

# CÉRÈS THROUGH THE RUSSIAN INLAND WATERWAYS, Part 1

## Thierry J-L Courvoisier

(Thierry is a Swiss astrophysicist whose main area of research is in the physics of active galactic nuclei. He is currently president of the European Academies Science Advisory Council.

Following an Atlantic cruise taking in the Cape Verde islands, French Guyana, Cuba, Bermuda and the Azores, in 2014 Thierry and Barbara sailed Cérès, their Centurion 40S, to the Baltic where she has been ever since – see Cérès in the Southern Baltic, Flying Fish 2014/2, and More Land than Sea – A Cruise in Finnish Waters, Flying Fish 2016/1.)

Cérès, our 40ft Centurion 40S, had spent some years in the Baltic Sea. We had sailed along its south coast (Poland and the Baltic States) and in the Finnish archipelago, enjoying the history of the region and nature in the latter (see *Flying Fish* 2014/2 and 2016/1). Cérès wintered in Helsinki in 2015/16, after which Barbara and I wondered whether we could exit the almost closed water system of the Baltic while discovering new territories.

Some years earlier we had enjoyed a few winter days in Tromsø, a large Norwegian city at 70°N with an important university, and found the light of the Arctic winter fascinating. It would be an interesting place to spend some more time, and I might be able to obtain a visiting position in an institute of the university. I therefore developed contacts in the Arctic University in Tromsø, and arranged an academic stay as invited professor for the winter semester 2016/17.

Looking at a European chart one sees that the most natural route between the eastern part of the Baltic and the Norwegian Sea leads along the east of the Scandinavian peninsula via Saint Petersburg, the great Russian lakes, the Belomorsk Canal, the White Sea, and up the Barents Sea to the northern tip of the European continent, from where one moves south again to Tromsø. Some elements of family history, related to Peter the Great and the origin of the Russian Northern Fleet, added to the attraction of this path. The route, without being exactly among the most popular cruising itineraries, has been sailed a few times in the last years, including by *Chamade* in 2012 and by Jarlath Cunnane aboard *Northabout* (*Flying Fish* 2013/1).

The OCC maintains a presence in Saint Petersburg through Port Officer Representative Vladimir Ivankiv, who is making considerable efforts to open Russian waters to cruising yachts. He already covers the Russian part of the Baltic sea, but also aims to make the route to the Barents Sea accessible to foreign vessels. Contacts with Vladimir in the months preceding our passage paved the way to obtaining the necessary visas and authorisations, and he also provided the required invitation and informed us of the conditions the Russian authorities imposed on those undertaking the voyage. These include, in principle, that a pilot is aboard for the whole passage, but it is interpreted lightly for sailing boats and translated into the requirement that we have one Russian crew member. We thus looked for and found Masha, a young student from Arkhangelsk, who took this opportunity to discover more of her country and culture. Masha is a French and English translator, a perfect combination for our



French-speaking crew. Her presence proved indispensable, as contacts with all sorts of authorities along the route were to be numerous, be it only to operate bridges and locks, and none of them spoke English.

