CÉRÈS THROUGH THE RUSSIAN INLAND WATERWAYS, Part 3

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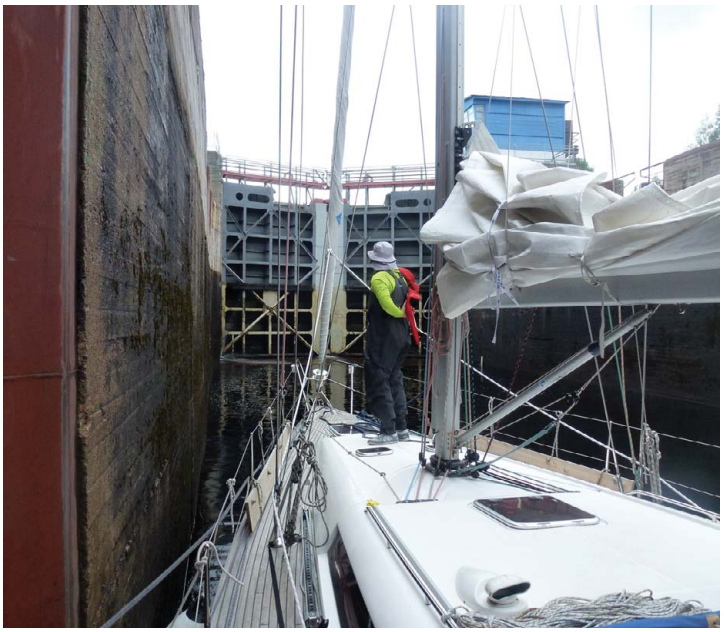
(In July 2016 Cérès *and her crew sailed from Helsinki to St Petersburg, before continuing eastward through the Russian inner waterways to the White Sea and the Barents Sea, aiming to reach Tromsø in Norway by early September.*

Flying Fish 2018/1 *documented their voyage as far as Voznesenye on the shores of Lake Onega, and* Flying Fish 2018/2 *saw them reach Povenets at the southern end of the Belomorkanal – also known as the White Sea Canal – where we rejoin them. Both issues are available in the* Flying Fish *Archive at https://oceancruisingclub.org/Flying-Fish-Archive.)*

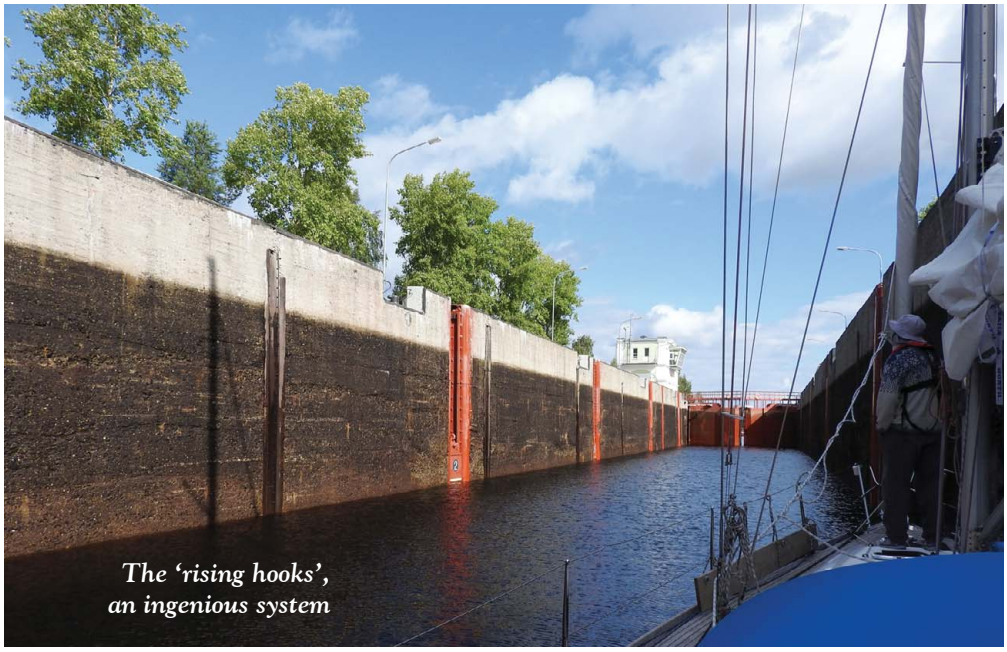
Approaching the lower gate of a lock is seldom a scenic highlight as one is, by definition, standing beneath the high doors and walls that water will fill until it finally dominates the landscape. Once inside the lock, one feels as if one is at the bottom of a deep, not too clean, can. This was no exception as, on a cold and grey morning in August 2016, we neared the first lock of the Belomorkanal, which connects the Baltic Sea basin to the Arctic Ocean. This was further shadowed by a lurking headache, probably due to the many glasses of vodka absorbed during the long evening at Konstantin's place the day before (see page 174 of *Flying Fish* 2018/2).

