

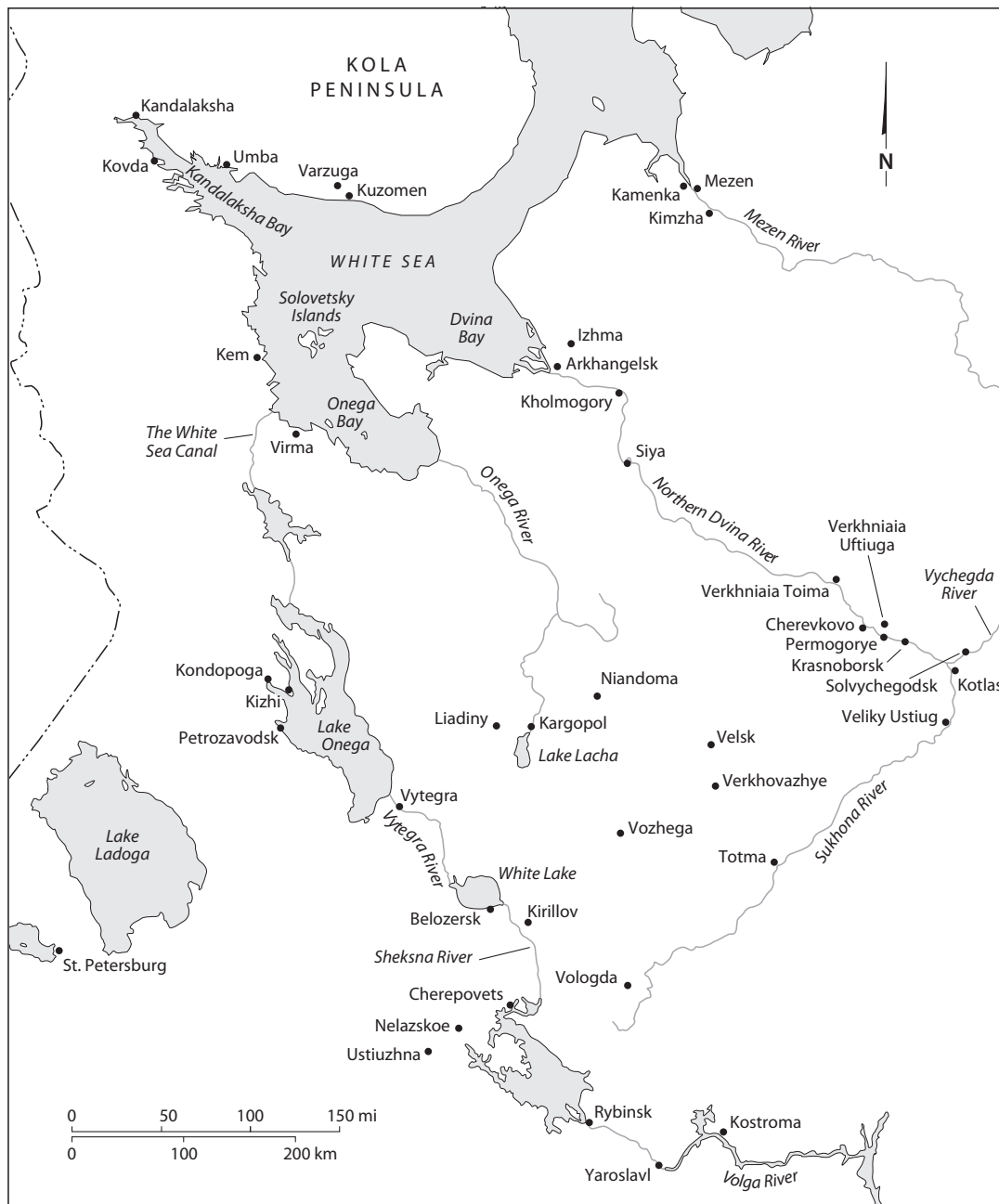
Introduction

Exploring the Russian North

In the popular imagination, virtually all Russia is “north,” cold and imponderable. Yet within this immense Eurasian landmass, there is a region traditionally known as the “Russian North” that includes territories located within or near the basin of the White Sea. This space is crossed by water networks extending from the White Lake (Beloe Ozero) to the White Sea (Beloe Morye). (The names themselves speak volumes.) Of special interest are the contemporary regions of Vologda and Arkhangelsk. Despite the cataclysms of the twentieth century, this area of the Russian North still lays claim to a deeply rooted cultural coherence created by those who settled in its forests and moved along its rivers and lakes.

