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Travel Adventures - Part 3: Cruising the Russian Waterways

by Noella Ballenger

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Enjoying the view from the bow of the cruise ship as we sailed along the Svir River.

In the last part of our adventures I told you about St. Petersburg, Russia and the many, many beautiful palaces and museums that housed stunning works of art. Art is a passion for me and I was “blown away” by the beauty of the city and of the art that is housed there. And actually, being able to see and study these fabulous works of art was so special that I didn’t think any other part of Russia could come even close to thrilling me in that same way.

Wow, was I in for a few surprises! So join us again as we continue our journey on the waterways that connect St. Petersburg and Moscow.

One of the joys of a cruise adventure is being able to relax and enjoy the scenery. After the busy time that we had during our stay in St. Petersburg, we were more than happy to relax and watch, but my frustration as a photographer was that I couldn’t get out and explore as we slowly passed something interesting. Compromise obviously was the name of this game!

We left St. Petersburg after dark and began our cruise along the Neva River. During our water excursion we would be traveling through approximately 27 locks--locks that are necessary when the ship is navigating dams which were placed across the rivers. During Stalin’s time in power, he wanted to link all of the Soviet Union with a waterway, so he built a series of canals and dams on the rivers and flooded many acres of prime farm lands--even towns and cities. As we cruised along the waterway, one could see the occasional flooded church tower protruding from the water. This deliberate flooding has been acknowledged as one of the worst ecological disasters in history.



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Squeezing two large cruise ships into one lock takes careful manipulation.



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All that could be seen of the village that once was here is the church steeple surrounded by water. It won't be too many more years before nothing will be seen at all.

Going through the locks was a fascinating experience. The ship would come right up to the lock and then sail into a very narrow space (in some cases, only a few feet wider than the ship) and either rise or fall as the water was pumped in or out of the locks. We also discovered that there were several kinds of gates on the locks. Some gates were like barn doors, some like sliding doors and some that were a single piece that went up and down like an elevator. And on occasion, we felt a bit like *sardines crammed in a can*, as they would put two big ships really close together into the lock.

The general agenda for the trip was that each day we would cruise and then stop in an interesting location for about half a day, then return to the ship and continue our journey. This agenda helped make our trip really interesting.

The first of the small towns we visited was called Mandrogy--a small community of traditional Russian folk artists. They create beautiful carvings, bead work and other items that are typical of the folk art of the area. The community has only two rules by which they live--no one drinks alcohol and no one steals in the village.



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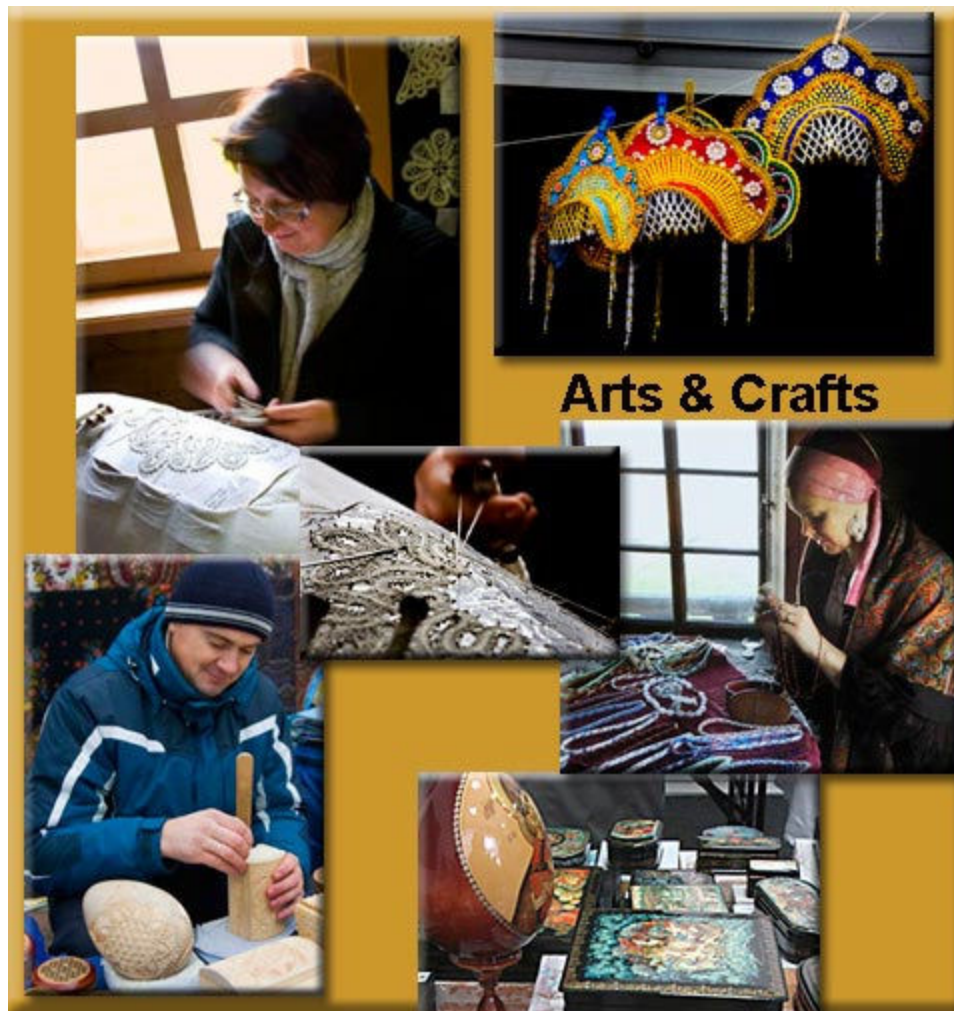
Mandrogly featured a number of new and interesting architectural buildings as well as older cottages. This building housed shops featuring the local folk art of Russia.



