

## THE BALTIC: Stockholm to St Petersburg Ernie Godshalk, Roving Rear Commodore, and Ann Noble-Kiley

*(Ernie sailed Golden Eye, his McCurdy and Rhodes-designed Hinckley Sou'wester 42, to Europe in 2010 and has spent seven of the last eight summers cruising in Scandinavia – see Flying Fish 2012/1, 2014/1 & 2 and 2016/2.*

*Ann has cruised Passport, her Hinckley Bermuda 40, from Canada to the Caribbean, as well as sailing aboard Golden Eye every summer since 2014. This past winter she and Ernie sailed Passport from Massachusetts down to Antigua – the perfect way to sail year-round!)*

Golden Eye's 2018 cruise included five weeks in the Stockholm archipelago and seven weeks in the Åland Islands, Helsinki, the Finnish lakes, St Petersburg and Tallinn, Estonia. Her crew also visited Moscow, albeit by train.

### The Stockholm Archipelago

The primary cruising guide for the archipelago, *Hamnguiden 8*, lists 300 harbours with chartlets and photos. We estimate that there are well over 1000 places in the archipelago where a yacht may comfortably – depending upon the wind direction – lie for the night. The inner archipelago (closer to Stockholm) generally has more protection from islands close together, high and covered with tall trees; the outer archipelago is more

*Ann Noble-Kiley and Ernie Godshalk*



remote, the islands are farther apart and they are lower with fewer or no trees.

Stockholm, the capital city of the Kingdom of Sweden, is itself an interesting cruising destination. It includes the magnificent Vasa Museum and the nearby Wasahamnen Marina and Gamla Stan (Old Town). It is a small and very attractive city, with nice walks and a network of ferries that connect the fourteen islands on which the city is built.



*Golden Eye at Sandhamn*

The island harbour of Sandhamn is the archipelago sailing centre of the Royal Swedish Yacht Club (KSSS, using its Swedish initials). This location has some of the characteristics and feel of Camden, Maine, or Newport, Rhode Island. We spent several nights there on three occasions, enjoying its excitement and attractiveness and meeting some of our many Swedish friends. The yachts are fabulous, including S&S yawls *Ballad* (owned by the family of KSSS Commodore Patrick Salén, who once owned *Bolero*) and *Refanut* (owned by the Wallenberg family).



*Ann and angry birds*

*A neat combination of bow  
pulpit and ladder*

*Golden Eye moored  
Baltic-style*



During our five weeks in the Stockholm archipelago in 2018 we enjoyed one of the best – and most unusual – summers in Swedish history. The water warmed to 25°C (77°F) and we swam

almost every day. Winds normally allowed sailing most of the day and were never excessive. It rained infrequently, but spectacularly. Wherever we went, we were welcomed and helped when needed – except by angry birds in the remotest islands.

In many places it is possible to ‘moor’ by setting a stern anchor and tying the bow firmly to the rocky shore, allowing one to simply step ashore. This is only possible in areas, such as the Baltic, that have no tide, and is slightly intimidating for those not used to it. First it is necessary to select a point where the shore is sheer enough to get someone ashore from the bow before the boat grounds, while at the same time being on the leeward side of the land so that the wind helps hold the boat off. Possible locations are clearly marked in cruising guides and often have rings drilled into the rock to which to tie. Almost all boats in the archipelago have stern anchors and most also have a split bow pulpit and bow ladder.

Having selected an appropriate spot, the boat is brought to within about three boats’ lengths of shore and the stern anchor deployed but not tensioned. The boat is then brought to shore, stopped, and a crew member steps off with the bow lines – a bit tricky if the shore is low, as the first step can be a long one. Once the bow lines are tied to rings, trees, or pitons placed in the rock, the stern anchor rode is tensioned to hold the boat off, but still close enough to step ashore.



*Golden Eye at Blekholmen*

Sandwiched between our weeks in the Stockholm archipelago, we ventured east to Finland, Russia and Estonia.

### **Finland, the Åland Islands and the Finnish Lakes**

The Åland Islands (an autonomous, Swedish-speaking area of Finland) are located halfway between Sweden and the Finnish mainland. Together with the Finnish archipelago south of Turku and Helsinki, these islands comprise a vast area for cruising, even bigger than the Stockholm Archipelago. We spent a couple of weeks there, often stopping for the night at the private harbours of Finland's leading yacht club, the Nyländska Jaktklubben (NJK), of which Ernie is a member. One of these harbours is the spectacular Blekholmen in the middle of Helsinki harbor.