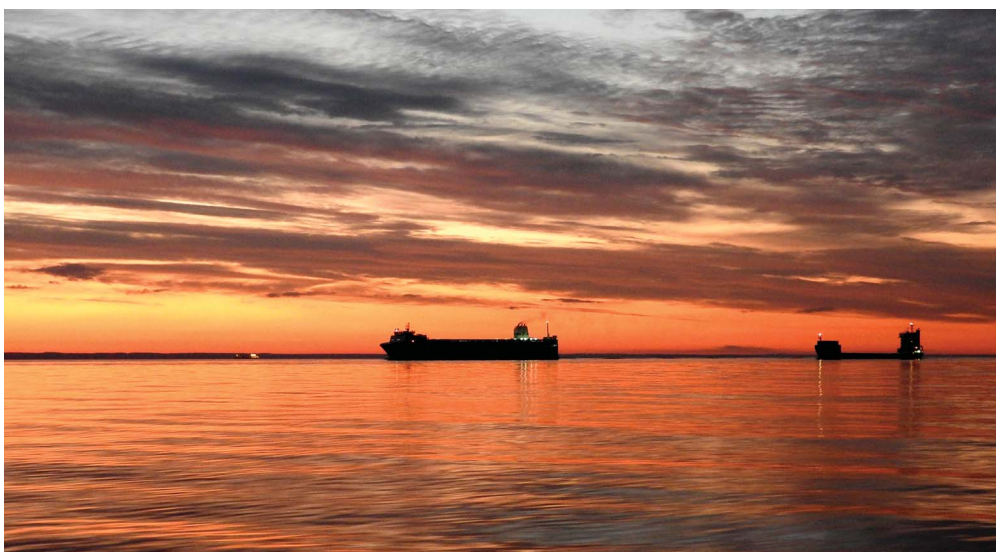
Professional duties made it impossible to leave Helsinki before 10 July, well after the Summer Solstice, on a day that started in as heavy a fog as one can imagine. We left harbour as soon as visibility was sufficient for safe crossing of the heavy ferry traffic between Tallin and Helsinki, after which settled winds from the west gave a few pleasant sailing days to Kotka, the last Finnish city before the Russian border.

Before entering Russian waters one must clear out of the European Union. This is done at Haapasaari, a small island 15 miles from Kotka where Finnish officials do the paperwork efficiently. The Russian authorities had to be informed of our approach 24 hours in advance, which Vladimir did. The Finnish officers clearing us out also informed their Russian colleagues of our impending arrival in their waters. We had been instructed to cross the Finnish-Russian border at mark Number 16, and to call the Russian coast guard on Channel 16 shortly before reaching the mark. Our call remained unanswered but we proceeded nonetheless.

We still had some 80 miles to sail eastwards in the Gulf of Finland to reach Kronstadt, a small city on an island 20 miles northwest of Saint Petersburg. We left Haapasaari in the late afternoon with the last of the westerlies, and sailed through a night of absolute calm lit by the beautiful colours of a sunset that ends in a sunrise. The strong and rainy easterlies that had been predicted reached us just few miles short of Kronstadt, ensuring a cold, wet arrival in Russia. Dykes extend from the coast on either side out to the island, leaving only a narrow opening in front of Fort Konstantin, just outside the city. Heavy doors can be seen on either side of the opening, which can be closed if weather conditions cause a surge in the water level of the eastern Baltic that could threaten Saint Petersburg.

The basin used by the authorities in Fort Konstantin is small, poorly protected from east winds, ill-equipped to moor a yacht, and generally most unpleasant. It was the first of many uncomfortable berths along our route. The entry procedure was somewhat

*On the eastern (Russian) waters of the Gulf of Finland, en route to Kronstadt*





*The port authorities' basin at Fort Konstantin near Kronstadt*

lengthy, but the officers friendly and helpful. Vladimir had given them all necessary details about our trip, and customs and the coast guard had the corresponding forms ready for us to fill. No payment was required. Paperwork done we tied nearby in Fort Konstantin, where we met Masha, our young Russian crew and interpreter.

We visited Kronstadt in pouring rain before sailing 20 miles the following day to Saint Petersburg Central River Yacht Club. We sailed east and northeast through thick brown waters, in southwest winds of force 4–7 and rain, following well-marked channels used by a heavy traffic of cargo ships and tourist hydrofoils flashing by in heavy black smoke. Vladimir had indicated that we should look for the wall of the harbour when approaching, but rather than seeing the harbour, a bridge under construction was conspicuous on our path. The construction work not being mentioned on any of our charts, we were happy when Vladimir indicated by phone that we had enough clearance to sail under it. It was the first time Masha had set foot on a sailing boat, and though moderately enjoyable it did not contribute much to making Masha love sailing. Our crew was completed in Saint Petersburg when Nicolas, a friend from Switzerland, met us. Nicolas is an excellent sailor and was to be on board for the entire passage to Norway.

