

# The St Petersburg Dash

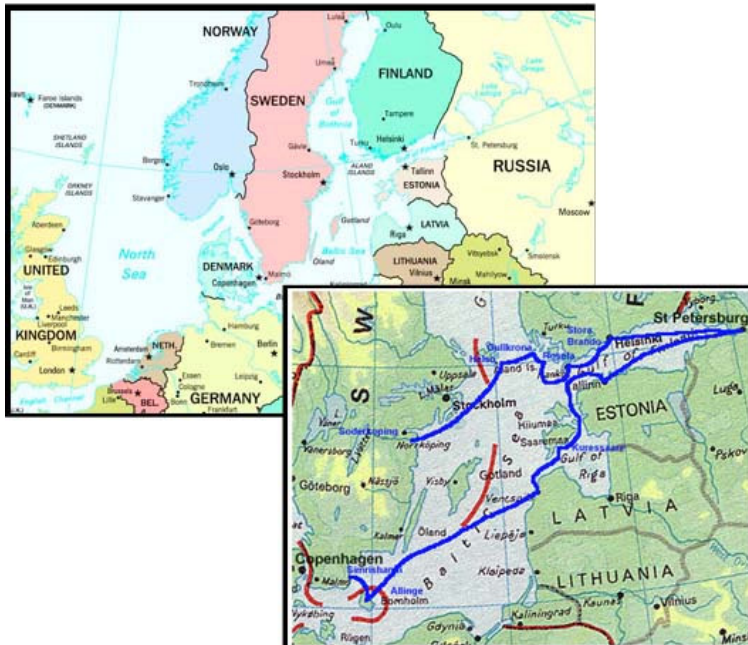
## Mary Wilson

I knew we were going somewhere different when the door of the Russian consulate clicked closed behind me. I was still Edinburgh, but this office already felt far away. "You may only visit Moscow and it will be on the visa. Do you understand?" The Russian official was explaining sternly to a man who had been hoping to combine attending a wedding with some sight seeing. I tightened my grip on the numerous papers I had ready. Many of them were in Russian just recently faxed from St Petersburg by Vladimir Ivankiv. Would they have a similar effect on this official?

"St Petersburg. How will you get there?"

"Sailing Boat" I replied

"Sailing Boat" He echoed – no hint of surprise or pending adventure



"Accommodation"

"Central River Yacht Club"

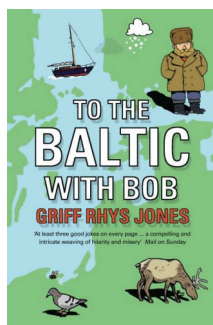
"Central River Yacht Club. Who will be going?" I shuffle the crew list across and got a flicker of approval.

"When do you need your passports back?"

"Yes, cash only £160 OK"

Just as quickly as I had left the familiar surroundings of Edinburgh I was back and nobody seemed to have noticed my disappearance for half an hour!

I had thought that "The Baltic the Bob-less way" would be the title of this log. Many of you will have read the Griff Rhys Jones book of his Baltic cruise – "To the Baltic with Bob – An Epic Misadventure". We were to follow much the same route but hoped to have a very different experience – efficient crew and fast sailing. We certainly wanted to avoid hitting a rock off the Finnish coast.



This was a family cruise. Mum and Dad with our son and one of our daughters who are both at University and a friend of the son. Andrew and Kirsty have sailed with us since they were very young and are now strong sailors. Bridget has done many cruises with us including the glorious St Kilda run last year. All are good at cooking in a storm and don't mind too much getting up early.

Various crews had delivered our X332 yacht, Madog, to Simrishamn in Southern Sweden. She was well placed for the 3-week dash around the Baltic. Simrishamn is easy to reach via Copenhagen. The plane from Glasgow is very small with just one stewardess. She was patient with the request to bring on a guitar as hand luggage and relaxed as we drank her last bottle of Champagne as we got into holiday mood. Madog was just as we had left her – always a relief when abandoned in a foreign port.