The interior of eastern Finland is largely water – a huge system of connected fresh water lakes, 76m above sea level. The Saimaa (or Finnish) lakes can be reached from the sea only through the Saimaa Canal, which is entered through Russian waters at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland. Midway through the canal, one crosses the border back into Finland. It is not necessary to have visas for the crew or advanced permission to transit the canal so long as regulations are carefully followed, including no contact with shore, and the vessel must stay in the designated fairway. Both vessel and crew are subject to intense scrutiny by Russian (and Finnish) authorities, however.

While still in Finland all paperwork is inspected by Finnish customs and immigration. Passports are stamped, certifying exit from the country and the EU. The vessel files a customs report listing the total amount of alcohol on board, a 'high water mark' which is rechecked when re-entering Finland to confirm that no alcohol has been purchased while in Russia.

We received a call on Channel 16 within five minutes of crossing the border into Russian waters asking the name of our vessel and the number of people on board. In the Russian section of the canal, Russian customs collected numerous documents in quadruplicate, including a crew list and a copy of the vessel's documentation. Further on, Russian passport control carefully inspected passports and conducted an extremely thorough search of the vessel – in *Golden Eye's* case this included inspection of all cavities in the boat 'bigger than a breadbox', about fifty in total. The Russian officials were polite but thorough and spoke little English.

On re-entering Finland, mid-canal, passports were stamped again, customs declarations filed, and the interior of the boat inspected once again.

The Saimaa Canal includes eight locks and seven opening bridges. The entire passage, from the easternmost Finnish port to the eighth lock in the canal is 68 miles and took us 17 hours (0530–2230). The locks and bridges were opened with little delay, except for one at which we waited 90 minutes for commercial traffic – a dinner-cruise ship and a ship carrying lumber – which has priority. The lakes are beautiful and pristine and the Finns are dedicated to keeping them that way. Holding tanks may be emptied only at pump-out facilities, which also have separate equipment for emptying bilges. Even in the island harbours, dishes and people are to be washed only on shore and the water dumped ashore, not in the lake.

The highlight of our cruise in the lakes was attending a performance of *Madame Butterfly* in spectacular Olavinlinna ('Olaf's castle') in the town of Savonlinna, Finland's opera centre. The setting is dramatic – a well-preserved three tower castle, built in the 15th century when the area was part of the Swedish empire, but overrun by Russian forces in 1714 and again in 1743. Our American flag was a novelty, and we were greeted in a friendly manner by everyone, including Russian yachts. On one island we grilled dinner and swam with four Finns, watched the sun set at 2245, then retired to their boat for vodka.



The return trip through the canal was uneventful, with only one delay for commercial traffic. Mid-canal, we cleared into Russia, using our single-entry Russian visas. The Russians' search of *Golden Eye* was even more intrusive than the northbound one, although the officials were polite, volunteering a couple of English words, and helpfully agreeing to my request that they make a phone call ahead to authorities who spoke no English.

### Russia

Our cruise in the Russian waters of the Gulf of Finland provided constant reminders of the long history of Russia's quest for access to naval bases and the open sea. Western Russia has only three possible routes to the world's oceans – the historical route north to the White Sea; ports on the Gulf of Finland, initially Vyborg and later St Petersburg; and via the Black Sea.

The northern route – via the Northern Dvina River to the port of Arkhangelsk, 500 miles north of Moscow and north of the Arctic Circle, then further north into the White Sea and around Nordkapp, Norway, at 71°N – is long and ice-bound for much of the year. Vyborg harbour, in addition to being controlled by Sweden until it was seized by Peter the Great in 1710, is only about 2m deep except where it has now been dredged. The Black Sea was, despite Peter the Great's best efforts, controlled by the Ottoman Empire until Catherine the Great established the naval base at Sevastopol on the Crimea Peninsula in 1783. The strategic nature of that access has been reflected over history, notably in the Crimean Wars of 1854–55 and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. Peter the Great therefore persisted in converting a swamp into the port of St Petersburg and the nearby naval base of Kronshtadt, the defence or defeat of which has been the object of battles ever since.

