

Using Russia's window of opportunity

The British Schools Exploring Society expedition to the White Sea of Arctic Russia, summer 1992.
Chief Leader's report by John Ramwell FRGS, MRIN BCU L5 coach. Revised and rewritten July 2022.

I had completed several expeditions with the British Expeditions Society, either in the capacity of the kayaking leader or as overall leader though I did feel the weight of responsibility and was pleased and relieved when we returned home safe and sound; this anxiety was made so well worthwhile on learning how fulfilling the experience had been for all those participants.

There's always a gamble when taking on any sort of responsibility and this should be fully recognized by those in authority... as indeed it mostly is. My last leadership experience was taking a BSES expedition to Svalbard back in 2004.

Fortunately I was unable to participate in any further expeditions because my wife and I had just bought ourselves a second home in Newfoundland, Canada, which took up all our spare time. I do not use the word 'fortunately' lightly as the leader who took my place had to deal with one of his young charges being attacked and killed by a polar bear; 'there but for the grace of the Almighty...'

So I return to the subject in hand, our 1992 expedition to Russia.

When one looked more closely towards Russia as a potential expedition site for almost 100 young British citizens and accompanying leaders back in the early 1990s one could see the potential for exploring not only new terrain but a wholly different culture. These opportunities were not lost on my chosen fellow leaders nor on the Expeditions Committee of the BSES to whom I owe my undying gratitude for sharing the risks in return for their perceived rewards.

I was often asked why. Why choose Russia? Winston Churchill was quite right when he described the Russians as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. This was the major rationale for our proposed visit and we were not at all disappointed.

For a start the Russian addiction for espionage is legendary. One has only to read Ben Macintyre's *The Spy & The Traitor* to discover just by how much.

For ourselves we were embarking on a voyage of discovery but for the ordinary persons living their lives this could and often did mean a regime of serious economic restrictions as well as a culture of authoritarian control and fear. I'm guessing that if one could choose one's birth country then Russia would be a quiet place.

Moving on to back to the future of 1992, Russia is a huge country... Down had come the Berlin Wall and with it the unification of Germany. Gorbachev was leading his country into perestroika, into openness, and it was thus opportune to give some serious consideration to a BSES expedition to Russia.

I did not want to go too far east, to Siberia. We had to keep in the back of our minds the possibility of the shutters coming down again or at least some other difficulties such that we might have to consider an alternative expedition area. Consequently, we chose to look at the NW corner of the White Sea, not too far from Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia.

Politics and Communism was a power to reckon with even back then, as Boris Yeltsin attempted to unleash some of the fetters to

which I've previously alluded. Today, as Vladimir Putin rages war in Ukraine, there is no chance of a similar excursion and, on reflection, we only ever enjoyed a short window of opportunity that has today slammed tight shut.

The starting point for our expedition was a meeting with the First Secretary at the Russian Embassy in London. So off we trotted, we being the then Director of the BSES, Lt Col Peter Steer and myself, to the Russian Embassy in London to plead our case. Initially it was plain we were on a loser. He sat high behind his enormous desk looking like a copy of Leonid Brezhnev, omnipresent and overbearing but polite and at least prepared to listen as we explained our ambitions. Initially I felt we were wasting our time but then... it was as though a light switch had been thrown, as we both later agreed, when it may have occurred to him that this proposal might just work in both his and our favours and so it was that several months later we had our official invitation to make a recce visit to his country and our chosen area and on 23rd July 1991 Keith Maslen (Deputy Leader), Jenny Ramwell (Logistics Manager) and I set off for Russia to meet up with the three designated Russian officials. It was clear the Russians were taking this whole event very seriously as we were due to meet up with our Russian language interpreter, a professor of English from Moscow University and the Government Director of Education and his wife who was also his deputy.

The plan was to fly into Moscow and take the train north to our proposed expedition area but I had other ideas.

Travelling by ferry via Sweden, we eventually reached St Petersburg. From here we took the train north and as we went we gradually became more and more pessimistic of finding a good expedition area. The terrain was featureless and even on embarking at Kandalaksha on the shores of the White Sea we were still not hopeful.

However, our perceptions changed rapidly. Firstly, it was the people. They were so naturally friendly and determined to help and we were soon treated to a conducted tour of the area, first by car and then by boat.

One of our first stops was at the top of a local hill, which gave us views across Kandalaksha Bay with its myriad islands and coastal inlets and bordered on all sides except seaward by rolling hills. There was no doubt this was just what we were seeking, protected waters for kayaking, hills for trekking and rich wildlife around which to base a science programme so we agreed Kandalaksha Bay it was to be. Whilst I put a leader team together the office was busy selecting the Young Expeditioners.

On 24th April 1992 we staged our training/briefing weekend at the Anglesey (N Wales) school of Sea 'n' Surf. As well as managing to get everyone out in kayaks, we also divided the YEs into the five fires, based on the individuals' scientific interests and disposition to kayaking, trekking and diving. Included in these groupings were a dozen young Russian YEs who were able to join us on Anglesey.

