

To Oslo and Back Again

A Rower's Tale by Jan H. Jensen

Translation & editing Jan H. Jensen & Niels Quist

Preface

What is the greatest experience you can achieve as a rower? Is it the honour and glory of winning championships? Is it the mere exercise and the fresh air that keeps your body in shape? This is up to each rower to decide.

My choice fell upon long distance rowing, which was a discipline almost non-existent in Rungsted Rowing Club in the period of the late nineties, when I became a member.

I heard about the three rowers from Rungsted Rowing Club - who in 1989 had rowed from Oslo to Rungsted - a seaside town by the Sound about 20 kilometres north of Copenhagen. What a unique achievement. I immediately knew that I wanted to do the same. I discussed the possibility with Niels Quist, who had participated in 1989. He felt that a shorter trip with greater chances of success was recommendable before the "real thing". This led to a trip around Zealand starting and ending at the Rungsted Rowing Club.

Two years later my old schoolmate, Jesper Damgaard, became a member of the rowing club. The three of us soon began planning a trip from Oslo to Rungsted. During the winter period we repaired the fibre glass boat "STØT" - the two oared gunwale rigged boat we would use for the trip.



Our route from Oslo in Norway along the Swedish coast to Rungsted - just north of Copenhagen on Zealand. A rowed distance of 675 kilometres.

Part One

On Saturday the 16th of July 2005 Jesper D. Jensen, Niels Quist, and I boarded the ferry "Crown of Scandinavia" in the port of Copenhagen. We finally convinced the dock workers to let us carry "STØT" on board ourselves after we had seen their rough treatment of it on the dockside. Dressed in orange security vests we placed our boat behind a huge lorry. The expectations ran high when we left Copenhagen and set course for Oslo to the sound of the ship's horn. We enjoyed a fine meal in the restaurant "Seven Seas", and later that evening we had a few drinks in one of the night clubs on board. This was a last luxury before 14 days of canned food.



Preparations are made to carry "STØT" all the way through the ferry and launch it nearby.

Early next morning we had breakfast in the "Seven Seas" enjoying the view of the Oslo Fiord. When the ferry moored we waited patiently until all the cars and lorries had left. Then we went out to explore the possibilities of launching "STØT" near the ferry. Some crew members lent us a hand carrying "STØT" all the way through the ferry. We carefully launched it 20 metres east of the ferry. Once our boat was in the water we started to load the fore and aft compartments with our gear and provisions. To see "STØT" next to "Crown of Scandinavia" certainly put things into perspective.

When our boat was loaded we thanked the crew and set off. We passed Akershus (the fortress of Oslo) - before we headed south.

As planned beforehand we changed seats every 20 minutes. This meant 40 minutes of rowing and 20 minutes of steering – 10 hours a day – at least. The weather was cloudy and we felt a light breeze springing up from the west.

We were already on our way home, and we could not help discussing whether it was a waste of money to go to Oslo and only stay in the city for one hour. Not much tourism here.



We loaded “STØT” for the first time. Most people are surprised how much gear the compartments can hold.

At lunch time we arrived at Drøbak. This is the place where Niels Quist had to spend the night in 1989 due to a strong southerly wind. It was a pleasant thought as we continued towards Moss. We reached Moss Rowing Club later that day. The fiord was extremely beautiful, and people showed great interest in us and our project. Gunwale rigged rowboats are seldom seen, especially flying the Dannebrog (the Danish flag). The only drawback was the amount of happy Norwegians in their speedboats, who could not care less about their stern waves. They seemed unaware of the effects of the turbulence they caused. We phoned the chairman of Moss Rowing Club and were kindly invited to spend the night in the club house and use their kitchen and bathroom.

The next morning we continued southbound towards Fredrikstad, which we arrived at late in the afternoon. The rowing club at Fredrikstad was built late in the 19th century, and was now undergoing a needed renovation. The few rowers we met thought that our project was sensational and even tried to contact the local newspaper.



Lunch on the 2nd day en route to Fredrikstad.

The third day it rained cats and dogs. The destination was Strömstad in Sweden. Due to the heavy rain we decided to take shelter on a small island. We found a small dock and tied our boat. Nearby was a cottage in a clearing. Standing outside in the heavy rain it looked very inviting. Jesper pulled himself together and went up the few steps and knocked on the door. A charming lady in her thirties wearing a partly buttoned red nightie opened the door. Trying to seem unaffected Jesper asked if we could take shelter until the weather improved. He must have made a good impression, because five minutes later we were sitting in the cosy, warm living room drinking coffee and watching the Tour de France on the telly with Norwegian Gunhild and Michael, her Swiss colleague and friend.