The entry to the Belomorkanal is a few miles south of Povenets in the northernmost part of Lake Onega. Passing the lock door meant entering the first element of a canal built in the early part of the 1930s at the cost of tens of thousands of Stalin's prisoners' lives. Every indentation in the rock that we were to see in the following days had been carved by hand, as cost constraints on the building work required that no explosives be used. Every rock and all the earth and trees that needed to be moved or removed to dig the canal had been carried by human muscle, unaided by any motorised device. The lock walls, now in concrete, were originally covered by trunks cut from the surrounding forest.



At the bottom of a lock

The canal was an old idea. The route linking the Arctic Ocean, and therefore the Atlantic, to the Baltic Sea had already been explored by Peter the Great and François Le Fort, the first



The 'rising hooks', an ingenious system

Admiral of the Russian fleet. He grew up in Geneva, brother to one of my ancestors – part of the reason that we were waiting in front of this very lock on that cold and grey morning. Digging the canal had, nonetheless, to wait three centuries following this reconnaissance by the Tsar and the Admiral before Stalin ordered its construction. Even then the result was far from the expectations raised by the strategic importance of the route, as the locks were designed and built to dimensions too small to accommodate 20th century warships. Stalin is said to have been furious when he was taken along the canal for its inauguration in 1933. The weight of this history contributed nothing to lift the spirit of *Cérès*'s crew on this cold morning in August 2016.

The locks are equipped with hooks attached to large steel canisters floating within vertical rails along the walls, which rise and fall with the water level. The only difficulty with this brilliant system is that the distance between them is much too