Vyborg was the first Russian city that we visited and a marked contrast to Finland. We attempted to approach the customs dock but were greeted with stony faces and clear – even in Russian – directions that we should go immediately across the harbour to the 'yacht club', where a gentleman called Igor, a retired Aeroflot pilot, guided us to a mooring in front of the 'club'. The Favorit Yacht Club consists of a wharf built many decades ago, a water hose ashore, electricity on the dock, and sparsely furnished men's and ladies' toilets – the latter barred with a crosswise boat hook which the club caretaker scurried to remove whenever Ann approached. Services were limited but they did their friendly best to accommodate our needs.

While hardly an outstanding destination for tourism or yachting, Vyborg is nevertheless interesting. In centuries past, before Peter the Great built his eponymous gateway to the Baltic, Vyborg was the only feasible access for the region's commerce with Europe other than one far north of the Arctic Circle, via Archangel (the modern Arkhangelsk), the White Sea and over the top of Norway. From the 13th to the 17th centuries the Swedish empire guarded Vyborg as a centre of commerce and built the fort that dominates the town; in the 18th and 19th centuries the Russian empire seized it for its strategic position in defending St Petersburg; and in the 20th century Finland regained it along with its independence in 1917, then lost it again during the Second World War.

Even after St Petersburg became Russia's major seaport into the Baltic, the opening in 1856 of the Saimaa Canal, which gave water access to the interior of Finland and Russia,



*The Hermitage (Winter Palace), St Petersburg*

ushered in a new period of prosperity for Vyborg. It is evident that beneficiaries of this commerce included Vyborg's architects – the city has many magnificent buildings, most from around the turn of the 20th century. Even on side streets, handsome edifices rise several storeys. Some of these are well-maintained and we observed new coats of paint being applied to already attractive façades. Others, while functional, have clearly not been maintained for decades and large chunks of their walls lie in the streets. Yet others appear to be lost victims of the Second World War – largely roofless with towering, dangerous-looking fragments of walls, barricades on the street to reduce injuries when they eventually fall, and squatters within. Like any city, a family sits on a bench eating ice cream, couples stroll, and small grocery stores are nestled side-by-side.

Bound south towards St Petersburg, we overnighted at the small marina in Bukhta Dubkovaya. En route we passed a large Russian Coast Guard ship underway and another Russian Coast Guard vessel – about 60ft long with a pointy, high-speed bow and significant armament on the stern – tied to a substantial mooring. We could imagine several sets of eyes watching us on screens and through binoculars, and anticipated seeing a high-speed RIB emerge from the far side for a boarding, as has happened to us in Germany and Finland, but continued on without incident.

The final leg to St Petersburg was long and unremarkable. Shipping traffic, mostly in traffic separation schemes, increased markedly and the low southern shore came into view. As we approached the narrow gate giving access to Kronshtadt, home of Russia's Baltic navy fleet since the early 1700s, and St Petersburg, we were overtaken by a fleet of medium-size military ships. We informed the coast guard of our plans to proceed to St Petersburg and the number and citizenship of our crew. Having cleared into Russia in the Saimaa Canal we did not have to clear in again, as do yachts arriving from outside Russia.

#### **Russia's capitals, past and present**

St Petersburg and Moscow met our high expectations in most respects. As anticipated by reading Robert Massie's 850 page tome *Peter the Great: His Life and World*, the scale and magnificence of the czars' palaces and Orthodox cathedrals and churches are breathtaking. By contrast, Harrison Salisbury's *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* describes the city's near obliteration. It is a remarkable narrative of a gruesome time in its history, from 1941 to 1944, when three million people in St Petersburg (then