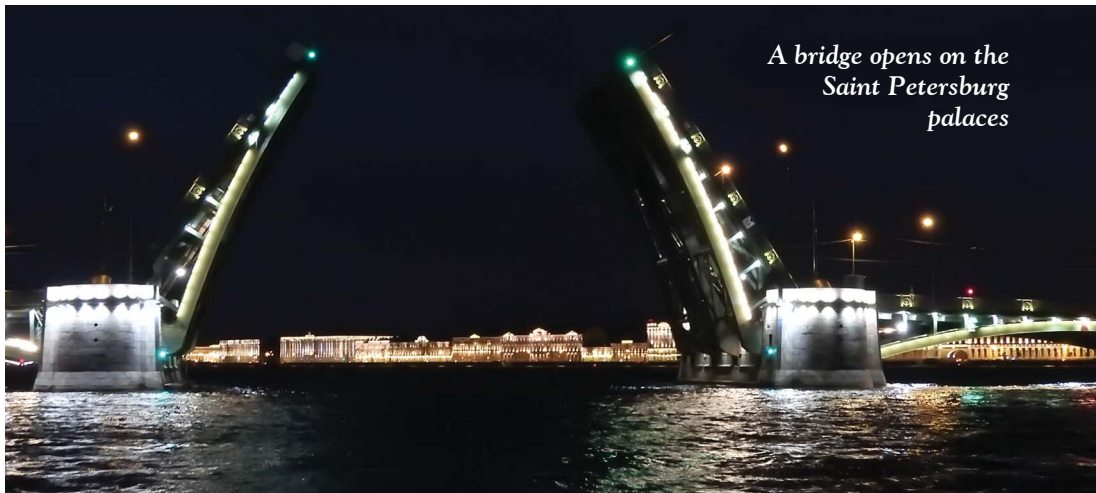
Saint Petersburg is a wonderful city enjoyed by a tremendous number of tourists. We did visit the sights for a couple of days, but concentrated on meeting old friends and preparing for the coming trip. Vladimir provided us with a VHF radio (frequencies differ from those of international maritime traffic), and verified both that we had the required documentation and that, with Masha's help, we were able to understand it. He also gave us a number of contacts along the route. Surprisingly Vladimir did not hand us any documents stating that we had paid the dues for the locks, bridges and canals, nor any official passage authorisation papers. He simply stated, and was proven right during the following weeks, that all necessary paperwork had been done, authorisations obtained and required sums paid, and that our passage was expected along the route we had provided in advance.





*Cérés' crew. From left to right, Nicolas, Barbara, Thierry and Mashav*

The first leg of our journey started at midnight on 20 July. The mandatory Saint Petersburg pilot, organised by Vladimir as part of the arrangement, arrived at the boat, as expected. Before leaving he described the route and the procedures to motor through the city bridges, and we slipped our lines at 0100 to be ready when the bridges open at 0200. What a sight! Sliding in front of the lit palaces of the city, during the night with a hint of light left in the north and the moon in the south. By 0600 we were motoring up the Neva River through the city suburbs, less glamorous but still in a reasonable shape. We left our pilot on the bank and continued towards the next bridge on our own.



*The Hermitage Palace  
illuminated as we  
motor past*



The last bridge on the Neva River before reaching Shlisselburg and Lake Ladoga is a railway bridge that opens only between 1600 and 1800. We had to motor as fast as possible to be there in time, sailing against a strong current and a strengthening headwind. We arrived just in time. Masha established communication and the bridge opened to the required height, which obviously had been communicated in advance. Arriving in Shlisselburg in cold, wet and windy conditions that evening was no fun – what had looked on the chart as a possible shelter was in fact a derelict dike, no pontoon or quay was to be seen, and the port authorities were unhappy to see a yacht arrive without a proper pilot. We were finally directed to a floating crane where we understood we could tie up. Lots of rusting steel, but good fenders and lines allowed

*Cérès moored alongside a floating  
crane in Shlisselburg*



for safe berthing in the prevailing conditions. The city was drab. Some of the wooden buildings were partly derelict, others in decaying concrete of the 1960s, a few of them abandoned. Trees often grew close to the walls and windows, adding a gloomy touch to the sight. The whole city had a sad and hopeless feel.

