hangar modified a washer for me to stop the situation getting any worse. While we were at the museum Ilona, our other Bullet Club contact, came in having been tipped off that there was a Bullet in the vicinity. She announced that she had room at her house, and would we like to stay the night? We accepted the offer gratefully and enjoyed a meal of reindeer chops and chatted late into the night. Ilona had crashed her Bullet on her return from the King's Road Rally and was recovering from the bruises while her bike had been taken to Moto Italia for new front forks and wheel. In the course of the conversation, we mentioned the expensive bill at the place we had stayed at in Hanko and she immediately got on the phone to Christer, who went along to the owners, so that when we returned for the ferry, a refund was ready and waiting for us! Ilona also looked at possible places to stay the following night and made some recommendations. Such nice people – thanks a lot.

Leaving Ilona's house, we set off in alternating drizzle and sunshine. We were heading north towards the Finnish Air Force Museum at Tikkakoski., but about half way there, the heavens opened and much of the rest of the journey was in a down pour. We parked next to a modern French bike at the museum and dripped our way in. There was a coat rack to hang our wet things on, and we were able to leave the tank bag as well. There was no hint of worries about theft anywhere, and it was not uncommon to see helmets left unsecured on bike saddles – a very refreshing attitude. We spent a very interesting time at the museum and came out to find a friendly note from the French riders left on our bike. It had stopped raining, but not for long. Our first choice of hotel said they did not have any rooms because the World

Rally Championship was on, but the car park was suspiciously deserted, and the Rally was not until the weekend. Could it have been something to do with the sight of two sodden motorcyclists?

Our next try was at a service area on a main road which had a supermarket, filling station, fast food outlet and a couple of shop units. There was also a big sign showing a bed, so we went in to find the reception desk. After wandering around for a while, we asked and were directed towards the supermarket. Still, nothing suggesting a hotel was visible and after a bit more puzzled meandering a shop keeper eventually took pity on us and escorted us to the supermarket checkout, where we paid for a room for the night and were directed to a block of motels rooms on the edge of the forest. Obvious really.

The room was good so we dried off and after breakfast on Wednesday our spirits rose further as it was a glorious sunny day. The plan was to ride the length of Lake Paijanne using minor roads (although avoiding the dirt roads as we were too heavily laden). It is one of the largest of the thousands of lakes in the area and we were enjoying the scenery and the day when we hit two ruts in quick succession, which had the suspension bottoming out. Not many moments later, the unmistakable wriggling of a rear wheel puncture made itself felt, rapidly turning into a tank slapper. Unable to control the bike I headed for the softest bit of the scenery, which happened to be the ditch. Luckily we missed the granite boulders at the bottom and escaped with bruises. The panniers had been wrenched off their mountings, but otherwise the bike had suffered only superficial damage. Traffic was very light and it was a little while before two cars came along. They stopped to help us pull the bike out of the ditch and once I had extracted the rear wheel, one couple offered to take me into the nearest habitation 30 kilometres away so that I could put the spare inner tube in and get it inflated hard enough to take all the weight. In the meantime Mary sat at the edge of the forest with the bike until I arrived back. The wheel was fitted and our Good Samaritans checked to see that we were mobile again before saying goodbye. It was late afternoon by now, so we picnicked and went down to the lake shore before setting off again.

About 10 miles further on the back end started to go again, but this time I was prepared and we stopped upright. Examining the wheel it became obvious that the previous concussion burst had not only damaged the inner tube, but the tyre casing as well, and that had caused the second deflation. It was now early evening, we had no spare inner tube and a wrecked tyre and were still some way from the nearest village. We tried to phone for help, but Mary's mobile would not connect to a Finnish network. We asked a couple of German cyclists if they could phone, but they were having the same problem with their phone. Eventually we flagged down a trio of Suzuki riders who started phoning around for help- no connection problems for them. About 20 minutes later they announced that a friend who was a motorcycle mechanic would come in about half an hour to help. When he and his wife turned up in a Toyota van, it turned out they spoke hardly any English, but the problem was obvious, so they put the bike into the van and took us into Sysma – the nearest village. It turned out that he had a small motorcycle and bicycle business and although it was now getting on towards 8 o'clock in the evening he opened up the shop and there, amongst the small selection of motocross tyres was a 3.50x18 Metzler ME22 road tyre and heavy duty inner tube– just the size we needed. He helped us fit it and when we came to pay, it turned out to cost about the same as a tyre in the UK, and the price included the recovery. More nice people.

There was a small hotel just down the street, still serving food, and so things were really looking up again.

Next day we headed towards Lahti to buy some souvenirs, but the bike did not feel right. I wasn't sure whether it was because my confidence had taken a knock, or wheel alignment had suffered in the fall, or a mismatch between a ribbed front and a modern rear, but we pressed on to Kellokoski where we were due to stay with David and Inkeri. They were kind hosts and we really enjoyed our stay. Even better, David spotted that in our haste the previous evening we had fitted the tyre with the rotation for a front wheel instead of a rear, so another session with the tyre levers had the bike handling much more surely. I really blessed the Enfield designers who made such a practical QD rear wheel. Mary and Inkeri did some laundry and we had a good meal and rest.

David and Inkeri were off to a reunion in northern Finland on their BMW the following day, but they guided us out to the motorway junction so that we could by pass Helsinki. The weather was good again and we made good progress towards the ferry port in Hanko. At lunch time we stopped at the Hanko Front

Museum which told some of the complicated story of territorial changes during the Second World War which had seen the Russians leasing the port of Hanko after the Winter War of 1939/40 and then being driven out when fighting resumed in 1941. The owner was very keen to chat and he had a lot of interesting information to impart. So much so that quite a queue formed waiting for admission while he explained about the naval campaign in the Gulf of Finland!

We carried on into Hanko, got our refund and had a pleasant afternoon by the seaside. By chance we met Christer and his family again, so we were able to thank him for his help.

The ferry back to Rostock was less luxurious this time, as we only had reclining chairs to sleep in. One of the other passengers had the loudest snore imaginable, and despite the efforts of several people to poke, prod and complain, he slept on angelically while everyone else tried to with much less success.

We docked in the early evening, and did not fancy riding through the night to Cuxhaven. The ship's office was helpful in finding a cheap hotel near Rostock, which was just what we needed. Overnight rain was clearing as we set off and the day was quite pleasant as we stopped for petrol near Lubeck. Then came a surprise. The folding part of the kickstart pedal had disappeared! This was more than a touch of déjà vu. Last time we had made a big continental trip, the kickstart had broken on the last day – I had even joked that we ought to carry a spare! However, I found that by carefully setting the position of the piston and easing over compression in the time-honoured way, it was possible to start the engine using the toe of my boot on the remains of the kickstart crank, but it did mean that we cut down on the rest stops, as re-starts were always uncertain.

We were riding against the clock as the ferry to Harwich only goes every other day, so a half hour hold up with an accident in the contra flow for autobahn road works was less than welcome. At least we did not get lost going round Hamburg, but the last 100 miles were in torrential rain, with the road surface planed off for resurfacing for several kilometres just for good measure.

But we got there in good time and the rest of the return was fairly uneventful with a couple of German riders helping to push start us for embarking and disembarking.

So, quite a few memories to last us until next time. Who could fail to like a country where people have been so kind and generous, where the roads are virtually free of traffic and the lakes and forest look wonderful when the sun shines? And Mary's opinion – she could do with more comfortable pillion footrests for the next trip.

Don McKeand