



Manchester Cruising Association  
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## Cruising the Baltic – Charles and Elizabeth Thorp

**10 April 2008**

There was more rummaging than usual after this talk as members hunted around their going-ashore gear for their passage plans for the summer. Most keep these dog-eared scraps about their persons at all times ready for spontaneous revision (after an appropriate risk assessment of course) and this talk had them delving to do just that. Scrub the Isle of Man, we're off to Tallinn this summer.

Elizabeth and Charles would take us inside the Friesians (the Islands not the cattle) and through the Kiel Canal to the Baltic and Sweden, Finland, Denmark and the Baltic States. It sounded wonderfully adventurous even before they spoke a word: Erskine Childers (the Riddle of the Sands one), Arthur Ransome, the Kaiser, Romanovs. And when they began, it became even more exotic: a cathedral built on blood, a rock-hewn underground church, narrow twisting channels, golden palaces and all for a tenner a night.

Everyone in Sweden has a summer house and they all come from IKEA as flat-packs (no doubt there are heaps of those keys they give you to assemble things quietly rusting in the forests awaiting Sven the Recycler). Each summer house has a sauna and photos of one or two of these had a few members reaching for their opera glasses. Given the extraordinarily high quality of all the photographs there was a chance they might discern some sauna frolics with suitable optical aid but it was not to be as we dodged on through the archipelago.

In fact, the Baltic has more than its fair share of two things: islands and churches. Indeed it doesn't just have plenty of islands, it has archipelagos in abundance. Weaving your way through these sounds fun because the channels are well-marked but you do go close enough to rocks – within an IKEA meat-ball toss as they say locally – for it to be alarming at times. The cathedrals and churches were everywhere in a variety of styles. There was even a spectacular wooden cathedral with 22 cupolas in Kizhi. The Church of our Saviour Built on the Blood was a more substantial structure built on the spot where Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, an extravagant gesture given that most assassinees get a brass plaque at best. But then the Czars were a fairly extravagant crowd as we realised from the Ship Cruise part of the odyssey.

Elizabeth and Charles abandoned *Aura*, their Westerly Ocean 33, in Riga to go on a cruise from Moscow to St Petersburg on a ship. This took them through a canal, along the Volga and across various waters. Some of them had been built by slave labour in Stalin's time with the irony that it all led to a city dedicated to royalist excess. The splendour of some of the palaces, particularly inside, was unsettling: if I'd been a peasant with only a blanket and a turnip to my

name I'd have wanted to be on the cruiser *Aurora* (beautifully preserved and open to visit incidentally) when it fired a blank to signal the start of the Bolshevik revolution. Mind you, it didn't turn out well. The canals and waterways built by slave labour reminded us of that.

After the cruise they pressed on from Riga through *Racundra* territory to Moon Sound (where Charles was breathalysed by a passing police boat) and on to Tallinn (Elizabeth's favourite place) and then across to Helsinki. When they moved on to the Aland Islands they saw the *Pommern*, one of the windjammers involved in the grain races between Australia and England from 1921 to 1939. Owned, like many of the vessels, by Gustaf Erikson, the Finnish entrepreneur ship-owner, she made 11 passages, three in under 100 days. She's now a museum in Mariehamn, Erikson's HQ. This is a better fate, you may think, than that of her fellow Glasgow-built *Moshulu*. Made famous by Eric Newby in *The Last Grain Race*, she's now a "fine dining" restaurant in Philadelphia.

They slipped down the Swedish coast (visiting the mysterious military island of Landsort until recently forbidden to the public where guns pointed at Russia in fear of invasion) and eventually left the boat at Burgstaaken where she was lifted out and taken to a storage hall for the winter.

They had covered around 2000M in four months, maybe one third under sail. They had been surprised how straightforward it was considering how adventurous it all sounded. In 2007 they cruised the Polish coast and it sounded as if they were reluctant to be coming back to Pompey this year. They'll probably meet Mancunian cruisers going the other way.

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