The fortress of Oreshek lies on an island two or three miles from Shlisselburg towards Lake Ladoga. There was no way to visit with *Cérès* in the absence of a place to tie up, but there is a ferry service. The island has been used as a fortress for many centuries, and was a strongpoint of the Soviet resistance to the Nazi invasion during the Second World War – one of those places which were key to the Nazi's defeat in Russia. Reading *Kaputt* by Curzio Malaparte gives some idea of war conditions in and around Leningrad, and of the suffering and efforts endured by Soviet people during the war. This is remembered in the fortress by a monument in Soviet flamboyant style in the middle of the ruins of the church that once stood at the centre of the fortress. The ensemble of the black monument within the bare red brick ruins is deeply moving. It reminded us that the victory against Nazism owed much to Soviet efforts. The Russian Orthodox establishment is seemingly battling now to get its hands back on the church. They want to move the monument out of the ruins and rebuild a church or monastery, to which the local people object. Indeed, the present arrangement is a vivid illustration of a time of acute fighting in which the whole local population paid a heavy toll.

The fortress was also a prison in which the tsars incarcerated dissidents, as happened in the 1820s when Tsar Nicholas I imprisoned the Decembrists there. That part of the detention facilities can be visited. The Soviets kept the tradition of using the island as a prison, and developed the detention facility for what must have been ugly practices. Indeed, part of it was called 'the menagerie' because there were no walls inside, just wired fences, giving inmates no privacy whatsoever. Those days are past, and now the island is visited by Russian tourists and a few from abroad, who arrive from Saint Petersburg on fast hydrofoils for a couple of hours on site.

*The  
monument  
to the  
memory of  
the Soviet  
war effort  
at Oreshek*

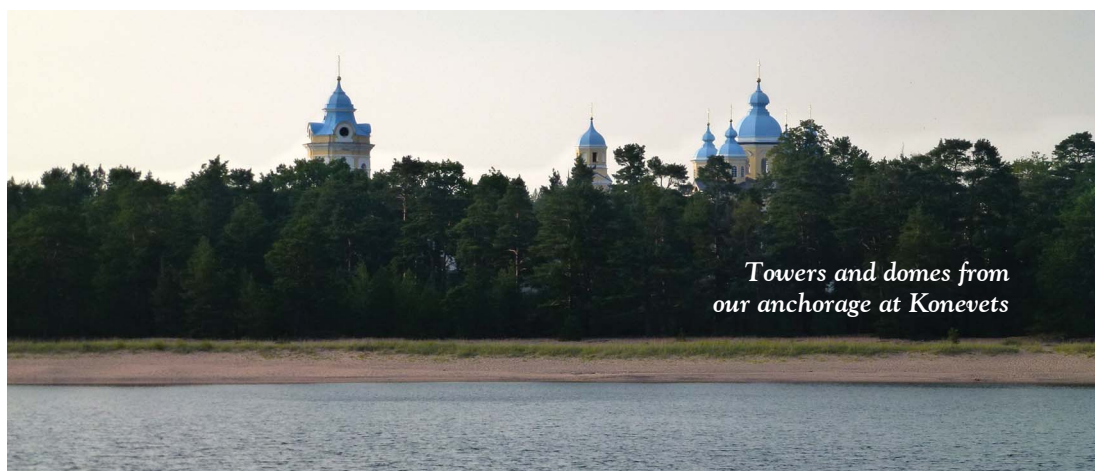




The day of our visit to Oreshek the weather was brilliant. The forecast for the next day was not so nice, but it did promise some pleasant sailing while moving north on Lake Ladoga. Things were to turn out differently, however. The sun shone between 0600 and 0700 while we prepared the boat, but fog appeared just as we were ready to sail. Radio contacts had warned us that conditions on the lake could be dramatic, with an operator questioning us on the maximum wave height that Cérès can tolerate – a somewhat disconcerting question when approaching a lake that is large (more than 100 square miles) but no ocean, and in winds expected not to exceed force 5–6.

