

Ship happens!

by Przemysław Myszk

Another transport logistics interview in Munich saw us berthing at the booth of Wasaline. We spoke with Catarina Fant and Tony Ehres about the Finnish-Swedish ferry line's recent performance, especially its intermodal component, new travel trends, adding to the green credentials of *Aurora Botnia*, as well as receiving distinctions and campaigning for maritime awareness.

■ *How did Wasaline fare recently?*

Last year, our *Aurora Botnia* ferry carried 21,250 ro-ro cargo units, up 1.7% on the 2023 result. We owe it to the Finnish and Swedish markets being in a pretty healthy shape, as well as intermodal volumes coming all the way up & down on the Umeå-Southern Sweden-continent corridor. This year's volumes are more or less on par with 2024.

While Wasaline's base catchment area is the 400-500-kilometre trade lane west & east of Umeå and Vaasa, including the Norwegian coast, we'd really like to grow intermodally on the north-south axis as well. In fact, the 2024 advance was mainly thanks to the volumes coming by train. These are modest now, around 1.5% of the total, but we're working on bumping them up to 5%, either already this year or in 2026. Umeå is fortunate to have a railroad going into the seaport. The fundamental challenge with getting more cargo on rails is to convince clients they can exchange a good road service for an even better rail one. Test shipments are crucial in this regard, likewise showing that others are already using this service to their advantage. We are also counting on the logistics sector to embrace the sustainability movement more & more – and it's hard to imagine a greener combination than rail and our ferry if you want to move a truck or trailer

to Finland from the European mainland and vice versa. Wheeled cargo moving by rail inside Finland is trickier. It is possible already today, but only if one could provide sufficiently big volumes, e.g., on the Vaasa-Helsinki corridor.

The passenger side of the business is also doing decently enough, with over 253 thousand travellers taking a trip aboard *Aurora Botnia* in 2024. Recently, we noted a new trend, namely tourists coming in the first quarter of the year from less winter-ish countries, say Germany, to see a vessel passing through ice. That and, of course, the northern lights and the overall 'icy vibe' of the Kvarken Strait. There are groups booked for such trips for Q1 2026 already. This is a more than welcome change as each year's beginning, especially January, was a challenging period travel-wise. Also, we see more tourists from Central Europe coming with their campers.

■ *Your ferry is already running in hybrid mode – why did you decide to turn the volume up?*

Just before transport logistics in Munich, we shared that *Aurora Botnia's* battery pack will get bigger. AYK Energy will help us upgrade the ferry's current system of 2.2MWh by an additional 10.4MWh. Thanks to this upgrade, with dry-docking scheduled for

January 2026, Wasaline expects to cut the ship's greenhouse gas emissions by 23% – towards fully carbon-neutral operations by 2030. The ports of Umeå and Vaasa are already prepared to supply more electricity at shore. We are also very fortunate as this (hydro & wind) energy is both green and relatively cheap.

Just as a reminder, *Aurora Botnia* entered traffic on 28 August 2021, and her carbon footprint is already lower by nearly 80% per trip vs *Wasa Express*, the previous ro-pax serving the Umeå-Vaasa crossing. Naturally, in our case – the world's northernmost regular ferry service – a lot depends on the weather. Last year was pretty mild, meaning our energy demand was lower; 2023, however, saw a long, almost unending winter, with half a metre thick sea ice.

Apart from battery operations, our ferry runs on liquefied natural gas, including its bio-version. Clients, both passengers and cargo, have the option of offsetting their footprint while sailing with *Aurora Botnia*. We would love to run on bioLNG only – and bunker supply-wise; that's a doable thing today. However, the price spread is still prohibitive to make the switch and pay for the greener fuel solely out of our pocket. Then again, with all the regulations targeting the carbon footprint of shipping, this gap will probably narrow sooner rather than later. And there's also the walking-the-talk



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issue. On the passenger side, clients can pay two euros more to ‘bioLNG’ their trip, so to speak. It is an amount that most probably won’t send anybody debt-spiralling, but only around 1% of passengers actually go green. On a more positive note, all conferences booked on board *Aurora Botnia* are battery-powered, so CO₂-neutral. Regulations – old, new, and whatever pops up in the future – don’t stress us too much, as we’re already way more sustainable than what the law of today or tomorrow requires. Batteries, bioLNG, cold ironing in both ports – we’re the ones capitalising on the green transition, including the surplus compliance under the FuelEU Maritime Regulation.

■ **What is the Finnish Key Flag, and how did you achieve this distinction?**

Aurora Botnia has received it because it’s made domestically in over 80%. The ferry was put together by Rauma Marine Constructions, plus the technology and interior installations also came from Finland (just to mention Wärtsilä engines, Danfoss drives, and WE Tech energy solution, all from Vaasa). Another Key Flag has been granted because our crew is local. We are also part of Responsible Tourism Västerbotten and Sustainable Travel Finland, initiatives that are all about sustainability, not only from a technological point of view but also regarding operations, material use, onboard service, etc. Among others, we carry out courses on the circular economy with our crew. That is to get more action on real sustainability than just sweet talk about the importance

of (some future) greening – something the entire transport & logistics business could embrace more boldly.

■ **Is it easy or challenging to recruit & retain staff up in the North?**

Wasaline is a brand widely recognised in the region. Employing people does not loom large in our HR department. Particularly, Vaasa has a very rich maritime heritage, with families living off the sea generation after generation. That said, we’re partaking in the ‘Ship Happens’ campaign of the Finnish Shipowners’ Association, aimed at attracting new talent to the maritime industry. It is a very social media-heavy action, trying this way to familiarise potential seafarers with the ins & outs of life at sea, including adventure but also responsibility. ■