It was Market day in Simrishamn when we hit the shops the next day so we stocked up on local food. Here all the unknowns proved good eating. Deeper into the Baltic we learnt to avoid doughnuts filled with sausage meat – more of that later. Jan Ljunggren, the harbour master had been good to his word and had got courtesy flags for Latvia and Estonia but had failed with the Russian one.

We're ready to set sail, just one more thing to do before we leave - a photo.

The German skipper on the next berth obliged, but I don't know exactly what he meant when he said "Smile before you die" as he squeezed the button on the camera. Maybe he thought we were daft setting off at 4 in the afternoon.



Towards Bornholm was written in the log book. SW4 increasing to SW5 was what we had with a very lumpy cross-sea. Luckily our planned route took us straight across the shipping lanes and there was very little traffic. In fact I don't think we saw anything. 25 miles and 4 hours later we're in Allinge on the north east side of Bornholm. Cosy little harbour, straight in then hard left though the narrow lock gate. They close this bad SE winds. Supper was cooked and we watched the locals and tourists watching us as they walked up and down the main street some eating ice cream! Cue for our own sweet. The ice cream shop that we could see from the harbour was going to be explored. The 30 Kr. special with all toppings from the Extreme Isbar is to be highly recommended.



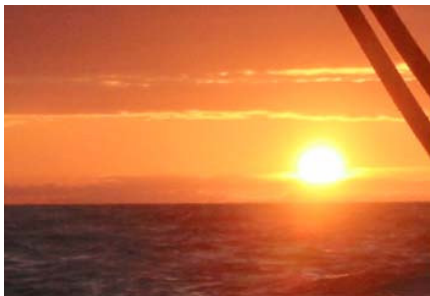
Allinge, Bornholm towards Ventspil Latvia. All quiet as we slip out at 06:30 on Sunday Morning. Good following wind is forecast and the sun is out. Sails are up and most of the instruments are off – next to no battery power. Madog's done too much good downwind sailing and too little motoring since she entered Danish waters. The morning goes by and the wind increases SW5, Bridget clocks 13.2 knots, by lunchtime David increases that to 13.6. Lunch is always good the day after shopping lots of fresh tasty bits.



A naval vessel is spotted to the south. Our course is good and we will pass a good distance from his bow. "Sailing vessel in position 55° 41' North; 16° 8' East." "Oh, that's us." David replied asking what course they would like us to steer. "5 degrees further north." We complied. Unlikely to win a fight with a naval vessel. There was a NATO exercise in progress. The vessels obviously trying to play hide and seek. There was one ship with radar switched on, he was questioned as to whether he had given up. Of course, I can't tell you anymore radio confidentiality and all that.

19:00 and we're still creaming along average speed of 7.2 knots. Andrew bursts on deck "Hello, I'm Andrew and I'm your drinks waiter for this evening. How can I help you?" Full American style. This gets a - "I hate that." - response from David who is clearly not a fan of this style of customer focused waitressing. It didn't put him off having a beer though. Supper eaten and off watch crew off to bunks. The watch this year works out at 4 hours on 4 off with a dog watch for some.

Having one crewmember miss the dog watches each day means that you slowly get to share watches in every combination. I'm not sure I like



getting up at 12 or 4 am. 8am is OK but the joy of sailing continuously or at least 24 hrs plus is that you can sleep during the day or as I like to say relax in my bunk.

By 07:00 13<sup>th</sup> June 167.44 miles completed not a bad 24-hour run. The wind now has dropped and we end up motoring, but for lunch even with only NE2 we put up some sail and enjoy a quiet snack. Lunch over and engine back David doing his usual odd jobs there is always an endless list of little things to do, keeps him happy! The rest of us doze, read, play guitar, sing or just relax. By 22:00 we can smell land so lookout becomes more interesting, pine smell first we must be close to land. Then the aroma changes, reminds me of Milford Haven. Yes, the smell of an oil refinery. I'm sure there's a technical term but it stinks. Lots of cardinal buoys to tick off as we pass. Radio ashore to announce our arrival. Reply was "Sailing yacht, huh. You can come in." Now its Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> June 00:34 as you can imagine its dark but not black we can still see outlines ships tied up along side and then the entrance to the yacht harbour. Now we have the challenge of picking up our stern buoy, then moving forward so that a line can go ashore. All worked a treat and the harbour master waiting for us so that we can have our papers checked and stamped. Finally at 01:21 some of us had a night cap and others tried the showers ashore.