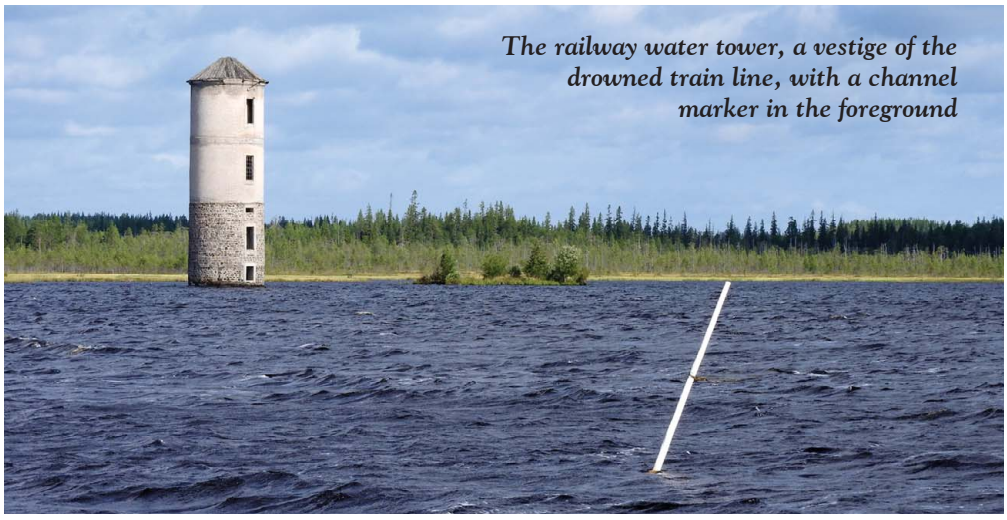
On the Belomorkanal

Crossing an artificial lake on the Belomorkanal

large for yachts, so that we could only attach our mooring lines to a single hook while ascending or descending. We made the mistake in the first one of using a hook in the middle of the lock and leaving too much slack in the lines, and danced uncomfortably against the lock wall while being lifted. In the following locks we used the hindmost rail where much less turbulence prevails, pulled our mooring lines very tight, and had no further problems.

The first section of the canal is dug through rock, followed by a part where land was inundated by building dikes and dams. So first one motors through the dense forest characteristic of northwestern Russia, and then through well-marked channels on wide and shallow artificial lakes won from the same forest. Locks animate the passage, sometimes single, sometimes double, lifting one to slightly over 100m above sea level before descending again. We sailed and motor-sailed some 120 miles in this way, anchoring twice to spend the night at the side of the canal. Lifting the anchor after the first night we heaved up a whole tree trunk complete with roots and branches.

During our transit of the canal we saw one old tug boat, one old cargo ship and, on the eve of our second night, a Russian yacht returning from a two-month circumnavigation of Scandinavia. The crew were so tired and eager to be home that they didn't even take the time to share a drink with us. For the rest, the waters were deserted in the midst of a continuous monotonous forest completely devoid of human settlements. At one point a railway water tower emerged from the surface of the lake, a vestige of the railway line that was inundated with the forest to form that section of the canal. The lonely grey tower emerging from the dark surface of the water in the thick forest creates a landscape that would be an ideal setting for a slightly sinister short story.

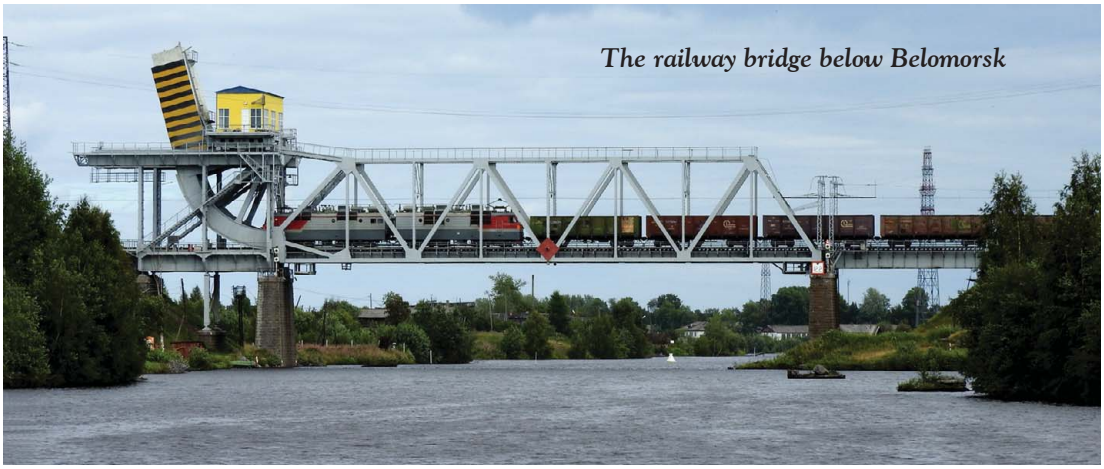


The railway water tower, a vestige of the drowned train line, with a channel marker in the foreground

The lock staff have an excellent view…

There was much wind when we sailed on the lakes – no problem for *Cérès* but some worry for her skipper, who had to manoeuvre cleanly in the locks to reach the desired hook, as no shore help was ever offered. When approaching a lock, Masha, our Russian translator, contacted the staff on the radio. We were then told on which side we should tie, some locks being in such a poor state that one side was derelict and could not be used. As there was no other shipping we never had to wait for the doors to open, which also demonstrated that the staff were aware of our approach well in advance. All locks are guarded by armed men and women and photographs are forbidden, of which we were sternly reminded several times. With no traffic or human activity to be seen along the canal, in the locks, or in the endless surrounding forest, it was difficult to understand the purpose of all these armed men and women pacing up and down the quays.

