

CRUISING LOG

**Readers'
Cruising
Stories**

Yachting Monthly's founder Herbert Reich wrote in the first issue in 1906:

'We shall be glad to receive the best logs and cruising stories offered to us from all parts of the world'

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From the White Sea to the Black

Australian John Vallentine is one of the few yacht skippers to have travelled north to south across Russia's inland waterways

It is a four-day trip through the Volga-Balt waterway system from Lake Onega to the Volga River. We have been in northern Russia for four weeks but I still cannot believe that we are here. After eight months of negotiation with the Russian authorities from Australia we had gained what seemed like tentative approval for our planned journey from the Barents Sea to Istanbul. But we knew that customs and immigration formalities in Archangel'sk and approval from the Captain of the Belomorsk Canal remained hurdles of unknown height. In the end all

went surprisingly smoothly.

Crew lists, itineraries, ship specifications and registration, insurance, language qualifications and insurance documentation all needed certified Russian translations in sextuplicate, but we found the authorities to be reasonable, friendly and helpful.

The voyage from Vardo in Norway seemed long to me: 500 miles of windward sailing along the icy, bleak Kola Peninsula into the White Sea was cold but uneventful. It soon became apparent to us that the Russian Coast Guard knew exactly who we were and where we were going,

'The Russian Coast Guard knew exactly who we were and where we were going'

although they did not answer our compulsory VHF position reports at the designated waypoints. Much later we found that they had even been following our website.

Maxine, my splendid Muscovite crewperson, is a competent sailor. Enthusiastic, optimistic and irritatingly cheerful, she is immune to seasickness and cooks well. What else could an elderly sailor ask for? As we

progressed down the Belomorsk Canal I found out: her skills as lawyer, negotiator, radio operator, interpreter and lobbyist were employed to the full.

The waterways from Archangel'sk on the White Sea

and from St Petersburg down the Black Sea are well-maintained and the commercial traffic is continuous. The locks are high and well run. In Stalin's not Belomorsk Canal (100,000 workers are said to have died during its construction) we were alone in all 19 locks. Now, working south on the Volga, we are tucking ourselves into locks behind large ships.

Tainui, our venerable Petrol 46, is very much a novelty, a yacht, a foreign yacht and Australian-registered vessel. In the last 1,000 miles we have seen just two yachts, both Russian vessels. On each occasion there has been rafting mid-stream, fraternal toasts and immediate conviviality between sailors in remote places. Our



With the mast on its frames, it's time to let the diesel engine take over



Preparing to share a lock with a much larger vessel



A typical lock hook, clearly designed for slightly larger vessels



Rafted up mid-river with Credo Gam, one of two Russian yachts we met



Socialising mid-river. Everywhere, people stopped to visit and chat

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN VALLENTINE

arrival in each new port leads inevitably to much tipping and toasting. Wonderfully friendly and curious locals arrive with vodka, blinis and jars of pickled things. I learned to sit resignedly as Maxine and our visitors laugh and chatter incomprehensibly in their ridiculous language. After 40 years of boat ownership and 15 years with *Tainui* I have found it quite disconcerting to relinquish control over my lovely boat in this fashion. But Maxine, who flirts shamelessly and very effectively with the officials, has proven herself over and over. So I just accept my loss of agency, sit quietly and tinkle contentedly.

The journey from the Arctic down to the Black Sea is long – some 2,500 miles – and with bridge heights less than 15 metres the mast sits inelegantly on cross frames above the bimini. We pulled our mast in Vytegra and it is not an experience I am likely to forget in a hurry. Picture a 200-ton floating crane heaving with the river wash, using a one-ton ballasted hook and a crane clutch, which gave one-metre jerking lifts... It was a very anxious day. We managed in the end. Now an elderly diesel does all

the work but still, for me this is a wondrous journey of discovery.

As far as I can tell, *Tainui* is the first foreign-flagged pleasure craft allowed into the Volga-Don river system in the last century. The late Miles Clark (a former features editor of *YM*) did the trip in 1994 and Barry Woodhouse followed in 2000, both under Russian flags. Things are much easier now and we do not pretend to be breaking ground as they both did.

Fertile cruising ground

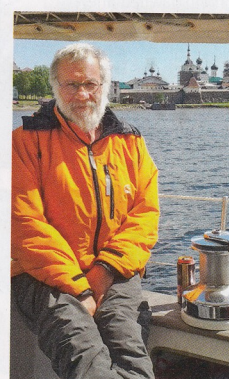
Now that Moscow has opened up Russia's inland waterways to foreign pleasure craft, we trust that things will continue to improve. The huge Russian inland waterways system could become a fertile cruising ground for foreign yachts in future years. Ultimately the main problem will be getting through the Barents Sea to Archangel'sk. Such remoteness will limit yacht traffic.

I suppose some pleasure craft will do the trip from south to north but there are two problems with that: they will have the

Volga current against them for 2,500 miles and they will find themselves entering the White Sea and the Barents Sea in autumn, which is courting disaster. Many more northbound yachts from the Black Sea will, I suspect, do the shorter trip, turning left at Lake Onega to enter the Baltic via St Petersburg.

We were, however, captivated by Archangel'sk, the remote Solvetskiy Islands monasteries and the lonely, densely forested shores of the Belomorsk Canal – all to the north of St Petersburg – and I would not have missed those places for the world. There is a third alternative, which is to enter Russia at St Petersburg and sail north from there to Archangel'sk, a much shorter journey, which at least gives a taste of the waterway system, with the big advantage of no height restrictions.

After 40 years of voyaging I have found that genuinely new experience comes less often than it used to, but this journey through Russia is truly new and exciting. I feel privileged to be here.



John Vallentine

John Vallentine is 68 and for the last seven years has divided his time between work as a doctor at a remote indigenous medical practice in central Australia and a slow circumnavigation aboard his 40-year-old Peterson 46, *Tainui*. He has two daughters and his partner, Christine, 'joins when we drop anchor in some lovely place and the chardonnay is chilled.'

The extraordinary and exotic onion domes of the Yaroslavl monastery