Today, the rivers have silted, and travel in the north occurs by road—or what passes for a road. The vehicle is all. The new Russians have their Mercedes and Cherokees, but for the true connoisseur of the Russian road, the ultimate machine is the *UAZIK*, Russia’s closest equivalent to the classic Jeep. Four-wheeled drive, two gear sticks, two gas tanks (left and right), taut suspension, high clearance. Seat belts? Don’t ask. The top speed is one hundred kilometers per hour, but you rarely reach that if you drive it over the rutted tracks and potholed back roads for which it was designed.

No place in Russia has more of such roads than Arkhangelsk Province, a vast territory that extends from the White and Barents Seas in the north to its boundary with Vologda Province to the south. A combination of poverty, government default on both a local and national level, and distances that exceed those of most



western European countries have created some of the worst roads in European Russia.

Hence the UAZIK, whose name derives from the acronym for Ulyanovsk Auto Factory, located in the city of Ulyanovsk on the Volga River. Comfortable it is not, but an experienced driver can take this machine over rutted ice tracks in the middle of a snowstorm and not miss a beat. I should say at the outset that I am not such a driver, and I have only a vague idea as to how the machine works. I am, however, fluent in the Russian language, and that ability rescued many a challenging situation.

Although my first photographs of Russia were taken during the summer of

Area of the Russian North covered by the photography in this book.



Driver engaging front-wheel drive on partially submerged UAZIK at village of Fedkovo, near Velsk.
Photograph:
June 14, 2000.

1970, my first limited foray to the North did not occur until 1988 (Kizhi Island), with return trips to the same area in 1991 and 1993. My deeper exploration of the area began only in 1995, but over the preceding two and a half decades I had created a substantial photographic archive and published fundamental books on Russian architectural history — including *A History of Russian Architecture* (1993, with a second edition in 2004). By the time physical and bureaucratic obstacles to travel in the North were overcome, I was prepared to see this area as an expression of time-honored traditions that I had long studied. After research came the road trips, and the drivers got me where I needed to go. My job was to keep the cameras ready and scan the horizon for onion domes. And in my travels throughout the North, the UAZIK performed superbly with or without roads.

The fact is, roads were an afterthought in the Arkhangelsk territory. Settlers, hunters, and traders moved primarily over a network of rivers, lakes, and portages that defined the area as a geographically distinct cultural entity. Indeed, the settlement of this part of northern Russia, its gradual development, and its eventual assimilation by Muscovy were based on a paradoxical set of circumstances. The wealth of its forests, rivers, lakes, and the White Sea itself promised considerable rewards to those capable of mastering the area; and yet the remoteness of the area, the relative paucity of arable land (usually limited to certain river plains), and the length of the harsh winters discouraged extensive population growth. Those who



succeeded in settling the area during the tenth through the thirteenth centuries proved to be sturdy, self-reliant farmers and craftsmen, a mixture of Slavs and Finnic tribes.

Moscow succeeded in colonizing the area during the next two centuries, and by the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century, the Dvina river system had become Russia's major route east to the Urals and west to England. Although the significance of this network declined after the founding of St. Petersburg, in 1703, the North continued to function as a critical artery, such as during the Second World War and the submarine race during the Cold War.

Nowhere is the former wealth of this area more evident than at Solvychevodsk ("Salt on the Vychegda"), which was once the capital of a Stroganov trading empire. Until recently, getting to Solvychevodsk was no simple matter. Coming from the richly historic town of Veliky Ustiug, some eighty kilometers to the south, one crossed to the east bank of the Northern Dvina over a ramshackle pontoon bridge across the Dvina just south of the grimy city of Kotlas, located at the confluence of the Dvina and Vychegda Rivers. In the winter cars also used a track plowed across the thick ice of the Dvina. Either route winds through the industrial detritus of Kotlas before reaching a ferry across the Vychegda River.