The current around the fortress was strong, around 4 knots, making for slow progress in the channel that led to the open waters of the lake. The fog lifted, but rain set in as the wind kept blowing from the north, the direction we were heading to reach Konevets, an island some 70 miles away. We motor-sailed for the first nine hours in cold, wet weather, but conditions eased towards the end of the day giving us four hours of sailing close to the wind. As we approached the island from the south it became quiet, with some wind left under a grey sky on flat waters. The island is home to a monastery, the light blue domes of which shone above the grey of the sea and green of the forest as we approached. We dropped anchor in 4-5m and enjoyed the endless cool calm of the evening.

Next morning military ships brought a host of people, whom we later identified as pilgrims, to a shabby wooden quay. We disembarked on the beach using our dinghy and started to make our way to the monastery. On the beach we were greeted by officials requiring that Barbara and Masha wore skirts and covered their heads, while men had to wear long trousers. So equipped we walked to the monastery, an ensemble of buildings around the white church under its blue domes. There are two churches in the central building, one on the ground floor, richly decorated and one above in lighter tones. The lower of these spaces can be heated and is used during the winter, while the top one is used during the warmer months. All the people who had been brought by the military boats were there, mainly women. A liturgy that seemed to have begun long before our arrival, and that was to continue long after our departure, was proceeding. Priests and monks were singing in deep, strong voices while parading in rich robes of gold, white and dark colours, wafting generous quantities of incense smoke towards the standing crowd. We did not understand the meaning of the ceremony, but found the voices and the show beautiful and impressive. It was to be the only time we were to see the singing priests and monks, who usually remain hidden behind the iconostasis\*.