In the middle of the third day we neared Belomorsk, the city at the northern end of the canal where we were to stop and complete the paperwork required to exit the Russian inner waterways and re-enter the maritime environment. A few miles before the indicated quay, we neared a lock followed by an old railway bridge that the authorities are reluctant to open. The line of which this bridge is part is of vital importance, as it is the sole railway link between the northernmost parts of the region and the city of



The railway bridge below Belomorsk

Murmansk on one side, and Moscow and the rest of Russia on the other – a problem while the bridge is open would certainly cause major disruption in the trans-regional traffic. The bridge is an old steel affair, probably awkward to operate, is only opened when absolutely necessary, and then only between 1600 and 1800 and only when the wind is less than 10 or 12 knots.

Since there is no room to anchor between the lock and the bridge, we wanted to spend the few hours before the possible opening time below the lock, where anchoring looked possible. Permission to do this was, however, denied and we were requested to go through the lock as soon as we arrived. We then asked to wait moored to the quay at the exit of the lock, but that too was refused, despite the complete absence of activity. We were given no choice but to tie to a concrete cube that stood about 3m above water level in a very narrow section of the canal. There was no hook or ring to which we could tie ropes at a height that could be reached from our deck, which the lock staff obviously knew. The guards, complete with weapons and dogs, therefore escorted Nicolas along a path to a shaky walkway that linked the concrete block to the land and left him there while we approached.

Waiting for the bridge to open

The problem was to secure *Cérès* to the rusty iron remains on the top of the block in the fresh breeze blowing, to install a ladder for Nicolas to climb down, and to arrange everything so we could get all our lines back when we were allowed to proceed later that day ... or on the following one, or even later, when the wind had dropped enough for the bridge to be opened. The prospect of spending 24 hours or more between lock and bridge on a deserted stretch of canal was not inviting! Eventually, however, the wind decreased, the staff on both sides of the bridge became active, and an official ordered us by radio to leave our block and pass beneath the bridge – now towering in the air – as fast as possible. I was relieved when the bridge was behind us and only one last lock separated us from the White Sea.

