

SECRET TRIPS

A full-page photograph of a sumo wrestler standing in front of a building with a grid-like facade. The wrestler is wearing a light brown kimono with a colorful floral pattern and a wide white belt. The image has a red gradient overlay on the left side.

ISSUE 02

We discover TOKYO's hot spots, reveal the world's best TREEHOUSES to stay in, uncover the vibrant bar scene in NEW ORLEANS and explore the hidden secrets of MILAN, as well as bringing you a host of insider travel tips

UK £12
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A Viking Heritage

J Craft boats are proudly made by hand in Sweden. Just ask their Master Builder why that makes them so different

Words **PETER HOWARTH**

‘Historically it was so important to be able to build boats on this island that there is a law on Gotland that says any boat builder can go into any person’s forest and pick out the self-grown parts of a tree that are needed.’ This is Johann Hallén, Master Boat builder at J Craft, the luxury motorboat maker that is based on the Swedish island of Gotland.

‘This is especially important if you are looking for the wood to make the front of a boat or the keel – the shapes that are difficult to find, where you want one piece to make it as strong as possible,’ explains Hallén. ‘So you were able to take it wherever you found it – not the whole tree but the branches and part of the trunk, to get the right shape.’

Hallén, a native of Gotland, and former Swedish Navy mine diver, who has been making boats all his life, says that while this is technically still the right of anyone in need of material for a boat-build, nobody makes use of it. ‘Because nobody still builds wooden boats here.’ Except, arguably, J Craft, but technically it is only the deck and cladding that is wood – mahogany and teak – while the hull is made from fibreglass.

However, there is another tradition that is still very much visible on the island, and is related to the history of wood in boat building here. On the shingle beaches you will see decomposing and rotting hulls of fishing boats, left exposed to elements. ‘These little boats are laid to rest here,’ explains Hallén. ‘Everybody in the villages on Gotland, however far inland, had the right to build a fishing hut, because fish and seal were the most important ways to get protein to survive the winter. So everybody fished.’

He says that when these boats reached the end of their lives, the people would build new ones, but instead of destroying or burning the old ones, they would leave them to rot. ‘It was a way of letting the boats become part of a cycle – returning them to the earth, which is where they came from in the first place as trees. It’s really beautiful,’ says the Master Boat builder.

Hallén likes this story, as for him Gotland is an elemental place, surrounded by the harsh Baltic sea, that has spawned generations of voyaging Swedes. He jokes that he and the other craftsmen who hand-build J Craft here are true Vikings, but looking at him, with



RECYCLABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY ARE SO IMPORTANT TO US BECAUSE IT TAPS INTO THE TRADITION OF THE ISLAND

From left J Craft’s high-tech Torpedo; Gotland’s tradition of allowing old boats to rot and return to the earth

his large stature and grey ponytail, and his equally well-built colleague Zoltan, all tattoos and beard, it’s hard not to think there’s something in this.

And a J Craft Torpedo, though at first glance a beautiful machine redolent of the sun-kissed glamour of the ‘60s Riviera, is actually built to be ocean-going. The aesthetic may be one of hand-crafted carpentry, but the engineering ‘under the hood’ is super high-tech, with Swedish Volvo IPS drives, gyroscopic stabilisers, Skyhook digital anchor and even remote steering. You don’t buy a J Craft to (just) potter about swimming and sunbathing. These boats can reach 47 knots and have a range of 300 nautical miles. And they sleep four in a cabin up front. Island hopping and coastal cruising are well within the craft’s capabilities, and one owner in the South of France even uses his to go for break-fast in Corsica.

But though J Craft are now moored in the Mediterranean and in America, it is the Nordic spirit of Gotland, Sweden’s largest island, that runs through the veins of all these vessels. It’s a special place, full of atmosphere, where

the history is palpable. There are nearly 100 medieval churches here, as well as numerous Viking burial grounds, and the fortified city of Visby, the capital and the location of J Craft’s shipyard, with its medieval city wall, is a Unesco World Heritage Site. Gotland was chosen by Swedish film-maker Ingmar Bergman as his final resting place, and for the haunting scene of Death playing chess with the knight in *The Seventh Seal*.

The first J Craft was made for the King of Sweden back in 1999 and there have only been 29 made since. Hallén has worked on all of them. ‘You know, the tradition of how we put the boats to rest here, the way we honour them and how they have served, this made us determined to find a way of making the J Craft as recyclable as possible,’ he says. ‘Recyclability and sustainability are so important to us because it taps into the tradition of the island. So while it would not be feasible to make our Torpedo with a wooden hull, we have instead developed a fully recyclable, vacuum-infused fibreglass hull, which is clad in a cultivated mahogany veneer, which is also recyclable.’ j-craftboats.com