*Towers and domes from  
our anchorage at Konevets*



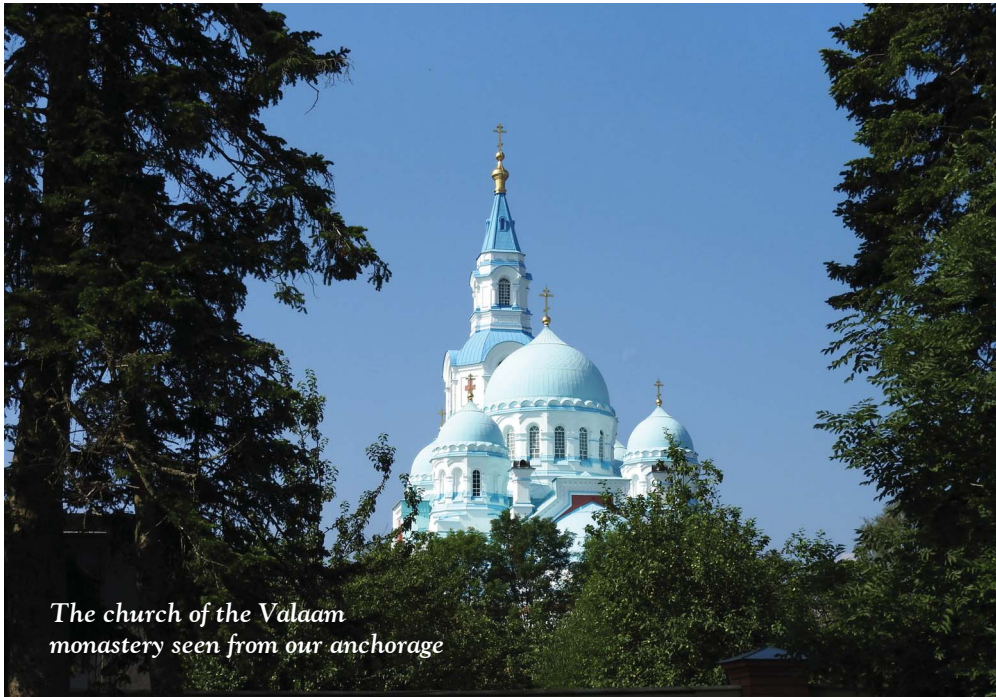


*Approaching the Konevets monastery*

Our friend Nicolas spends many of his holidays in Russia, most often climbing in exotic mountain ranges, and he thus developed a friendship with some young people from Saint Petersburg who were spending the summer camping on the north shore of the lake. Since the weather was calm we decided to visit their camp. This caused some stir within the authorities that were following our progress as it involved an unannounced stop some 30 miles from our declared route, but this seemed manageable for 24 hours. There were some 30 people camping there, the youngest a few months old and the oldest more than 80. They were many miles from the nearest village, road or shop. All had travelled by dinghy or kayak from the nearest point – some miles away – where cars could approach the lake, bringing all the equipment needed to keep them alive, dry, and for some of them working, for several weeks. They had built all the infrastructure on the spot, and would dismantle it when leaving. This included an ‘office’ – an open space with a wooden floor and protected by a tarp, which housed a large number of laptops on improvised tables. An internet connection provided them with access to the world. Life seemed pleasant on the sunny day we spent there, children playing, men building and women tending the cooking fires.

The following day we sailed to Valaam, a monastery on an island which forms part of an extended archipelago in the northern third of the lake. We carefully entered the narrow, shallow fjord that leads to the monastery, far too slowly, according to the captain of the hydrofoil which entered behind us to discharge a load of pilgrims at the pier. We dropped anchor some way past the pier, a spot not quite to the liking of an official who had little idea of swinging space around an anchor. The sky was bright blue. Seen from our deck the monastery rose above the trees of a thick forest, its walls

\* In Eastern Christianity an iconostasis is a wall of icons and religious paintings which separates the nave of a church from the sanctuary.



*The church of the Valaam monastery seen from our anchorage*

dark red crowned by light blue onions. We joined a crowd of monks and pilgrims on the shore and walked up the hill to the main building. The monastery has the same structure as in Konevets – two churches stand one above the other, the summer one on the top. Monks hidden by the iconostasis were singing as we visited, beautiful, luminous, low voices again following endless liturgies. The pilgrims departed in the late afternoon, leaving monks of all ages moving around the island, some by boat speeding by *Cérès*. The presence of a white yacht hoisting a Swiss flag seemed to be purposely ignored by all, a trait that we were to note more and more as we moved out of the routes sometimes followed by tourists.

The light on the evening of our second day was so gorgeous that after an extensive walk on the island we decided to reschedule our departure for the Svir River. Rather than waiting until next morning we left as the sun slowly sank into the trees. The narrow fjord was like a mirror in golden light as we left. We sailed east along the archipelago in the descending darkness, seeing no signs of life on the small islands draped in forest other than a bonfire here and there. We turned south after some hours, passing through a strait between islands lit by two lighthouses, aiming south for the mouth of the Svir River some 70 miles away. Arriving there the following afternoon we first found an isolated red and white clear water mark, the low shore barely visible in the distance, and entered a marked channel as little by little a marsh appeared on either side. It was only several miles further on that trees could be seen, indicating the sides of what had become recognisable as a river. But for a small working ship that had approached the channel as we did, and stopped there in the middle of nowhere, we were completely alone in an infinitely calm landscape.

Our charts indicated what I imagined would be a town or at least a village some miles up the river. I had planned to stop there for the night, but only a few scattered



houses could be seen – no pier, no quay, no place to tie a boat even for a few minutes. The shores were shallow, unsuitable for a sailing boat. We therefore pushed on, alone on the broad river now surrounded by thick forest, to reach a place marked on the chart as a possible anchoring spot. Nothing there but marshes and forests – no sign of human presence. The current was strong, with a fresh breeze blowing upstream. It was difficult to know whether wind or current would win to stabilise *Cérès* at anchor, and where we would rest once the anchor was laid. We had to try several times before being reasonably satisfied that *Cérès* would spend the night in sufficient depth.