Being wet and cold we were more grateful for their hospitality than you can imagine.

After a couple of hours we continued our journey. We crossed the border to Sweden, and later that evening we arrived at Strömstad. The rain continued to pour down, and unfortunately we could not find the rowing club. We searched desperately for a couple of hours in the heavy rain, but had to learn from the locals that it was situated up a river not accessible from the sea. We gave up the thoughts of the rowing club. We tried the sailing club – also without success - and finally headed for a vacant piece of land opposite the town. Everything was soaking wet, but we managed to put up the tent. No outside cooking that night, our supper only consisted of rye bread with liver paste and aquavit. The rain continued.....

In the morning we spread out our wet clothes on the rocks and bushes to dry in the sun. On this, the fourth day, we rowed through a labyrinth of islands, reefs, rocks, and shallow wa-

ters in the Swedish archipelago. Even helped by the charts and compass it was difficult not to get lost. We were forced to row here instead of the open waters due to the strong south-west wind.

We often had to remove the rudder or the flag to be able to pass through low bridges and shallow waters. In Havstenssund we provisioned. Leaving Havstenssund we were unprotected, and we were soon forced by the waves to camp in a sheltered area.



Morning in Strömstad. The rain has stopped, and we spread out our wet clothes on the rocks and bushes.

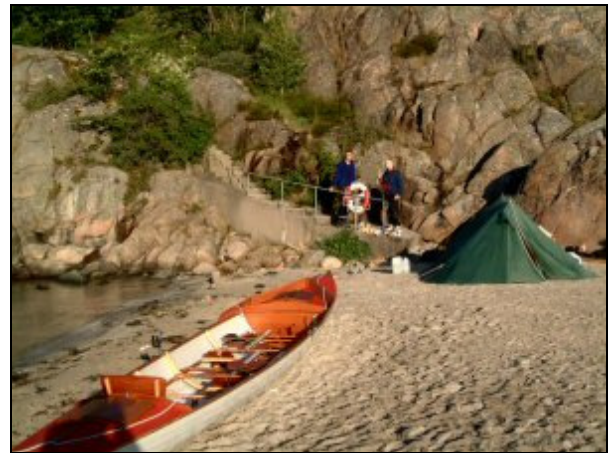


Lunch on day 4. We rowed inside the Swedish archipelago because of the wind.

On the fifth day we rowed in sheltered waters again. We passed the “Sotenkanalen” – a very long and narrow channel with extremely heavy traffic. It was a stressful experience but also exciting. We passed a Viking ship, and the Nordic crew made “a human wave” and cheered loudly to acknowledge our Viking-like expedition. Later that day we ran into some heavy showers and had to seek shelter on land, this time under a shed roof only.

In the evening we reached Malmö – a big island Niels Quist camped on in 1989. He thought he could remember the location of a

very suitable camp site on this very rocky island. But he could not, and our efforts finally brought us to a public beach that had to do for the night. Though we never found the targeted camp site, it turned out to be a satisfying place.



Camping at the second best camp site on Malmö.



Provisioning on Gullholmen en route to Marstrand. Just room to squeeze in “STØT”.

After a relatively uneventful day of interminable rowing we reached Marstrand. We found a shallow, muddy bay and put up our tent on the bank. This beautiful camp site had soft green grass, mirror-like water, and swans. We enjoyed a red sunset with Carlsten – the famous Swedish fortress – in the horizon.

The roaring of a herd of bulls woke us up the next morning. They had gathered 30 metres away, and obviously our tent was blocking their way to the meadow. Not quite unaffected by their presence we immediately struck our tent, and the bulls passed more quietly than expected, while we loaded our boat.

This was the first day we allowed ourselves a shorter distance of rowing. It took us only five hours to reach one of the rowing clubs in Gothenburg. For the first time in five days we

could now again enjoy the hospitality of a rowing club with modern conveniences.



We struck our tent to let the young bulls pass to the meadow.

In Gothenburg we were visited by Mia, Jan's girlfriend, who brought Danish rye bread, and a home baked cake. (Yum yum). That night the usual canned food was replaced by pizzas bought at the local pizzeria. We were now half way – and until now everything went smoothly.