For our day ashore in Ventspil we took a bus trip to Kuldiga to see Europe's widest waterfall, which I'm sure



it was, but I think it was also the smallest fall at around 2-3feet! Before our bus trip we bought some bits for lunch. All very cheap and all good except the doughnuts. They look like sugar-coated doughnuts without the sugar the outside tastes sweet like doughnuts but the inside was meat paste. Not what we expected. Not sure about them. A leisurely day Ventspil is rather nice, much improved on the description in the guidebooks. A park with lots of sculptures open streets lined with



trees. Friendly people and good facilities at the harbour. Local fisherman happy to sell some fish 3 Lats (about £3) for a carrier bag full and he wanted to give me more. A feast for all but Kirsty tomorrow, Kirsty dislikes fish intensely. Last job of the evening is to have our papers stamped as we are leaving Latvia tomorrow.

Ventspil towards Kuressaare Estonia - 65 miles. Motored out of Ventspil at a leisurely 10:30 into NW2 so kept on motoring. "Yacht Madog, Yacht Madog, Yacht Madog. This is the Estonian Coast Guard, Estonian Coast Guard, Estonian Coast Guard." How did they know where we were? They had just called us up to welcome us into their waters. The authorities in Ventspils must pass on passage details. By 20:00 our engine had been on and off all day, we passed an Estonian coast guard boat looking at us looking at them. 22:00 we arrive at the island Saaremaa in a port of entry harbour of Kuressaare. Again bow in to the pontoon with stern buoy hopefully astern and a rope from the boat to it. Its my turn to leap sorry gently step from the bow with the line now I'm used to pontoons giving way when you leap ashore but because there are no tides in this part of the world there is no need for the pontoons to float so when you leap if you expect them to give, and they don't, then all that happens is you fall on your face it looks like your kissing the ground just glad to be ashore! Harbour master could not have be friendlier, organised the paper work, phoned for the authorities to come and see us, showed us the facilities - shower room with sauna and the local bar/restaurant. We try what we think is, "Please can we have a beer." in Estonian on the barmaid who bursts out laughing - we never do get to know what we actually said!



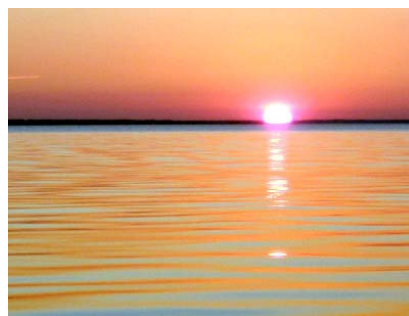
We had decided that having someone in charge of each country reading up about places to visit words to say, etc would be a good idea. It had worked in Latvia where Bridget had been our tour guide and language tutor now it was Andrew's turn. So a bike hire and cycle to a meteorite crater, picnic lunch then

possibly a swim before we set sail. All sounds good well it was except that Estonian miles are much longer than UK miles; either that or the estimate in the book is about half reality! The result, we all have very sore bottoms and we only just get the hire bikes back in time. We do find an



excellent place for lunch in a windmill. The first five listings in the menu were excellent, well we didn't have a clue what anything was so it was easier just to order the first five and share.

The harbour master was very sad to see us go, he tried very hard to keep us there another night but off we went



into the sunset leaving at 19:45 towards Tallinn. Again the wind played with us and sails went up and down. Motor was on at 07:00 and Bridget bored with the hum

of the engine decided to scrub decks before her shift ended at 08:00. The sun had risen a huge ball in the

sky, the log rolled over to zero and we carried on motoring up through the channel Moon Sound. Sea was glassy the light breeze warm and so we continued. All enjoyed the peace. I finished knitting a sock. Andrew played guitar. Kirsty sun bathed and David did odd jobs!