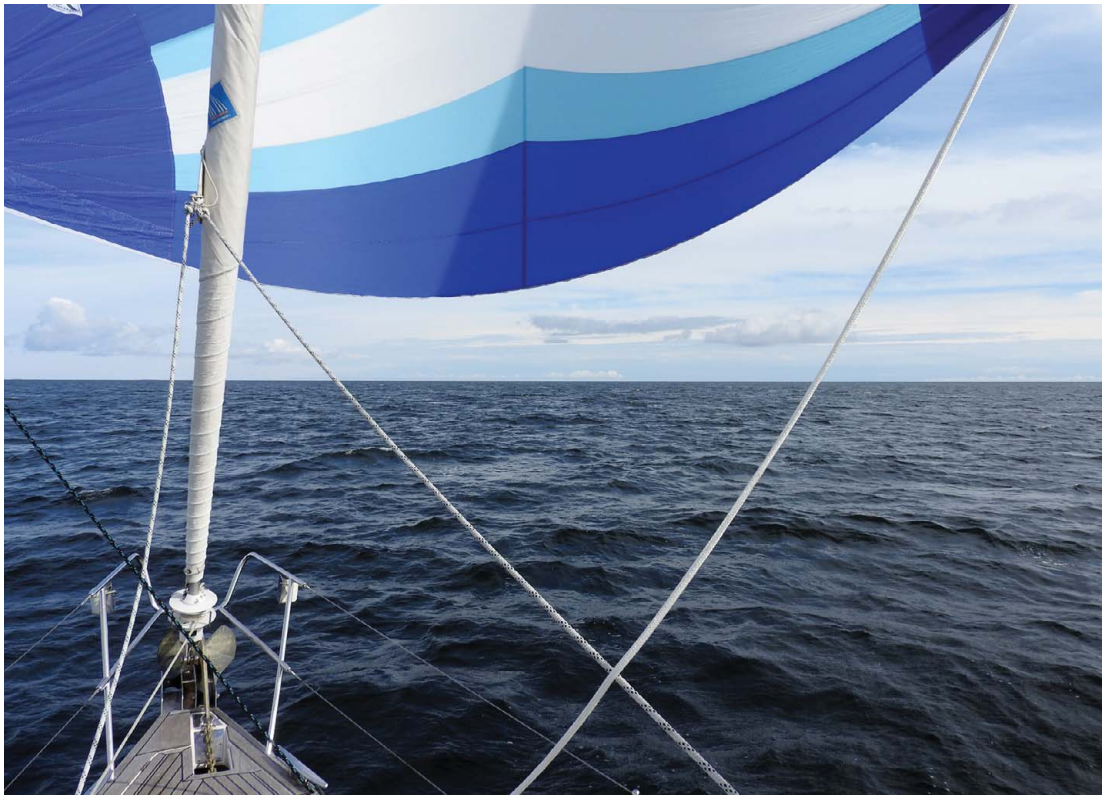
We had to stop in Belomorsk to report to the authorities, and I expected a small town or at least some houses along a quay and some life – we were eager for a meal in a café or restaurant and for a bit of human life. But instead we found a high stone quay alongside a garbage dump, without any house in sight, not to mention a café or restaurant. We were ordered over the radio to walk a few hundred meters down a path to a road, and to look for a blue house where we would find the officer in charge of the formalities. We were to bring our charts of the White Sea as proof that we had the required documentation to sail these waters. As we walked, we noticed the phone number of a taxi painted on a rock alongside the path. We eventually found the blue house beneath a high antenna and the officer sitting at a desk watching television, which we could understand, having measured the density of the traffic. From what

we had seen, the poor lonely man had to deal with at the very most one ship or boat every few days. We filled in numerous papers under the guidance of the officer with Masha translating. The man started by being difficult and unpleasant, but mellowed little by little and was smiling warmly by the end of our encounter, a behaviour we had noticed previously.

Back at the boat we called the phone number seen along the path and indeed got a taxi. When Masha told the driver we wanted to be driven to the town centre, the driver laughed and told us that there was no centre in Belomorsk, and that the only public place was a building serving as a hotel where we could try to obtain a meal. The ride to the 'centre' took us along a derelict road past some buildings in a poor state to a spot next to the river where 50m of dirt had been covered by tar and where two or three cars were parked. A lone young lady was pushing a stroller in which an infant was sleeping. This 'square' was in front of the hotel, where we did indeed obtain a meal, which was even decent. We spent another day in Belomorsk, some of the crew visiting the local museum while I prepared the navigation for the following days. Officers of the FSB (the Russian Federal Security Service) came by in the morning and requested that I sign yet another form which Masha assured me was harmless.

On the morning of 12th August we left the quay early in a bright sunshine to motor to the last lock before the White Sea, with the prospect of a long, cold, but possibly pleasant sail to the Solovetsky archipelago. Attempts to take a last picture of the lock were actively countered by the armed guards. Once through we left the lock to follow a long channel past derelict industrial remains and abandoned quays – Belomorsk is certainly the saddest of the small, semi-abandoned cities we had seen during our passage through the Russian inland waterways. The level of activity in these cities has been decreasing over the last two or three decades and a significant fraction of