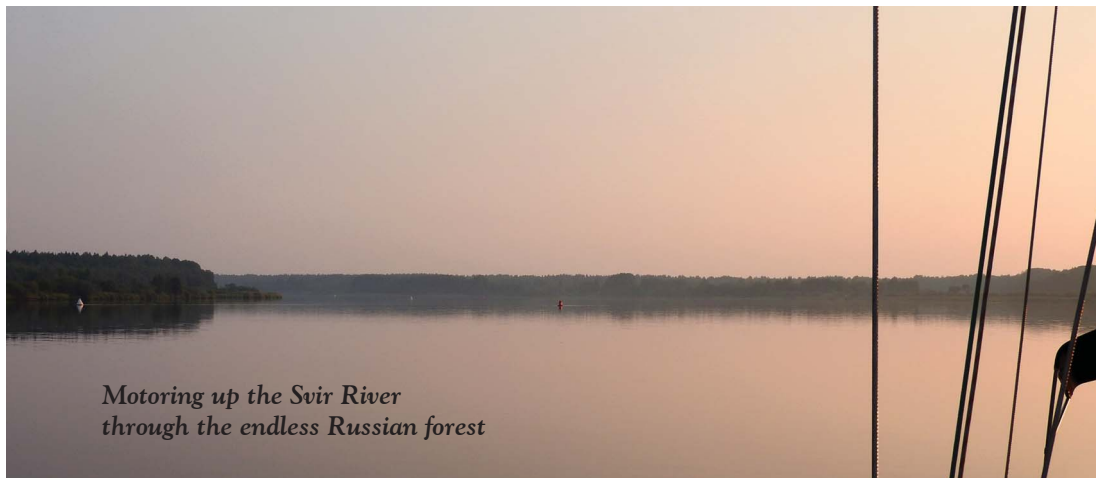
It was to be a perfect evening with drinks, food, light, warmth, quietness, a passing cargo ship every few hours, the sound of the wind on the nearby reeds. In the middle of the short night I realised that we were slowly drifting away from where we had stopped in the late afternoon, so stood watch until morning. When we lifted the anchor we understood – it had caught a heavy sunken tree trunk, which was bulky enough to hold us but not quite massive enough to prevent any drift. Once freed from the trunk we continued motoring upriver through endless thick forest for the whole day, only seeing the occasional *datcha*. Few people were seen on the shore or around the houses, and to our surprise they made every effort to avoid noticing the white boat passing by. Only children would make happy signs as we passed.

We stopped for another short night at a deserted resort on the riverside. After some hesitation, apparently because tourist ships might arrive, we were shown a barge alongside which we could tie for the night. Deserted log houses were organised around a large, completely empty, restaurant where we had a meal. Stretching our legs after 2½ days on board was a pleasure, even if the surroundings felt like a sterile, empty resort for wealthy but non-existent Russian tourists.

*Datchas along the Svir River*







*Motoring up the Svir River  
through the endless Russian forest*

A further day of motoring upstream led to another isolated anchorage, in an elbow of the river out of the current. A chapel could be seen on the shore and some houses in the distance, to and from which a fast, light motorboat moved at times. But here, as elsewhere, nobody approached us, and we spent another night in the quiet of the endless Russian forest. It was to be yet another day of motoring before we reached an area where some human activity took place, old timber industries flanking the river before we reached a lock and a bridge. We waited at anchor in front of the bridge for it to be opened and the lock made ready. Masha was again hard at work on the radio conversing with the various officials.

With these obstacles behind us another hour or so led us to Voznesenye, where the Svir River exits Lake Onega, the second largest lake in Europe. Finding a spot to tie Cérès needed another round of communication with various officials. We were told to tie alongside two motor boats which had already seen many years of use, inhabited by elderly men. The boat owners, however, warned us that they would leave in late afternoon as strong thunderstorms were expected and the place was not sheltered. We were then to tie to a half-stranded steel barge, despite having barely enough water under our keel. While waiting for the storm we went to the supermarket, the first since Shlisselburg, a necessary stop after many days living off the boat's resources. The two men helped us carry our groceries back, a welcome gesture as the supermarket was quite some way down the river.

When leaving the two men warned us that, whereas our boat would probably be safe during the storm, we should watch for groups of young people who used the spot to drink significant amounts of alcohol and could become aggressive. And indeed, as clouds approached, so did some ten or fifteen mostly young people carrying large plastic bottles of a colourless liquid that was most probably not water. Thinking that the best way to deal with the situation was to engage with them, I went on deck and attempted to start a conversation. But either they did not speak English or they did not want to talk with me, or a combination of both, and the dialogue never got off the ground. I went on insisting, however, to the point that after a while they left. The storm did not materialise beyond some wind and rain, and we enjoyed a quiet evening and night.

To be continued...