North of Gothenburg we had been able to find sheltered waters inside the archipelago. After Gothenburg this possibility would soon end, and the coastline would be unprotected for the rest of the trip. This could become a problem as the weather showed no sign of improvement.

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Part Two

We left Gothenburg and stuck close to the coast, because the wind was still strong and coming from southwest. After less than 20 kilometres we had to throw in the towel and look for a suitable place to put up the tent. The waves simply grew too big and fierce for any rowing. We camped on a peninsular called "Vallda Sandö". It was a huge nature reserve occupied by three sheep. The nature was grand, but our time was not for fooling around, and we retired early for the night hoping for an extremely early start in the morning.

We woke up at 3 a.m. on the ninth day, and had to admit that the wind was still too much. We waited and waited, and late that afternoon we were finally able to leave.

In the evening we got to the island called "Balgö" – only seven kilometres from the

Swedish town Varberg – and a rowing club. We discussed whether we could reach Varberg, and the comfort of sleeping in a club house, but the daylight faded, and we camped on the island. A mere meadow with a lot of cows, deer and a single farmhouse. As soon as the sun set, it turned cold and we turned in. Generally the nights were cold. Probably about 10 Centigrades.



Preparations for dinner on Vallda Sandö.

On the tenth day we finally came to Varberg, and again we could go no further. Wind, wind, and wind again - always from the wrong direction, the southwest. Headwinds, and directly from the open ocean, the Skagerak. We spent most of the day in the club house, but also strolled to town to buy some provisions and delicacies to comfort ourselves. Here we bought the first ice cream on the trip, and we enjoyed it in a crowded café.

On the trip we used a small transistor radio to listen to the weather forecasts from the Danish Kalundborg medium wave and long wave band radio station. A Danish radio service for fishermen, yachts, and ships. The service transmitted the extended weather forecast four times a day and offered good and precise information. Listening to these forecasts soon became the highlights on days when we were forced by the weather to stay on land. Whenever we turned it on and the transmissions began, I came to think of World War II, when the resistance movement listened to the British Radio for important, coded messages. Not that I have experienced this myself, but so many historical documentaries and movies have given us this picture.

Varberg Rowing Club had a television set. It was a luxurious existence. We enjoyed the shower, the soft sofas, and the visits by the

chairman of the club. As always when the weather was against us, we tried to get away during the night, but the wind was still too strong, so we went back to sleep hoping to find a change of weather at dawn.

The eleventh day brought no news as to the weather, and we did not move at all. We bought more food for the remaining trip, ate more ice cream, and I visited the Fortress of Varberg – now a very interesting museum. We relaxed, and the once so sore muscles and backs nearly cried to continue. The urge to get on grew immensely. The following night we succeeded.

We were on the water at half past 4 a.m. – and it was smooth as a millpond. The weather was again with us, which is pretty necessary for this exposed stretch. Only few harbours and nearly no islands at all. Actually one of the trip's most uninspiring stretches of coast. After dawn we got some waves against us, but not more than we could cope with. In Falkenberg we ate lunch, and late afternoon we entered the bay "Laholmsbugten". The goal was Halmstad. To get to the rowing club we had to row up a river, Nissan. Quite an extraordinary tour, bringing you through the quite big town of Halmstad before you arrive at the rowing club. We soon worked out that something was up. It seemed as if all citizens were on the Great Migration. The streets were full of people who shouted and made a racket.

When we got to the rowing club we found out why. Fifty metres from the club house was a rather huge football stadium (soccer) - and the place swarmed with security men and dead drunk football fans. We were dog-tired after having been on the water for fourteen hours, but also a bit worried that "STÖT", which was to spend the night on a small lawn, would be crushed by Swedish football hooligans. However, it seemed reassuring that the rowing club was protected by a barbed wire fence and other measures of precaution. This, our twelfth day, was a Friday and consequently we had to make a few extra telephone calls on our mobile phone to persuade a responsible person to spoil the evening and let us into the club house. Either the members were watching football or they had guests. But finally we succeeded, and – as always – the rowing clubs are driven by hospitable and kind people. The menu was – for the very last time – canned mock olive turtle (some kind of meat in a sauce) - which we had eaten three

other nights on the trip. Do you know that the meat in it is tongues from calves? If it had not been for the invention of ketchup I would surely have died of hunger. That night we slept like logs.

