



A JOURNEY THROUGH
RUSSIA
WITH
LOVE

An adventurous German couple takes a Marlow Explorer 72E to Moscow.

BY JOHN WOOLDRIDGE PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS KITTEL



IT WAS THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME FOR THEM.

THOMAS AND JUTTA KITTEL had a dream of cruising where few have had a chance to go. They boarded their Marlow Explorer 72E, *Azura*, on May 1, 2014, in Rostock, Germany, and cruised the Baltic Sea along the coasts of Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to St. Petersburg in Russia. They then entered the Russian inland waterways and voyaged to Moscow and back to St. Petersburg, spending more than seven weeks within Russia.

"We traveled the Neva River, Lake Ladoga, the Svir River, Lake Onega, the Vytegra canal (part of the Volga-Baltic Waterway), the Kovsha River, Lake Beloye (the White Lake), the Sheksna River, the Rybinsk Reservoir, the Volga River, the Moscow Canal and the Moskva (or Moscow) River," Thomas Kittel told me. Eventually they returned to Rostock, but not before exploring the southern Finnish archipelago to the Åland Islands, Stockholm, the eastern Swedish archipelago, the Swedish islands of Gotland and Öland, the Danish island of Bornholm and the German island of Hiddensee. In 4½ months, they spent 135 days on the water and covered 4,150 nautical miles.

It was an epic adventure for this retired German

couple, whom I first met during the Marlow Marine Rendezvous in April 2014 on Florida's Captiva Island. Thomas joked that they had hoped to demonstrate that an American-brand boat built in China and sailing under a German flag could get in front of the Kremlin without the slightest problem. They accomplished this to their satisfaction, though not by themselves.

"During the trip we had many guests on board — family members, friends and a Russian pilot, which is required by their laws and is absolutely needed on the Russian inland waterways," he said. "So during about 12 out of 20 weeks, we were not completely alone."

The Kittels had their first cruising-under-power experience in 1997 chartering river and canal boats in the Burgundy region of France, where they admit with a laugh that they caught the cruising virus. For the next few years, they gained experience and earned their licenses: in 1998 on French inland waterways, in 1999 during their first time on the Baltic Sea, in 2000 on the German inland waterways and in 2001 on New York's Hudson River and Lake Champlain.

Overleaf: *Azura* passes through a late-night bridge in St. Petersburg. Above: Summer reeds beautifully obscure *Azura* in Vergi Harbour, Estonia. Jutta and Thomas Kittel on the beach at sunset in Jūrmala, Latvia.



A post mill (with machinery that's housed in an enclosure that revolves around a central post) stands quiet on Saaremaa Island, Estonia. At right is the Historic Centre of Riga, the capital of Latvia.

When they bought the Marlow Explorer 72E, they were already thinking about equipping her with communication and navigation electronics, operating systems and comfort systems for a long-distance cruise. *Azura* has two redundant and linked Raymarine G Series electronics suites, two Onan Cummins generators, Naiad stabilizers, a watermaker and a KVH satellite phone. Navigation references include Navionics electronic charts and Russian paper charts. Before leaving, they had to acquire a six-month business visa with multiple entry, purchase the right to use the inland waterways, acquire a Russian handheld VHF radio and hire a Russian captain.

"We entered Russia on June 4 and left St. Petersburg during the night of June 14 in a convoy of ships through the opened bridges of the Neva River — very spectacular," Thomas said. The couple started at the Neva River, crossed Lake Ladoga and went up the Svir River. *Azura* traveled across Lake Onega, up the Vytegra canal and Kovsha river, through the White Lake, Sheksna river, Lake Rybinsk, the Volga River and the Moscow channel, docking at the Royal Yacht Club in Moscow on June 30 in Mediterranean-like temperatures and surroundings.

"On the trip up we went through 16 huge locks,

usually in company with passenger cruisers, cargo ships, tankers and push tugs. To get to the city center of Moscow, we went through five additional locks down to the Moskva River on July 4 — Independence Day in the United States — quite a coincidence!"

On July 10, the Kittels began their way back the same route, adding some unplanned legs in Lake Onega and Lake Ladoga to visit the monasteries on Kizhi, Valaam and Konevets islands. They reached St. Petersburg on July 29 and, after another week there, left Russia. Up to that point, they had cruised more than 3,000 nautical miles — about 2,000 of those in Russia. At journey's end, the adventurous couple had covered almost 4,200 nautical miles.

Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Poland, the Netherlands and Russia now rank atop their list of all-time best cruising destinations. "Our favorite cities include Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki, Amsterdam, St. Petersburg and Moscow," Thomas Kittel said. "And we have enjoyed seeing the Göta Canal in Sweden from Stockholm to Gothenburg, the Telemark Canal in Norway and, most recently, the Russian inland waterways to Moscow." In total, they entered nine countries and visited numerous harbors in all kinds and sizes of villages, towns and

The Moskva (or Moscow) River flows eastward from a point about 90 miles to the west of the city. The waterway is approximately 300 miles long and flows through the center of Russia's most important city.



Clockwise from right: *Azura* cruises past the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Nameboards on display in a shipyard in Petrozavodsk, Russia. Knights in the Old Town of Tallinn, Estonia. Passing through St. Petersburg at night.

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cities. The harbor list includes the well-known capitals of Russia (Moscow), Sweden (Stockholm), Finland (Helsinki), Estonia (Tallinn), and Latvia (Riga), plus the spectacular city of St. Petersburg.

The range of waterways they traveled was considerable, including the open sea, lakes, rivers, canals, reservoirs and a large number of huge locks built during Communist rule. Most of the time that they were underway, they were on their own, interrupted occasionally by meeting commercial ships — tankers, cargo ships, tugs pushing barges, and passenger cruise ships — some downbound for the Black Sea as they traveled the commercial routes between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Except for St. Petersburg and Moscow, Thomas said, there were only a few signs of a rudimentary maritime infrastructure in Russia. He compared trip planning to exploration. In the morning, they would have no clue where to dock in the evening.

Along the way, they found mainly rotten piers, which they could tie up to, and there were enough of those that they ended up anchoring out only twice. With few exceptions, there was no water, no power, no diesel and no other standard marina services, so they had to plan accordingly.

The Kittels are not envisioning an idle retirement. This year they plan to cruise to Denmark, Sweden and Finland — a lap around the Baltic Sea. In 2016, the British Isles beckon. As ambitious as those adventures sound, it is 2017 that promises to be extraordinary, with a cruise that includes Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal and the Canary Islands. That almost makes their planned 2018 Mediterranean Sea cruise sound calm by comparison.

Still, they are secure in their abilities, and supremely confident that their Marlow Explorer 72E is more than up to the task. ▀

Catherine Palace, summer residence of the czars, and the Winter Palace of Peter the Great are must-see destinations. In Moscow, the famed Bolshoi Theatre, the historic Kremlin and Red Square are vital stops.

FINDING THE RIGHT YACHT: HIGH-VALUE CRUISING FEATURES

The Kittels first learned about Marlow Marine's yachts in a European boating magazine. "Elegance, space, comfort, consumption, long-range capability, build quality and David Marlow's reputation as a builder who is very engaged with his owners — these are some of the important features that led us to look more closely," Thomas Kittel said. "We were also impressed with some technical specialties like the protected shafts and propellers, large fuel tanks and the resin-infusion process used for the construction of the entire yacht. The yacht's long-range capability, watermaker and two generators made us completely independent from the virtually nonexistent maritime infrastructure between St. Petersburg and Moscow. And with twin diesel engines, bow and stern thrusters, and three mobile control stations — flybridge, bow, stern — Azura is easily handled by two people." — J.W.