*Peterhof (Summer Palace),  
St Petersburg*

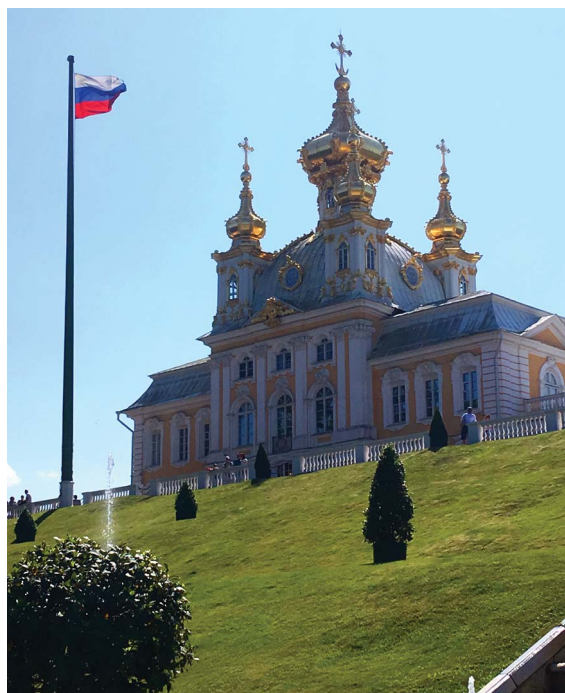
Leningrad) endured unspeakable hardship with fewer than half surviving. Their endurance is echoed in the love and passion the residents have for their beautiful city. We observed that passion at an outstanding concert followed by caviar, blinis, and vodka with local friends – *na zdorov'ye!*

The Central River Yacht Club – the best option – provided adequate berthing and security, but has somewhat limited facilities and is next to a lively disco on a river used by various noisy vessels. We moved to a lovely hotel in St Petersburg for a little R&R – chilled vodka and caviar accompanied by a violin and piano! – and to be within walking distance of major attractions.

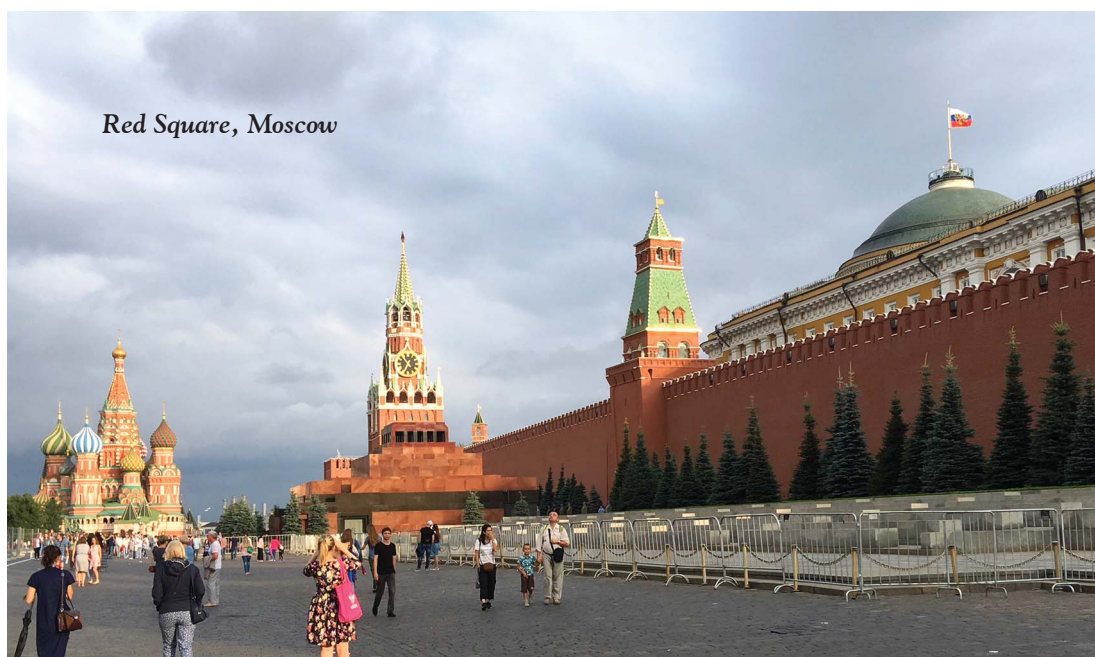
We reached Moscow by train on the day after President Trump's meeting in Helsinki with President Putin, adding further to the drama of visiting the Kremlin and Red Square.

