

# CÉRÈS THROUGH THE RUSSIAN INLAND WATERWAYS, Part 4

## Thierry J-L Courvoisier

*(There has never been a four-part series in Flying Fish before and there probably never will be again – but having followed Centurion 40S Cérés and her crew through the Russian Inland Waterways from St Petersburg to Arkhangelsk, only for them to learn from St Petersburg POR Vladimir Ivankiv that the White Sea and the Russian part of the Barents Sea were closed to all civilian navigation for an unspecified duration, we have to find out what happened next!*

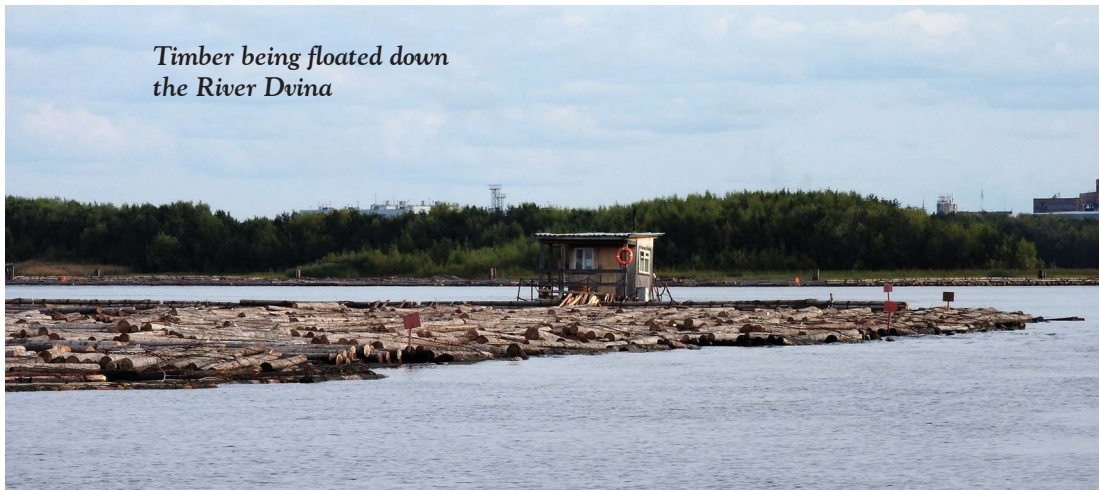
*Parts 1, 2 and 3 are available in the Flying Fish Archive at <https://oceancruisingclub.org/Flying-Fish-Archive>. The photos are by Barbara Courvoisier.)*

Warm and sunny weather soon appeared following the rain and wind prevailing when we had docked in Arkhangelsk. Being ordered to remain at the quay by the naval authorities was, at first, not a problem as we were looking forward to spending a few days exploring the city and its surroundings. Arkhangelsk is the home city of Masha, the Russian student who had sailed with us since St Petersburg. She had handled the radio and phone communications with lock and bridge staff and all other authorities along the way with impressive authority and was now eager to show us her city and its surroundings.

Arkhangelsk lies on the Dvina, a broad river down which wood is floated from the forests upstream. It is collected in large areas along the river banks, where various industries deposit it for further transportation by ship or for use on site. Among the many industrial buildings, the one in best condition was bright blue and put us in mind of a well-known Swedish furniture producer.

A long path winds through the city alongside the river where people stroll, walk or cycle in the shade of the trees. A beach invites sunbathing and swimming, a temptation we resisted being wary of chemical pollution. A pedestrian street in the city centre, Chumbarova-Luchinskogo, is lined with traditional buildings from the region which have been transported and re-erected there, and sculptures representing author Stepane

*Timber being floated down  
the River Dvina*



### *The poet Pisakhov*

Pisakhov and some characters from his stories are also to be seen. Cafés sell food and drink in this quiet part of the city – a comfortable atmosphere, somewhat unexpected compared to what we had seen in the previous weeks. Arkhangelsk was certainly the most pleasant city that we had encountered since St Petersburg, at least during an unusually hot August.

Masha had attended university in Arkhangelsk and knowing my long university connections\* she invited us to visit its main building – long corridors and lecture halls, similar to those of many universities

\* Thierry is a Professor of Astrophysics whose main area of research is the physics of active galactic nuclei.



in the world, but brighter and cleaner than many I have seen. The prominent place of Arctic studies in the university research and teaching programmes is very visible on posters along the halls, illustrating the strong interest of the Russian state in this part of our planet.