The quay in Belomorsk

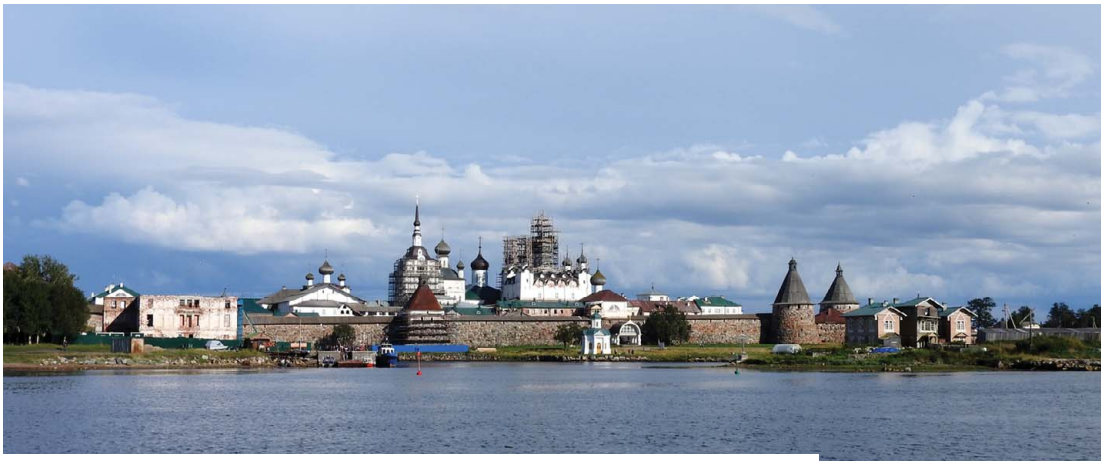


Under spinnaker on the White Sea, heading for the Solovetsky archipelago

the population has moved away. The abandoned apartments and houses have been left without maintenance, which showed blatantly by the time we passed by. This is not specific to Russia in the last decades – one may read similar fates of villages in southern France in the early parts of the 20th century. Jean Gionno's descriptions of Provence in the 1930s are vivid illustrations in this context. Almost abandoned villages can also be found in southern Italy.

We sailed the 50 miles or so from Belomorsk to the Solovetsky archipelago under spinnaker, alone on the White Sea – a glorious sail with sunshine and a cool, fresh breeze. The Solovetsky archipelago is the ensemble of islands called the Gulag archipelago by Solzhenitsyn when he described the life and death of thousands within its walls during the 1930s. The approach to the archipelago requires some care, as the main island is surrounded by a maze of rocks and islets. The monastery which emerges from the landscape within its walled citadel would probably look impressive were it not shrouded in scaffolding. Works in progress is indeed a *leitmotiv* on the island.

As with other monasteries in northeast Russia, its origins go back to a lone hermit. Later, in the 19th century, the original very simple quarters were transformed into rich and complex buildings attesting the glory of the Orthodox Church. The history of the Solovetsky monastery is, like that of the Oreshek fortress on Lake Ladoga, 'enriched' by a dark episode of Soviet repression. The archipelago served as detention centre and administrative authority for a number of camps in the area during the latter



The Solovetsky archipelago, also known as the Gulag archipelago, where the monastery is undergoing restoration

days of Lenin and the Stalin era. It became known as the Gulag archipelago through Solzhenitsyn's celebrated saga. The works in progress aim at removing all traces of that time and at restoring the monastery to its former, glorious appearance. There is no proper harbour near the monastery, just a derelict quay on which a sturdy-looking Russian sailing boat was tied so we went alongside for a while before anchoring in the bay. The Russian crew came from a forbidden city, the centre of Russian nuclear submarine construction, near Arkhangelsk.

A first tour of the place in the late afternoon made it clear to us that, without a guide, a foreign visitor would have no chance of finding their way around the maze of buildings, but strolling around far from the pilgrims and the tourist crowds gave us the opportunity to get some idea of life on the island. Everyone lives one way or another from the monastery, be it directly from its operation, either as monks or in some other religious function, or from the building work, or to serve the pilgrims, or as support for the other communities as school teachers, traders etc. Our wandering shattered my naive expectation that we would be able to make contact with some of these people, were we to stay for some days. Mariusz Wilk, a Polish journalist, spent several months

in this community and in *The Journals of a White Sea Wolf* describes vividly a number of characters entangled in complex personal lives, lost expectations and large quantities of alcohol – a world I had naively imagined being able to approach, having come all the way on a sailing boat. But here, as elsewhere, people were careful not to notice us. Obviously it takes much more than a few days, and probably a good command of the Russian language, to approach this community.

