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EXCLUSIVE / David Coulthard talks to Baltic Outlook
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Where the East
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Tbilisi

The forecast calls for *rapujuhla*:

Adventures of a thirty something-year-old crayfish virgin

TEXT AND PHOTOS: ROGER NORUM, AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE NEW ROUGH GUIDE TO FINLAND

Finland's short summers bring everyone out to the countryside for sauna get-togethers and skinny-dipping parties during long, white balmy nights. However, once the Scandinavian summer cools off, Finland's crayfish season heats up, making early autumn the perfect time to come and take part in this unique Nordic ritual.

I arrived unannounced recently for a short stay in Åland, that group of over 6000 islands and skerries splayed out in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden. After befriending a group of jovial islanders, I found myself invited to an all-night soiree. After dinner, we all stripped to our skivvies and headed into the sauna to sweat it up, then jumped into the chilly lake water, which was lit up with colorful paper lanterns heralding the end of the summer season. At some point, I heard the clock strike 2 a.m., but we were all still wide awake. Someone had once again turned up the tango music and the partying wasn't going to end anytime soon.



Finns are fanatics of classic cars. When I arrived at the cabin on Åland's northern coast, there were old Saabs, Mercedes, Triumphs and Chevrolets parked outside and tango music was lilting from a nearby radio.



Traditionally, freshwater crayfish are caught in traps or nets baited with herring or sunfish. Ours had been caught that morning in nearby Tjudö, where the island's famous apple brandy is distilled. The *Astacus astacus* – Scandinavia's sole natural crayfish species – is also known as the "noble crayfish," as it is the *crème de la crème* when it comes to taste.

Once the dinner bell rang, the eight of us sat down at a table by the water's edge, where the air was thick with the aroma of smoked sausages, along with the smoke of a wood-heated sauna. On draught were *Stallhagen* (Åland's local brew) and *Lapin Kulta* (Finland's national beer), but we started things off with a shot of *Älvados*, the local 42% apple brandy, which is a great appetizer.



The crayfish party or *rapujuhla* in Finnish, is usually enjoyed in the great outdoors. Since 75% of Finland's territory is covered with vast tracts of forested wilderness and another 10% consists of inland waterways, this is rarely a problem. Be sure to head straight to an inland lake or to the Baltic archipelago.



You are left with a diminutive critical mass of crayfish meat, which you scoop out with your fingers and a small tong, sprinkling it on top of a slice of crispy toast spread with dill, local caraway cheese and lemon butter (or mayonnaise). This is repeated until the catch has been consumed, or until you have reached some state of intoxication: beer and liquor are consumed in no small quantity during the meal.



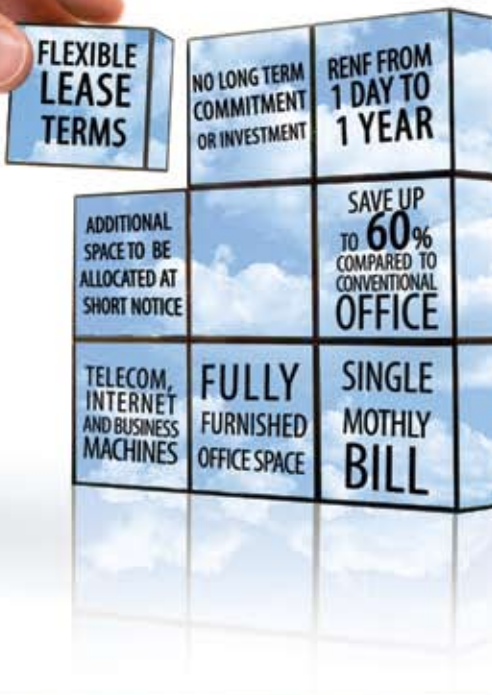
While there may be more than one way to disembowel a crustacean, the Finnish method involves cracking the neck, removing the head, tearing off the main shell and then stripping out the single strand of intestinal tract, which should peel easily out of the body.



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E- mail office@EOSystem.lt

Created and managed by ARTAPRO,
office@artaPRO.lt, PH +37066353277



Local Älänningars send off colorful paper lanterns lit with candles out to sea, bringing an end to the summer and welcoming autumn.



Åland's most smashing place to stay is this gorgeous, elegant resort right on the archipelago's north shore – perfect for a crayfish evening with friends. They even have an authentic smoke sauna and large jacuzzi for kicking back afterwards.

📍 fly to Helsinki, Turku or Stockholm, HavsVidden (+ 358 184 9408; www.havsvidden.com)

Alternatively, head to mainland Finland's Lake District for a lovely evening on the shores of a quiet, remote waterway. Easily the best place in the country to learn the ins and outs of crayfish culture, an evening here includes lessons by Lord of the Manor Pasi Heinonen, who will guide you gingerly through the ritual, ensuring that you avoid any *faux pas* in crayfish consumption.

📍 fly to Tampere, where Crayfish Manor (+358 44 592 9429; www.rapukartano.fi)

📍 For more information on Finland, visit www.visitfinland.com/uk

Special thanks to Visit Åland (www.visitaland.com) and GoTampere (www.gotampere.fi).

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