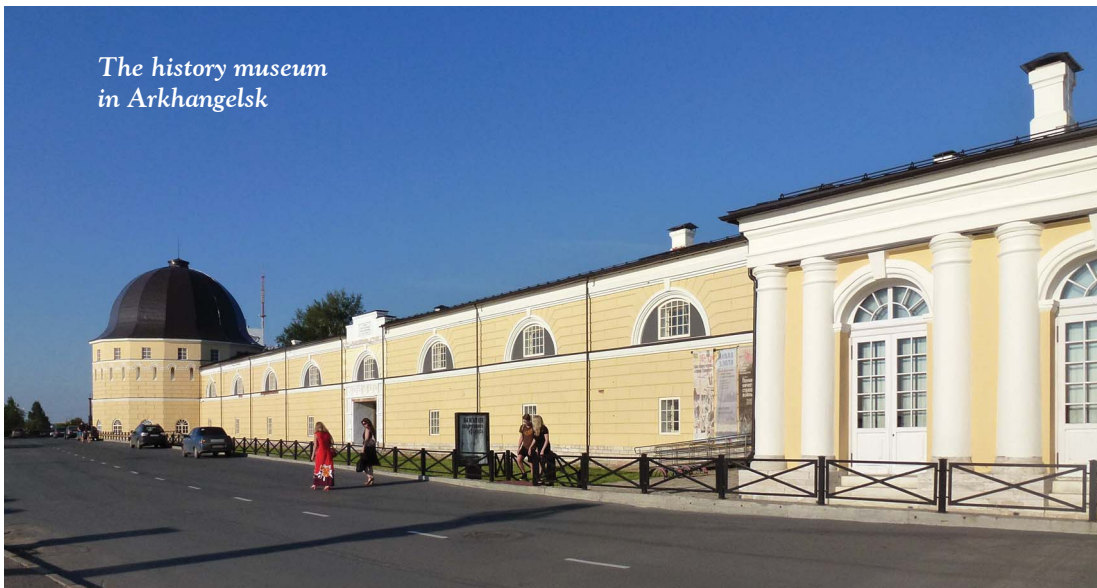
*The ideal woman,  
from a story by  
Pisakhov*

The visit of Peter the Great and François Le Fort (see *Flying Fish* 2019/2) at the end of the 17th century was a turning point in the history of Arkhangelsk and led to a still thriving ship-building industry. The shipyard founded at that time – and still operating – is only a few hundred metres from where *Cérès* was moored. It was then that the strategic importance of creating a shipping channel between the northern oceans and the Baltic Sea was first discussed, though it took some 250 years to transform the idea into reality. The naval and military tradition also remains vibrant – Arkhangelsk was the port to which allied convoys sailed during the summers of the Second World War (in winter they stopped in Murmansk as the White Sea freezes). Nowadays the region is home to nuclear submarine construction, an activity to which we did not have access. The local history museum describes at length the importance of the great Tsar for the city and for the whole region. We were guided during our visit by Gostev Igor Mikhailovitch, a historian working on a biography of François Le Fort, who grew up in Geneva. He was happy and proud to show his museum to a Swiss crew who had just travelled in the footprints of Geneva's best-known citizen in Russia.

Arkhangelsk is not only a city where life can be good – at least in August – it is also a city of wide avenues crowded with cars, and a city of massive buildings with some definitively Soviet monuments including the inevitable statue of Lenin. Not all parts of the city are recommended for walking around at night, so much so that one evening we had difficulty finding a taxi driver willing to bring us back to *Cérès* on her assigned quay.

Some distance away from the city there is an open air museum, Malye Karely, to which a number of traditional buildings from Karelia have been moved. The interiors of these houses testify to a very structured way of life in past centuries. One corner of the main living area, always the same, was reserved for an altar, the seating arrangements were clearly visible, and different activities took place in different parts of the lodging. Visitors from outside the family were admitted to only part of the house. Strolling in these low-ceilinged houses, dark even on a bright August day, one cannot but wonder how their inhabitants lived through the long Arctic winters when darkness settles at

*The history museum  
in Arkhangelsk*





*Arkhangelsk's war monument*

3pm or even earlier and lasts until 10am or so next morning. During these hours there would be a bit of light from the fire in the living quarters of the house and possibly some candles or a lamp burning animal fat. No clock to measure the ticking of the hours, and no books with the possible exception of a Bible. How did they keep body, mind and soul alert in these conditions?