A ferry in this area typically consists of a small barge capable of carrying one or two vehicles. Along the deck are benches for hikers and bikers. Power is pro-

Car being pulled from icy slush on "frozen" surface of Mezen River between Mezen and Kamenka. Photograph: March 8, 2000.

vided by a motor launch lashed to the side of the barge. That first trip, in July 1996, presented an empty landing on a chilly Sunday morning, and no one seemed certain that there would be a ferry at all. But after an anxious half hour, a few people with packs appeared, and shortly thereafter the ferry made its deliberate way toward our bank. When offered pay, the ferrymen refused with gruff good humor: “Today is the National Day of the River Fleet.” And to prove the point, they turned up the radio with rousing music of Russian riverboat chanteys. The ride was choppy, but it was an ideal way to see this northern river, cold and wind-swept like the landscape. On the opposite side the barge ramp clanked down, and vehicles plunged into the sandy bank, as if from an amphibious carrier. A rutted track led through flat, marshy fields with small villages, and finally connected with a graveled road to Solvychevodsk.

Entering Solvychevodsk, which has some four thousand souls, is another of those Russian experiences that transport you back to the nineteenth century. One-story dwellings, usually of wood, mingle with low brick structures of the town’s few Soviet-era enterprises and workshops. The first Russian settlements in the area probably arose in the fourteenth century with the support of medieval Russia’s mercantile power Novgorod, whose explorers and traders would have recognized the value of a site near the crossing of two major river routes: north to the White Sea and east to the Urals. The merchant dynasty of the Stroganovs did not arrive until the middle of the sixteenth century, and soon thereafter the town was founded. As new trading routes led to a decline in its significance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the town became a small resort, known for its mineral waters and springs.

At the beginning of this century there were at least twelve brick churches here, of which eight were destroyed in the Soviet period, and two others left in various states of damage. But the jewels in the crown, the two Stroganov “cathedrals,” still stand relatively unscathed. The earlier is a sixteenth-century cathedral dedicated to the Annunciation, and the other is an elaborately decorated seventeenth-century church dedicated to the Presentation of the Virgin.

Why were such grand structures built in so remote a location? One answer lies not far from the Presentation Church, in a salt spring now covered with a small log tower, a replica of the earlier Stroganov stockade. The area is replete with such springs, as well as a small brackish river, the Usol, and a salt lake, the Solonikha. The production of salt is now taken for granted, but in the medieval era, it was one of the most valuable of commodities. In this part of the Russian North, an enormously profitable salt monopoly, derived from ample sources of brine, allowed the Stroganovs to create a private empire at Solvychevodsk. Al-

though miserly in most respects, the Stroganovs spent immense sums on the arts and crafts in the North of Russia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The term “Stroganov style” defines elaborately ornamented forms in music, icon painting, and architecture, as well as in the applied arts—a style that appeared wherever the Stroganovs had major operations, from Solvychevodsk to Nizhny Novgorod, on the Volga River, to Perm in the Ural Mountains.

The most lavish example of Stroganov architecture is the main church of the former Monastery of the Presentation of the Virgin. During the winter, services in the Presentation Church are held only in the warmer, south gallery. In March 1998, however, Father Vladimir, the young priest of the parish, allowed me into the main sanctuary after noon services on a bright Sunday. The interior was intensely cold, but the sunlight streaming through the high south windows dramatically illuminated the iconostasis. I hurriedly fumbled with my cameras to take as many shots as possible (the priest himself wanted photographs of the interior), and within minutes I was perspiring, despite the cold. Rarely has a small parish received such lavish premises.

Of course in the winter, the Vychevda ferry does not operate, and we skidded in our UAZIK upriver toward a frozen pontoon bridge at Koriazhma, a former monastic settlement now notorious as the site of one of Russia’s largest paper mills. The town itself is pleasant enough; but in warmer weather the smell spreads for dozens of kilometers, and pollution is an ever-present factor. It is impossible to compute the ecological cost of such economic mainstays, but on the road we stopped at an abandoned church near the tiny village of Niuba.

A young boy, perhaps eight or nine, clad in a tattered padded coat, approached us. Despite the appearance of poverty, his face was bright and clean, and his voice clear as he answered my questions about the village. Then I noticed that one sleeve was empty. With a whisper I drew this to the attention of Sasha, the driver, and he bluntly asked: “What happened to your arm?” The child’s calm reply, starkly brief: “Netu” (Not there). This clearly was a kid wise beyond his years, but what could anyone say to explain the defect that left him without an arm—and the state of poverty that left him without hope of a prosthetic? As we drove away, he slowly walked along the snow pack of the road, followed by his small dog and content as only a child can be on a bright and idle Sunday afternoon.