The next morning we rowed across the Laholmsbugt in a fine weather. It was a bit foggy so we kept close to the shore. About midday we got out of the Laholmsbugt and had lunch in Torekov, the last harbour before the large and deep bay of Skäldervik. Afterwards we set off to pass the Skäldervik, and this went smoothly, too. Now we headed for Kullen. Kullen is a very beautiful, rocky cape. To reach Kullen meant something special for us. Zealand (the island on which Copenhagen is located) can be seen from Kullen in a clear weather. This meant that our goal was soon to be in sight. What an encouragement. Unfortunately the weather was still foggy when we arrived, so we could not see Zealand as we had hoped. Later that evening, before we made it to Höganäs Rowing Club, we ran into a shower. Wet as always Niels Quist contacted the chairman of the rowing club, and we were invited to spend the night in their club. Not far from the location of Höganäs Rowing Club was a small restaurant. A lovely smell of roast pork wafted our way, and we had to fight the temptation to go in and buy our supper. We had to pass it about 5 times to get all our gear to the club house. However, we felt obligated to eat our canned food and boiled pasta. We knew that if the weather would remain like this, we would be home in Rungsted the following day.

On the fourteenth day the weather was still foggy. The clouds in the sky were heavy with rain but the wind was not a problem, so we continued south towards Helsingborg. Just before we got there the rain started pouring down and everything got soaking wet. Somehow it did not dampen our spirits this time, as we finally could see Zealand. Our plan was to cross the Sound (the sound between Zealand and Sweden) immediately south of Helsingborg to avoid most of the ferry traffic, but before we passed the harbour, which the ferries from Denmark use, a strange incident occurred. On this very day a group of the young folks from Rungsted Rowing Club had ended their rowing trip in Dalsland in Sweden. They had rowed partly through the Dalsland Canal, and were camping for the last time. Some

parents went from Denmark to Sweden to pick up the youngsters. We were waiting for a ferry to pass inbound before we crossed the harbour entrance. On the ferry were Hanne and Jens Peter, two of our friends, on their way to transport the young people home. Suddenly Hanne cheered and waved from the sun deck of the ferry – and Jens Peter hurried downstairs to get his camera from the car. On his way up he had to fight his way against the stream of people heading for the car deck to leave the ferry. But fortunately they succeeded in getting some good photos of us as the ferry passed and moored.



One of the photos from the ferry. "STØT" seems very small.

After we had passed Helsingborg we set course for Zealand. We used the compass to make sure that we took the safest and shortest route across the Sound. The traffic in the Sound was very heavy as always, but we managed to get across. It took forty minutes and we ran into some heavy showers. As soon as we reached the Danish shore we made fast at Elsinore Rowing Club to have lunch and change to dry clothes. It was a great feeling to be back in Denmark. The last part of our trip went smoothly, as we were now in well known waters. The fog was getting denser, but it did not bother us now. Before long we would be able to see the harbour in Rungsted. It was at this moment only four kilometres from Rungsted that we met a strange looking craft. It looked like a rowing boat, but a very old fashioned and heavy kind. As we got closer we could see that the boat flew the Norwegian flag. The rower in the boat was a man with a great beard and glasses. He was dressed in orange rainwear and when he finally noticed us, he stopped rowing. We asked him where he was from, and he told us that he had rowed from Oslo and he was

heading for Greece. Until now he had spent five weeks to get this far.



Ivar Samuelsen on his way to Greece.

We also told him briefly about our trip and mutually impressed we both took out our cameras and took photos. The lonely rower was Ivar Sammuelsen. (He became famous for rowing all the way to Greece, where he arrived the next summer). We continued the last few kilometres and were finally looking at a very familiar spot. We were home.

In Rungsted Rowing Club we were welcomed by family and friends. They had brought flags, champagne and cake. Later, when Ivar passed, we invited him to moor and celebrate with us. He happily did, and while we unpacked our gear and talked about our trip, our chairman invited Ivar to spend the night in the rowing club before he rowed on.



A warm reception awaited us in Rungsted.

Epilogue

It was an amazing experience, and I sincerely hope that others will try to do the same. And perhaps in many years I might want to go on a trip like this again. I am deeply grateful to Jesper and Quist, and I am glad to have shared this experience with them.