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Carved posts in Mandrogly dotted the walkways pointing in the direction of shops and other town features.

The Arts and Crafts of the Regions Along the Russian Waterways



Upper Left: Lady working the art of tatting ... making lace in Ulgich. Note how quickly she is moving her hands to make the intricate pattern. Copyright © Noella Ballenger

Center: Close-up of the fine lace work in progress. Copyright © Noella Ballenger

Upper Right: Traditional Russian headdresses featuring delicate and colorful bead work were for sale in the local shops of Mandrogy. Copyright © Noella Ballenger

Bottom Left: This gentleman did beautifully intricate geometric carving on birch boxes in Ulgich. Copyright © Noella Ballenger

Right center: A Russian artist stringing beads in Mandrogy. Copyright © Sunny Asch

Right bottom: One of the stores in Yaroslavl had a large selection of the lacquer boxes that are so famous in Russia. They are an outstanding example of Russian folk art with their delicately painted scenes depicting Russian fairy tales and historic and mythical moments. Copyright © Sunny Asch

A day later we had crossed Lake Onega, the second largest lake in Europe (actually the 18th largest by area in the world). Toward the northern end of that lake is Kizhi Island. This outdoor architectural museum is a small, intact and

beautiful piece of old Russian history. The highlight of the island was seeing the beautiful wooden church--a fairy-tale structure built in 1714 without a single nail. As it has aged, the aspen shingles on the domes have taken on an enchanting silver sheen. In the early morning light it was breathtaking. And from there we entered into a home that was refurbished, showing us how the people in earlier times lived. Considering the freezing cold winters they have here, one had to admire the hardiness and strength of these early people.



Large photo: Copyright © Stan Westfall
Smaller close-up: Copyright © Noella Ballenger

View of the church at Kizhi Island and the silver glow on the aspen shingles of the domes in the early morning light. The church featured many domes. The entire church was built without a single nail and is one of the most beautiful Russian churches of all that we saw.

The domes are meant to resemble candles and their flames.



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Wheat in a window tells the story of Kizhi Island's early residents.



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This is a replica of the living quarters used by the people who lived in the town. It was bitter cold during the winter. Notice the covered baby cradle hanging from the rafters.

We returned to our ship and sailed back across the Lake Onega and continued our journey on the Volga-Baltic Waterway. As we cruised along these northern waterways we saw many industrial freight ships on the water, as well as large loads of timber on the shores, waiting to be loaded--the thick forests lining the rivers contribute to an active (substantial) timber trade.

Storage areas



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for timber and other commodities wait to be transported on the rivers.

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Be sure to join us next month as we visit Moscow.

[Read Travel Adventures - Part 1: Finland and Estonia](#)

[Read Travel Adventures - Part 2: St. Petersburg, Russia](#)

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