The days went by very pleasantly visiting the city and surroundings. There was, however, no sign that civilian navigation on the White Sea would soon be authorised again. This became a worry as the season was advancing and our Russian visas were due to expire. I therefore contacted the General Consulate of Switzerland in St Petersburg and explained our situation to the Consul who, unsurprisingly, said that it was the first time he had

*A windmill in the open air museum at Malye Karely*

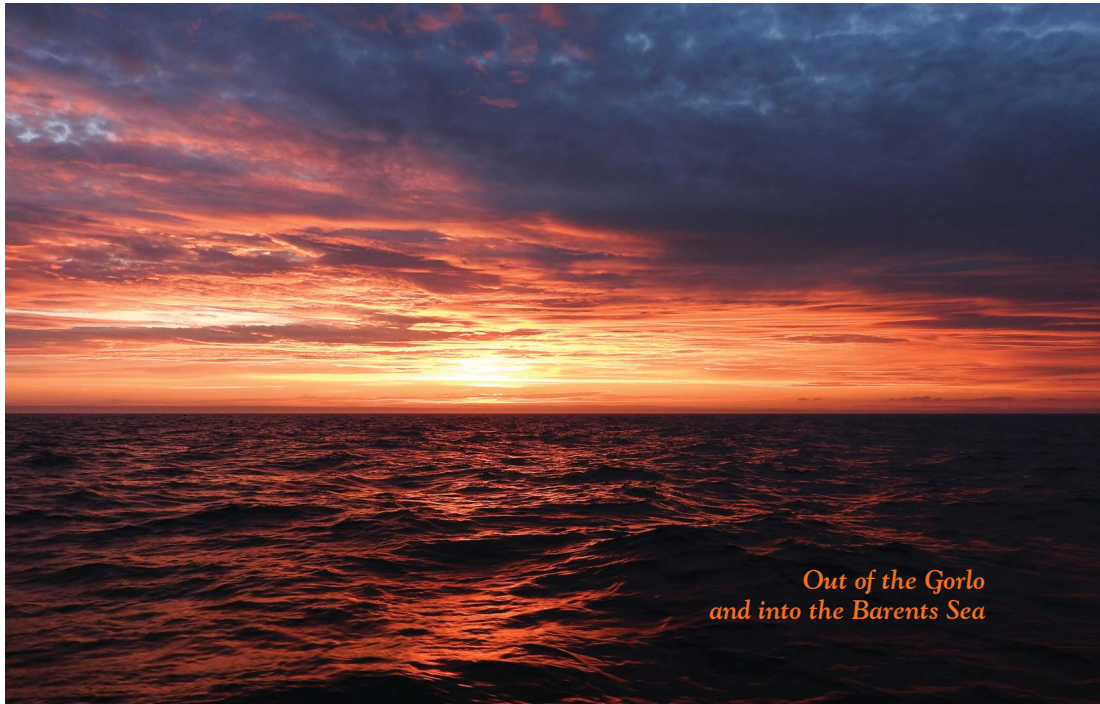
been confronted with this type of problem. While it was not in his power to influence the orders of the Russian North Fleet, he did obtain its phone number. We gave this to Vladimir, who had helped us with all kinds of administrative problems but had been helpless in this matter.

One morning we were told by Vladimir that we would be allowed to leave, so I went by taxi with our local contact, another friend of Vladimir, to the offices of the harbour authorities. There we were told, after numerous calls and discussions, that the information was inaccurate and that we would not be allowed to leave yet. Then another call came late on the following Saturday morning telling us that if we could swear to be out of Russian waters in the Barents Sea by 0400 on Monday morning we would be allowed to leave. Since I estimated that we would need about 48 hours to reach international waters, and the time for exit formalities had to be added to this, I could only assure the authorities that we would do our best to meet their requirement. This was not good enough and we were ordered to stay, which had me very worried as I guessed that while the weekend would be free of naval exercises they would start again on the Monday morning for an unspecified length of time.

Fortunately, this proved incorrect. We were told on Monday morning that the sea was open again and that we would be allowed to leave Arkhangelsk's commercial harbour at 2000 after the last commercial ship – a tanker, immobilised as we had been – had left. Another taxi trip to the harbour authorities and we were duly authorised to leave our berth and ordered to reach the commercial quay, some 15 miles downriver, by 1700 in order to complete the formalities to leave Russia. There was barely enough water in the river for our draught at that state of the tide but, trusting that the bottom was soft, we said goodbye to Masha and left our quay. We reached the deeper part of the river, probably leaving a mark in the soft mud, and made it to the commercial harbour in time.