Tallinn was spotted from a long way off; the old town is high on the hill and the spires from the churches easily seen. There were a number of large boats around and we had fun using the binoculars to work out exactly what they were. Pirita, our destination for the night, was the Olympic village for sailing in 1980. We found a berth as a firework display started.



have been on the closing ceremony.

Early Saturday morning and we're all tightly packed into a taxi on our way to Tallinn -an old town with a lot of history and relatively unspoilt. A lovely day was spent there looking at the churches and cobble streets, open markets and individual shops, amber jewellery, original artwork and crafts. The evening meal taken in the cockpit, watching the other boats, one bashing into another, skipper got reverse and forwards mixed, everyone seemed very relaxed. The marina is filled with Finnish cruisers all stocking up with crates of beer wine and spirits. They all tasted the goods before loading them. The local bar has given up selling drinks at the bar. It now offers boxes of beer and you get the use of their trolley for free.

Since Simrishamn we had been looking for a Russian courtesy flag but as yet no joy. Now we needed it for our next leg, the chandlers was closed, harbour office didn't stock flags so Bridget and Kirsty set off to beg borrow barter or steal a Russian flag from one of the other boats, "just don't sell your bodies but come back with the correct flag." they were told. Time passed, another glass of wine, eventually they returned but no flag. So what were we to do?

Cleared customs at 07:00 on Sunday morning and set off on the 220 miles to St Petersburg. No flag on board or was there? The light northerly wind was on the nose as we motored out of Tallin Laht. Turning at the point we got some sails up, long tacks and slow progress. It did however give us time to contemplate our courtesy flag dilemma - white over blue over red horizontal stripes. The C flag with a bit of cutting and reorganising and stitching back together that would work at least till we get into St Petersburg to buy another. So the C flag was duly cut up on deck and re-stitched, using thread from a hotel sewing kit so all the colours matched it even looked quite professional when

finished. More importantly it was finished in Estonian waters. The wind kept changing its mind as to strength and speed, and the sails were hoisted and lowered as it dictated. By supper time we were 68 miles into the passage, off watch crew disappeared to their bunks and left the remaining two on deck, the sun disappeared and the moon rose it was never really dark, following the shipping lane as we were required to do, took us round south of the island Ostrov Gogland. Andrew was on lookout and he could see a vessel in the shadows but it appeared stationary, now I can hear all you sailors saying well if it was moving it would have its lights on and even at anchor would probably have an anchor light. No not the Russian coast guard vessel. Mm! There were quite a number of ships around freighters and big cruise ships etc and when we turned the corner to head further north still on the edge of the shipping lane it was quite scary as the big boats who were going a lot faster than us, looked as though they were coming straight for us, of course they also turned the corner and changed direction and then overtook us. The wind was still playing games with us and at one point we altered course in an attempt to keep the sails full and went just a wee bit off course and off the shipping lane, time for sails down and engine on. The vessel lurking in dark of the island started moving in our direction and we could see the white froth from his bow. Before we knew it they were within a hundred metres of our beam. "David, wake up, time to inflate the big fender in case they want to board," so David was down below pumping the fender. Andrew was checking the plotter to see how far off the shipping channel I had gone and making sure I was on course now and I just kept looking forward trying to keep a steady course. They watched us, and watched us, for what seemed like forever then without any warning it was full steam ahead for them and another drink for me, and a watch change. At 04:30 we hit the magic roundabout, why Kirsty thought



it was magic I don't know I think she had been sailing too long. It's was a "T" junction in the shipping lane. Round the roundabout and into a northerly wind, good sailing again.

Getting closer to Kronshtadt, we could see on the horizon the outline of ships not one or two but about fifty all waiting for a pilot. Kronshtadt the floating hotel



moored of the fort is the first of our check-in points, passports, visa ships papers all looked at. Then off again to St Petersburg itself, a big open patch of sea but not much water so channels to follow and buoys to tick off. We tied up at the customs ready for our on board inspection this time. The officer came on board big hat and shiny buttons, with his assistant who could easily have been Miss St Petersburg. Mind you all the other

assistants we saw later looked like Miss St Petersburg perhaps a prerequisite for the job.