From this far southeastern corner of Arkhangelsk Province, it is possible to shuttle by train 250 kilometers due west to the other side of the province. At Konosha junction, the track merges with the main line north to Arkhangelsk. But there is no reason to rush, for this region around the town of Kargopol contains some of Russia’s best preserved ancient villages. Kargopol, too, is a formerly

wealthy trading center that time and fortune have passed by. And like Solvyche-godsk, it is not easy to reach. The trains stop at Niandoma, a singularly graceless settlement whose main occupation — apart from the railroad — is the local forest products industry. From Niandoma Station, regular bus service runs to Kargopol, one hundred kilometers to the west.

The other, and faster, possibility is to hire a car for a fare that can be split three ways if there are additional passengers. For my first trip, at the end of February 1998, I chose the car. My train arrived at two in the morning, and in blustery winter weather I did not care to wait another forty minutes for a bus whose existence seemed very doubtful. (I later heard that the bus was right on time.) The car proved a mixed blessing: five passengers jammed into a small Zhiguli, whose driver played an endless, mediocre rock tape at ear-splitting level as he careened over a snowy road at eighty to one hundred kilometers an hour.

After an hour and a half, I finally stumbled out of the car into a snow drift while the driver vaguely pointed in the direction of the “hotel,” and drove off. A brisk wind, a meter of snow, a barking dog, a couple of dimly lit windows, and one street light. I felt a sense of isolation intensified by the dull roar that remained in my head after the rock tape from hell. Although the refuge turned out to be only a block from where I uncertainly stood, my disorientation was so great that it took another half hour of stumbling and disturbing law-abiding local citizens before I desperately rang the bell at the small and very discreet two-storied hotel. Miraculously, a concierge appeared with an electric kettle and a space heater, and I — the only guest in the entire hotel — was escorted to a room on the second floor.

Kargopol still preserves the feel of a northern provincial town of the nineteenth (or eighteenth) century. By the turn of this century it had approximately three thousand residents and twenty-two churches (including those of wood), as well as two monasteries. Like other ancient Russian towns that were bypassed by railroad construction, such as Suzdal, Kargopol became a backwater. Unfortunately, this did not save its monuments of art and architecture after the revolution. During the Soviet period, half of the town’s churches vanished through neglect or demolition.

Yet however difficult the struggle to preserve the legacy of historic architecture in Kargopol itself, the crisis is more acute still in the villages of the surrounding region, renowned for containing some of the best examples of log architecture and folk art in Russia. On a gray day in late February, I had my first view of this abandoned rural treasure as Viktor Sheludko and his wife took me over snow-covered lanes in a Niva vehicle of respectable age. When we got to the village of Oshevsk, sixty kilometers to the northwest of Kargopol, there was momentary

uncertainty as to whether we could enter: the pine logs of the wooden bridge were being replaced. Enough remained to allow one lane of traffic, and as we passed over this beautifully designed structure, the fragrance of freshly cut pine planks came through the damp air.

Oshevensk was a wealthy and large village, and it is now one of the best preserved, with local inhabitants renting some of its log houses to summer visitors. Thus the mobility of new Russia gives hope to some otherwise neglected rural settlements. Oshevensk contains not only the exquisite miniature Chapel of St. George (now under restoration), but also the log Church of the Epiphany (1787), with its tent tower over the sanctuary and a detached bell tower. The interior has one of the largest spaces among wooden churches in the Kargopol area, and its icon screen and braced, painted wooden ceiling (known as a *nebo*, or “heaven”) are staggering in their extent and color. I was informed by Olga Stepanovna, who kept the keys, that regular worship services are not held here, but women from the community frequently gather on Sundays to sing hymns in this church. Thus devotion returns in its most basic and sincere form.

One of the most remarkable examples of art and architecture in the Russian North is located at the small village of Liadiny, thirty kilometers north of Kargopol. This extraordinary and now all-too-rare ensemble consists of three parts: a summer Church of the Intercession (1761), with tall tent tower; a winter Church of the Epiphany (1793), with its panoply of cupolas; and a large bell tower. Both churches have distinctive designs, and the combination of icon screen and “heaven” inside the Intercession Church is the most striking that I have seen. This three-part ensemble of churches was once common in wealthy northern farming communities, but most have disappeared.