The guide we hired for the following day was highly competent but remained distant, avoiding any conversation that did not centre on the monastery or citadel and their dependencies, where almost no traces of the Soviet detention facilities are still visible. However, the unrestored buildings and facilities give an idea of the conditions prevalent in the middle of the 20th century. Solzhenitsyn's descriptions, a number of pages from *Stalin's Meteorologist* by Olivier Rolin, some pictures on display and some stories told by our guide did give us an idea of the conditions in the detention camp. Interestingly, our guide was energetic in refuting some of Solzhenitsyn's stories – where he describes, for example, how unruly prisoners were sometimes precipitated down a long and steep staircase with their hands tied in order to die from broken backs and heads – our guide objected that this had certainly not taken place, as the guards would not have been stupid enough to throw prisoners down several hundred steps, as their bodies would then have had to be heaved up again. In the absence of further research on these sordid stories we'll leave doubt as to the veracity of Solzhenitsyn's descriptions open.

While the Bolsheviks destroyed almost all the art on the archipelago, as it belonged to the church they despised, some works were salvaged under the pretext of keeping a few items to show posterity the decadence of the pre-revolutionary epoch. These items are on show in a small but beautiful museum within the monastery.

The weather forecast was grim, with force 7 easterlies due some days hence. Since the route from the Solovetsky archipelago to Arkhangelsk is east-northeast and then southeast, we decided to leave a day earlier than planned. The 14th August thus saw us raise anchor to sail for some 30 hours, hoping to reach Arkhangelsk before the weather turned nasty. The passage was excellent, with the visit of a beluga whale in the afternoon, and fair and cool winds on a manageable sea. On the morning of the second day a military ship kept appearing above the horizon, approaching us to within a few miles, and then disappearing again before reappearing. This game ceased as we approached the channel leading into the city. It is some 25 miles long and starts before the shore becomes visible. It is well marked with massive buoys and is equipped, unusually, with lights on the channel side at each bend, green or red depending on whether the channel bends to starboard or to port.

The radio and telephone became active as we motored up the channel. All sorts of authorities wanted to know where we were. Vladimir Ivankiv, OCC Port Officer Representative for St Petersburg, who had helped us plan and execute our trip had to report our position, and so did we to several authorities, a rather unusual level of administrative activity that kept Masha busy on the VHF and telephone. Approaching the city one sees large quantities of floating wood brought down from the forests upstream and many timber factories in more or less good shape. One large plant, painted bright blue, led us to suspect that a famous Swedish furniture company gets at least part of the wood it uses from this region.

Crossing the White Sea towards Arkhangelsk

We had been instructed to moor at the local yacht club, and to be careful to arrive when the tide was high enough for us to reach the quay safely following a large bend in the river. While there was just enough water for our draught, the expected quay was nowhere to be seen. It seemed that the barge which had served as a mooring place had been moved, and instead a large, ex-military ship was moored against a stone quay. Our only possibility was to secure alongside, but not only was the shape of the ship, broader at deck level than at the waterline, anything but adapted for mooring a sailing yacht, we were told also that they would be leaving in an hour to refuel and would then return. The strong easterly winds had materialised, with heavy, cold rain putting the last touch to a grim arrival. We had no choice but to manoeuvre when required, trying to stay in waters deep enough for us in the decreasing light of a stormy, late summer, arctic day. Eventually manoeuvring came to an end, we were reasonably safely tied, Masha had found her boyfriend and was off to see her mother and, warm and dry inside *Cérès*, we could relax with a large glass of wine, when the phone rang one last time. It was Vladimir telling us that the Russian Northern Fleet had just closed the White Sea and the Russian part of the Barents Sea to all civilian navigation for an unspecified duration.

A true cliff-hanger ending, which will be resolved in *Flying Fish* 2020/1 in the final part of Thierry's account of *Cérès through the Russian Inland Waterways*.