Our cruise into Russian waters was facilitated – no, made possible – by St Petersburg Port Officer Representative Vladimir Ivankiv, 'the man who makes everything possible'. For many years the

*Peterhof church*

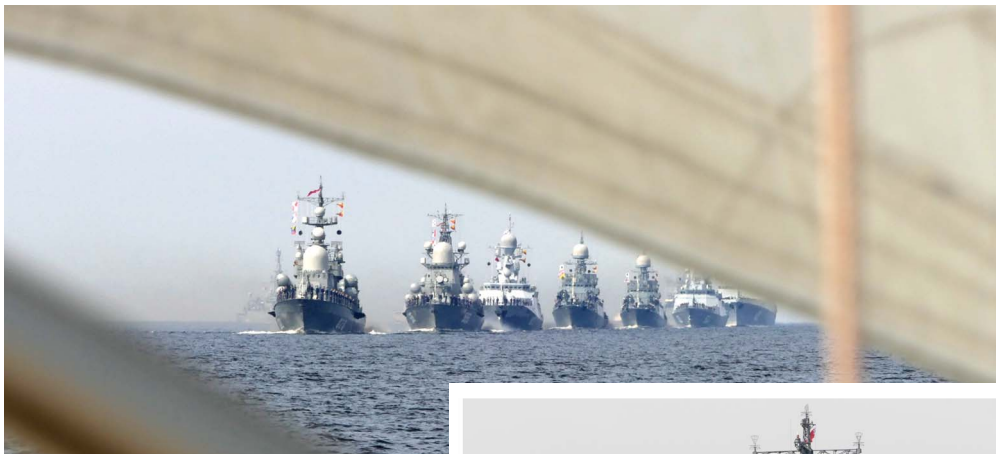


representative of eight yacht and cruising clubs including the OCC, Vladimir provided the necessary formal 'invitation' and detailed guidance required to get Russian visas, was in helpful contact with the authorities on our behalf throughout our cruise, gave and arranged tours of major sights in St Petersburg and took us shopping. We were delighted that he and his wife Alla joined us for a concert at Mariinsky Concert Hall (self-proclaimed as 'one of the world's finest concert venues' after re-opening in 2007 following a catastrophic fire), and Vladimir came aboard for our last Russian leg from St Petersburg to the island fortress of Kronshtadt.



Clearing out of Russia involved a wait of a couple of hours and another intensive inspection of the boat and our documents, but the officials were polite and, once they finally arrived, speedy. Having cleared out, we exited the gates at Kronshtadt and soon received and complied with a polite request to proceed just outside the channel. A few minutes later, peering under the jib, we observed a fantastic spectacle – twelve large, modern Russian warships, including a submarine, underway on a reciprocal course down the shipping channel in single file and tight formation, each with a plethora of flags and crews at attention along the rails (see overleaf).

Peter the Great, who founded St Petersburg in 1703, created the Russian navy from scratch – in fact he spent many hours building boats and ships himself, initially learning the skills in Amsterdam and then teaching them in Russia. He created St Petersburg to establish a naval port on the Baltic, built Kronshtadt, on an island fifteen miles west as the naval base, and seized territory from Sweden, some in what is now Finland and Estonia, for strategic defence of St Petersburg. To witness this modern legacy to Peter was a jaw-dropping epilogue to our visit.



*Seen under the jib*

***The Russian  
crew at attention***



**Estonia**

After clearing back into Finland and the EU we crossed the Gulf of Finland to Tallinn, the capital and largest city of Estonia. As throughout the Baltic, history is measured on a scale far greater than that of the United

States. Tallinn – then known in languages other than Estonian as Reval – developed as a walled city in the 13th century but, despite its fortifications, control changed regularly. It suffered badly during the Second World War but has been attractively restored and is now one of the best-preserved medieval cities in Europe. Unseen by the casual tourist wandering through the old city is Tallinn's technology economy. It is known as 'the Silicon Valley of Europe' and is the birthplace of many international companies including Skype. It is a sister city to Los Gatos, California, in *that* Silicon Valley.

By early August we had returned to the Stockholm archipelago, which felt like coming home.

**Authors' note**

We are eager to assist fellow OCC members in seeing this area. There is much useful information about the Baltic, including Russia, on the OCC website at <https://oceancruisingclub.org/Cruising-Info-Map>, and readers are also referred to Thierry Courvoisier's excellent articles about cruising in Finland and St Petersburg in *Flying Fish* 2016/1 and 2018/1. With respect to Saimaa and St Petersburg, we would like to thank Paul and Marty Rogers and Jim and Jean Foley for sharing their experiences, their advice and their charts and guides.

This article previously appeared in the 2019 issue of *Voyages*, the annual magazine of the Cruising Club of America.