Vladimir arrived, our local contact he helped us with one or two details like ship's port and ship stamp (which we didn't have). We left the customs and clearance site and motored to our marina berth. We arrived just as the crew of the J120 "Resolution" returned from their day sight seeing in St Petersburg. The Canadian couple and their two daughters came on board to compare notes and sample malt whisky. We've got here. Madog is 1460 miles from Port Edgar about half of that in our 7 days at sea to date.



The next day we hit the toilet block, one shower for the marina, no hooks to keep your clothes off the wet floor a raised shower tray and no curtain I guess that's why we have a wet floor. Vladimir arrives to give us a tour of his city, we pile into his people carrier and the trip



begins. He points out the trolley bus stop no.7, it will take you straight into town. The Russian palace; the Hermitage; Peter and Paul fortress; Dostoyevsky's home grounds; amazing fruit & vegetable market with produce from all over Russia; St Isaac's Cathedral;



Church of the saviour on the blood; Cruiser Aurora and so the list goes on. Vladimir stops the car and we all pile out to see the sights. Although the streets are really busy he has no trouble finding somewhere to park. No parking meters or tickets to buy, unfortunately though he does get stopped by the traffic police for a left turn across the traffic that they have recently banned but haven't yet got around to putting up all the

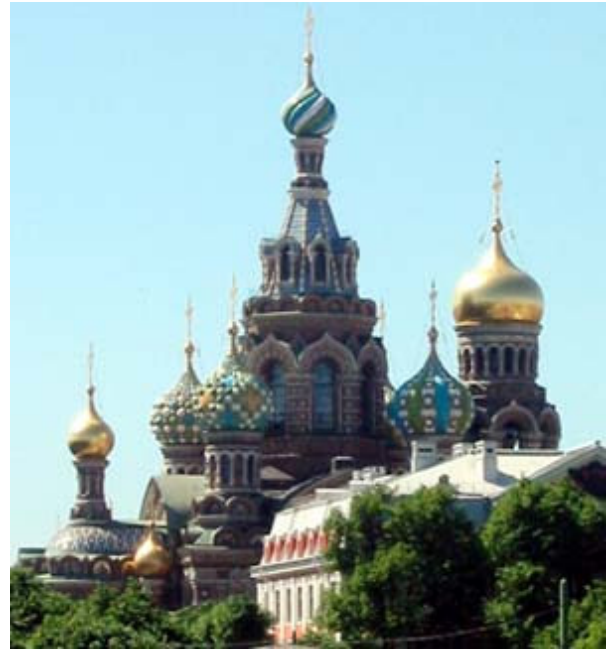


notices. We see his wallet coming out. The trip finishes and we talk about tickets for the ballet "Leave it with me" says Vladimir. Thursday day started with a full Canadian breakfast on board Resolution. Freshly



made pancakes and maple syrup bucks fizz and good banter. They trumped our 13.6 maximum with 15.2 knots in their Atlantic crossing last year and had included Poland and Riga in their cruise. The couple were retired so had a full 10 days in St Petersburg. They had an electrical ring to conserve gas that is very hard to refill in the Baltic – have to buy the local cylinders. The water is not recommended in St Petersburg. We had enough in our tanks but they would soon be down to bottled water. Trolley bus no.7 into town, we had a good time in the Hermitage only seeing a fraction of its contents and the evening at the Ballet, what an experience. Our ships binoculars were being passed along the row continuously it certainly was well worth seeing.

St Petersburg is a fantastic city and we didn't do it justice in our 3 days there but we certainly got a flavour



of its history and culture. Sailing there you get a long period of expectation as you keep to the shipping channels, the customs guards ensure that you feel thoroughly foreign and you get to see the extremes of Russia – the very poor and the very rich; the carefully restored and the neglected for decades. For me the sail there was amazing, best of all we were a great crew with the return adventure in front of us.

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