There we found a high quay with no place for a yacht to secure, but after circling the area for some time two uniformed men directed us to tie up to a floating crane. These two officials came on board with Vladimir's friend – indispensable, as without Masha we would have been unable to communicate. They left after some time, returning equipped with portable passport-reading apparatus and went through all the paperwork, apparently on behalf of all the relevant authorities. When everything was finished they asked me to sign a formal promise that we would not touch Russian territory again on our way to Kirkenes in Norway. The last official to leave *Cérès* very formally and elegantly kissed Barbara's hand and they finally waved us away. All of this was performed in a friendly, easy-going atmosphere, but with absolutely no consideration for tides, currents or weather conditions either in Arkhangelsk or underway. The last point was the most worrisome, as we were to sail for four days along a hostile coast on the White Sea and the Barents Sea, crossing the Arctic Circle northwards. Fortunately the weather forecast showed no dangerous conditions, but it did predict some uncomfortable stretches.

The beginning of the journey was most pleasant. We motored down the 20-mile channel leading from Arkhangelsk to the open sea in the evening twilight of a warm August day. The following day on the White Sea was easy and pleasant and led us the next night to the Gorlo, the strait some 25 miles wide and 80 miles long which links the White Sea to the Barents Sea. Our second night at sea was magnificent



– the sun set slowly, the light was such that the northern horizon remained just perceptible, and the northern lights were visible in the darkest part of the night followed by a slow sunrise with gorgeous colours ... arguably the most beautiful night we had ever seen at sea.

This did not last long. A heavy fog settled in in the middle of the morning, making us glad we had radar. The fog was followed by rain, a bumpy sea and strong winds – the first of two depressions during that crossing. It was unpleasant, but not dangerous. In the afternoon we reached the point where we were to cross into international waters, the coordinates of which had been specified to us, and where we were to call the Russian coastguards. This we did, but received no answer. Shortly after leaving Russian waters our path crossed that of a white, completely closed, ship with no identification and no AIS signal. Its deck was stuffed with antennae of all sizes and shapes, obviously some power listening intently to the radio communications on the Kula peninsula.

We sailed northeastwards through the Murmansk area where a large number of ships were anchored. We regretted not to being allowed to stop there, and sailed on. The second depression approached on the evening of the third day. We had hoped that the associated westerlies would give us a fast and comfortable sail for the last part of our passage to Kirkenes, but this was not to be and we motored across the Varanger fjord and south to Kirkenes through a bitterly cold night. We arrived there at 0400 and tied up to a rather unprotected floating dock.

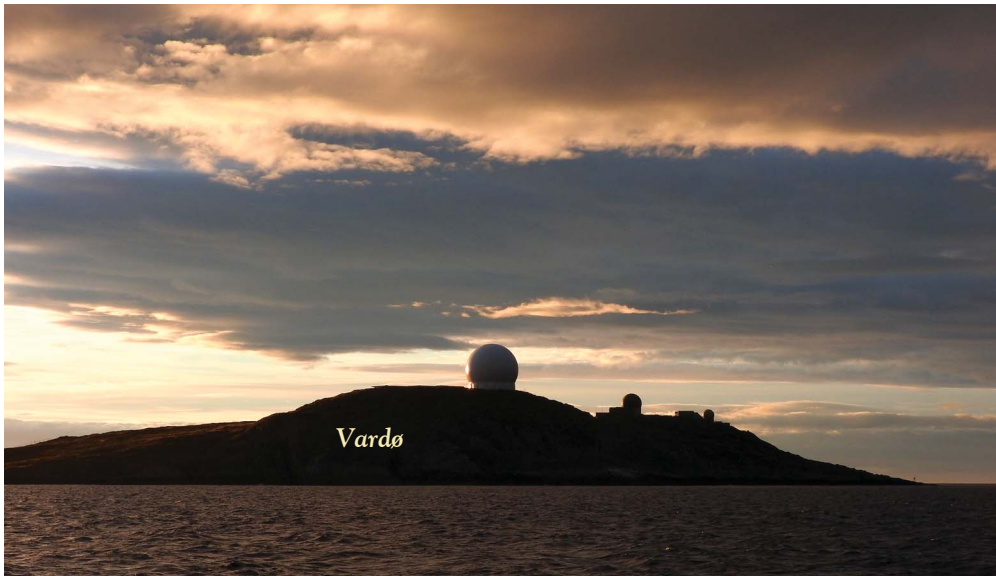
In the morning I went ashore to search for some form of officialdom to clear into Norway. This proved somewhat tricky – there was a customs office next to the pier where we had tied, but a sign said that it would not be open until the following Monday. Since it was Thursday I was disinclined to wait four days to do the paperwork, so I wandered around with the crews' passports until I found a police station. Following

the Russian bureaucracy it was somewhat surreal to tell the officer, “Good morning, we have just sailed in from Russia, could you indicate what procedure we should follow to clear in?” and be met with a smile but with no further help, except to point to the next building where an immigration office was to be found and where, I was told, somebody might be able to help.

