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WHAT ASSOCIATIONS DOES THE WORD 'FREEDIVING' RAISE IN YOUR MIND? I BET THE LIST WOULD INCLUDE THE SUN, A BLUE CLOUDLESS SKY, HEAT, SAND, GENTLE WAVES OF WARM WATERS, MAYBE PALMS... WRONG ANSWER. WE ARE ABOUT TO BREAK THIS STEREOTYPE! THE EXPERIENCE OUR GROUP GAINED ON THIS TRIP TO THE EXTREME NORTH OF RUSSIA WAS ABSOLUTELY FANTASTIC AND EXTRAORDINARY.

# ICE DIVING IN MOSCOW



Freedivers take turns to dive and rest on the ice

White Sea is one of the most beautiful northern seas of the Russian Federation; the environment there is pristine and the marine life is prolific. Solitary coastline and numerous uninhabited islands are exceptionally picturesque. Cliffling steep shores are followed by flat lands covered with taiga and mixed forest. Here every winter Greenland seals find their breeding grounds and great numbers of birds incubate eggs and bring up their fledgling in summer. The underwater world is as rich with beautiful landscapes and inhabitants. Suitably trained and equipped divers can enjoy views of under ice arches, hummocks and cavities with viz about 25-30 metres. Wrecks are waiting to be explored. Also you can encounter mammals, such as Beluga, schools of lanceet fish, plaice, cod, not to mention prawns, sea-urchins, crabs, starfishes, sponges, anemones and soft corals.

The weather in the sea area is truly unpredictable, for it's strongly influenced by oceanic and continental air masses. Winter is long and severe with the average temperature about - 20°C, though it brings the most beautiful northern lights which makes this remote place worth visiting in themselves. Now if you don't believe me I will understand, because I'm going to say that the water temperature during the cold months varies from -0.5°C to -3°C! And yes, we were going to cross half the continent just to have a few days of freediving and Beluga-diving in these hospitable conditions.

Our small company consisted of 5 persons: 3 freedivers, Julia Petrik, Andrei Lagutin and myself, and 2 fellow divers. Having come a long way from Kiev, Ukraine, via Moscow and Murmansk, we finally arrived one evening. The diving club astonished us with its beauty, convenient location close to the boat launching site and its harmony with the surroundings. After dinner and briefing, we headed to our rooms to have a good rest before tomorrow.

Early morning was still and sunny. The temperature was slowly crawling up. Since we arrived at the end of the winter season, the bays were partly free of the ice, and the rest of the white cover was extensively crossed with leads. This made us take additional precautions when moving around either on foot or snowmobile. We were all anticipating the main event of becoming completely frozen, so the staff live in an open-water cage which is accessible by boat once the ice is sufficient space for the Beluga to breath. The Beluga is the only whale that can move its head and in this way they are similar to dolphins.



In spring the ice cover gets very thin and crossed with leads



The Belugas are very playful; they allow you to grab them by the tail or fins, or give them a big hug

While we were approaching I could clearly see the Belugas curious faces peering out at us and hear their calls. Honestly, at first it seemed a bit terrifying to be surrounded by two 5 metre long white torpedoes, but you get used to them quite quickly, and it is then that you start feeling this wild enthusiasm and childlike glee. You dive together, touch them, talk to them, feed them in and out of the water, and they chase you, push you (and playfully bite your fins) to get a fish faster. They even took me for a ride on their backs! There are not enough words to describe the spectrum of sensations and emotions you experience...

Meanwhile, our scuba diving friends went for a dive to a cliff 5 minutes out by boat. A really unique piece of rock has its top just a few meters below the surface and goes down to a hard sandy bottom 20-25 metres deep. Why is it so special, you may ask? Because it is densely covered with many forms of marine life peculiar to this area only. So, don't forget your cameras!

After a good day's diving, a real Russian bath called 'banya' is perfect for unwinding and restoring your energies. You will be surprised with the power of its reviving effect. The next days brought more diving with Belugas, freediving sessions for us and wreck dives for the divers. There were lots of records made and shots taken to show others this absolutely uncommon, extreme, challenging and so delighting way of living your life.

Apart from diving, we would go for walks in the pine and birch forest that grows all around. There was also a traditional fishing village not far from the centre. It looked nice and old, but what was totally amazing was the absence of any basic services in it, even electricity (believe me; I could not imagine something like this would still occur in our modern world)!

Well, time goes by fast, especially when you are so captivated and absorbed. It was a pity that we had only 3 days to spend in the 'Polar Circle'. I would advise everyone to stay at least 5. Leaving White Sea we all had a tiny part of great, harsh and beautiful Northern Russia saved forever in our hearts.



Diving upside down under the ice is so confusing, you feel like a fly on the ceiling!

## 3 BELUGAS IN THE WHITE SEA



These Belugas, 'Filya' and 'Sema' adore posing for the cameras

divesites<sup>o</sup>

### USEFUL TIPS

- Our trip was organized with Polar Circle diving centre based out of Moscow. [www.ice-diving.ru](http://www.ice-diving.ru)



- The best time for diving under the ice is February through to April, as at the beginning of May the majority of bays and gulfs loose their ice cover.

- There are a lot of domestic airlines that fly to Murmansk where you will be met by car and transferred to the centre; an 8 hour drive. Alternatively, you can catch the Moscow-Murmansk train to Chupa Station and from here only a 2 hour drive will get you to the centre. Note, local airlines are very strict on a maximum allowance of 15kg, so pack only things you really need, the rest you are welcome to hire over there.

- Russian is the spoken language, but the staff can speak English to a certain extent.

- Currency: Russian rubles. It's preferable to bring cash for there are no ATMs for hundreds of kilometers around.

- Keep in mind that the water is cold, to put it mildly, so 10mm wetsuit plus, and no less than 7mm boots and gloves are a must.