

Breaking Ice

There is something so fascinating about an icebreaker ship that one can easily conjure up stories of extremity, adventure and being in latitudes where man alone is powerless.

Icebreakers exude polar exotic. They are brawny, rugged and daring. To hear the sound of a 3,500 tonne icebreaker forcefully crush ice is to hear a noise few other machines can match. You feel it in your bones.

M/V Sampo, a Finnish icebreaker originally built in 1961, is a captivating ship with a beautiful soul. Her role now is to provide wintertime 'nautical tourism' in Kemi, Finland via short cruises (and ice swimming!) in the Gulf of Bothnia.

Petter Tähtinen is the charismatic captain of Sampo. He loves nature, being outdoors and mostly, he loves the sea. He has had a long maritime career, however ten of those years were at a desk job where he felt trapped. The sea has a hold on him and he itched to get back.

Petter masters Sampo as if she is his own child. (Ships are called 'she' for various reasons – some may say politically incorrect reasons – so for now, let's just go with: *because men love them.*)

He knows her abilities inside-and-out and he can at times push her. However, like a defiant child, she will in no uncertain terms challenge him as to who is boss.

Being a captain of an icebreaker requires special skills, yet none greater than knowing that the sea and ice demand respect. Although years of training have given Petter the tools to sail an icebreaker, instinctively he must at any moment know when to change course.

All the charts, computers, gadgets, bells and whistles cannot replace what is felt in his gut when nature decides to be in control. As a captain of an icebreaker, safety is paramount and room for error is limited.

Standing outside on the bow as Sampo crushes ice is like being in an IMAX movie with Dolby sound. For every moment the bow crunches ice and slabs of ice part ways, a movie frame is created. To witness each frame as the story unfolds is akin to watching a cinematic masterpiece.

And each thudding sound of a crashing wave, and each rhythmic swishing of water as she crevasses ice sheets, a note to the movie score is produced.

Being on M/V Sampo while she crushes ice is both meditative and exhilarating. It is a 'play in the ice' experience.

However, to truly experience Sampo's ice breaking power it is best to stand outside on the bow alone in silence. It is to engross yourself in the movie as it unfolds in front of you and allow the sound of ice breaking to surround you in its undiluted, knock-your-socks-off, kind of way.