In the immigration office I told my story to a lady who seemed as helpless as the police officer and enquired about my nationality. After some hesitation and discussion as to the status of Switzerland and Norway with respect to the Schengen area and the European Union, the lady left to ask her boss what was to be done. The boss appeared, told her to stamp our passports, and she told me that this was all we had to do. No need to wait for customs or any other formalities – we were happily waved into the Schengen area.

Kirkenes lies at almost 70°N. At these latitudes the end of August is already autumn – the leaves are yellow or brown and falling, and the weather is unstable and cold. While waiting for another depression to cross the area we visited the local museum. This tells the story of the region – an area with the Varanger fjord on one side and of the Sami population on the other side – in the 20th century, with a strong emphasis on the Second World War. It is told through a relatively small number of objects assembled in scenes, in front of which one finds a binder containing, typically, three pages of text in Norwegian, English, Russian and German. Although this layout is against all the norms of modern museology, we spent a whole morning reading the texts from the first line to the last. Rarely if at all have I seen a description of a war fought in the hardest conditions in a city that was burned down to the last house when the invaders left, given with such respect for the suffering of members of all parties to the conflict, in this case Norwegian, German, British and Soviet. The texts are well-written, lively, emphatic and to the point. The exhibits serve merely as illustrations to the written message.





The museum also tells how the Sami population lived, following their herds of reindeer in a region where national boundaries were unknown until recently. The appearance of frontiers proved fatal to this way of life, but there remains a certain relativity to the reality of national borders in this harsh region where Norway, Russia and Finland meet. For example, street names in Kirkenes are written in both Russian and Norwegian. We were also told that discussions on fishing issues are dealt with locally to the satisfaction of all.

Strong westerly winds were forecast following the depression, but the reality seemed less dramatic and we left on a cold, windy afternoon for Vardø, in the northeast of the Varanger fjord, the starting point to round the northernmost part of mainland Europe. That area, the Finnmark, is a barren, massive, polished 150 mile-long rock. The few well-protected harbours are usually hidden behind a double thickness of massive stone dykes. Good protection is essential in this inhospitable part of the earth.

We progressed westward to the Nordkinn, the northernmost cape on the continent, in long cold and windy daily runs. We broke the throttle cable one morning while leaving our berth, which meant manoeuvring under sail to regain it. Until we could find







*Nordkinn, the northernmost cape of the European continent*

a replacement cable we resorted to old practices, and tied a line to the throttle which was activated by a crew member on orders from the skipper. We met few fishermen in the semi-deserted villages, and those we did told us stories about the red king crab invading these waters. One does not know whether their presence is a blessing, because their meat is excellent and sells well, or a curse, because they devastate the areas they invade.



*A ferry enters Hasvik*

From the Nordkinn our route turned south again, with stops in Hammerfest and Hasvik. Hammerfest is a small city, home of a major gas liquefying facility. The associated gas loading terminal lies on an island opposite the city and navigation is forbidden when gas tankers move in the area. The city leans on the hill behind the harbour, from which one gets a nice view of the surroundings and a hint of the Sami way of life in the form of some restored habitat. Hasvik is a small fishing village on the southeast shore of Sørøya, one of the large islands in the very north of Norway. It was cold, windy and rainy while we were there, sufficient reasons to look for an establishment of one sort or another for a meal. We found one open – not completely

trivial at these latitudes – and discovered that it was owned and run by a Lebanese man who had worked for some years in a Swiss city we know well. He was now renting cabins and boats to tourists, apparently often from the Czech republic, who pay substantial amounts to go deep-sea fishing. The place was lively, a real rarity in this whole region.



*En route to Tromsø*

We arrived in Hasvik just too late to avoid the first gusts announcing a depression bringing rain and strong westerly winds. Having let it go by while enjoying the fish served by our new Lebanese friend, we left early on a grey morning two days later towards Tromsø. Several layers of cloud occupied the sky and were reflected by a flat and smooth sea. Rain was not far away, fog was visible in some directions and there was no trace of wind. Thus we motored to Tromsø for the last leg of what had been a richly diverse trip from St Petersburg. *Cérès* had circumnavigated the Scandinavian peninsula and was to spend the winter in Tromsø, her third in a decade, but this time Barbara and I planned to spend most of it on board.



One definition of a chart is: 'a map on which the water is of greater importance than any land which may be surrounding it'.

From *The Sailor's Little Book*, compiled by Basil Mosenthal