Liadiny, and its state dairy farm, have lost even the modicum of prosperity of the Soviet era. The elderly woman who opened the church for us was spirited, but how much longer can she continue her duties? And will anyone take her place? As I photographed the Liadiny churches, the brief, angry comments of local farm workers who walked by made it clear that preserving these priceless monuments was not one of their priorities. Their life is hard, and I would be the last to criticize them; but indifference and vandalism have degraded the condition of village churches. In 1998 Lidiia Sevastianova, director of the Kargopol Museum of History and Art, said that the Epiphany Church at Liadiny was in desperate need of restoration, and she gave me a detailed estimate of the sum needed to do preservation work for the entire ensemble. Funds were eventually found to complete the restoration of the structure of the Epiphany Church. (The art on its interior had long since disappeared.)

But just as there were signs of improvement, tragedy struck in a most literal sense. On Easter morning, May 6, 2013, the tower of the Intercession Church was struck by lightning. Although a lightning rod seems to have been in place, that is apparently not a guarantee of protection against certain strikes. The fire quickly consumed the tower and the main structure. With the intense heat, the nearby bell tower also caught fire. Fortunately, quick response enabled the Epiphany Church to survive. But the jewel in the crown, the Intercession Church, was destroyed. Even should funds be found to construct a reasonable copy of the church (unlikely), the unique interior, beautifully painted and adorned, can never be regained. My copious documentation of the interior will provide a record, but that is slight consolation.

The Onega River flows north and empties into the Onega Bay, in the southern part of the White Sea. Nearby are the Solovetsky Islands, the culminating point of a journey through Arkhangelsk Province. Geographically, the islands form one of the most curious natural environments in Russia. Historically, the very name “Solovetsky archipelago” resonates with both tragedy and heroic endurance, for it was here, in 1923, that the first specially designated concentration camp was established by the Soviet regime. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has already given us an incomparable account of that monstrosity, which metastasized throughout the Soviet Union in the 1930s and gave rise to the phrase “Gulag archipelago.”

The most impressive way to approach the islands is by boat from the Karelian town of Kem. The monastery rises from the water, a floating citadel of towers and domes. For the strong of stomach, there is also an air option, from Arkhangelsk, on a twin-engine plane. Although less haunting than the approach by boat, the small plane provides an unforgettable view of the northern forests—pine, fir, larch, aspen, birch—merging into the taiga along the White Sea.

There is evidence that the Solovetsky archipelago was settled—or visited—by humans as early as four millennia ago. Not until the beginning of the fifteenth century did the island chain attract the attention of a few hardy monks, part of a wave of monastic expansion throughout the Russian North in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The first, tentative settlement occurred in 1429 when the monk Savvaty joined forces with one Herman, an illiterate hermit who had explored the archipelago. Despite the severe winters, sea currents moderated the climate, and the surroundings provided sufficient food for survival.

The elderly Savvaty’s death, in 1435, brought an end to this first attempt, but the following year, another monk, Zosima, returned to the island and founded the Transfiguration Monastery. All three men were canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. The great flourishing of the monastery occurred in the six-

teenth century, under the direction of Philip Kolychev, a Moscow nobleman who spent twenty-five years at the monastery, before being called back to Moscow by a suspicious Ivan the Terrible — who had Kolychev tortured and executed. He, too, was canonized.

The monastery's dramatic fate took another tragic turn in the middle of the seventeenth century, when dissenters known generally as Old Believers refused to accept certain liturgical reforms. The monastery was a leading point of resistance, and after a seven-year siege by tsarist troops, it fell only when one of the monks betrayed the fortress through a secret entrance. The subsequent execution of the monks cast a pall over the monastery, but it gradually rebuilt over the following centuries — until the modern cataclysm of war and revolution.

In 1921 the Bolsheviks expropriated the monastery. Two years later, in 1923, a mysterious fire spread throughout the great stone churches and reduced their interiors to ashes. There are legends among the people as to who was to blame (the Bolsheviks, the monks themselves), but a once flourishing island was reduced to devastation.

Soon thereafter the archipelago became the site of a prototypical concentration camp that malignantly expanded. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Dmitry Likhachev have provided definitive accounts of the Solovetsky camp, which was conveniently proximate to the White Sea–Baltic Canal (1931–33), the first major Soviet infrastructure project built by slave labor. In the 1930s the system spread throughout the Soviet Union as the “Gulag archipelago.” Superseded by far larger complexes, the Solovetsky camp closed in 1939, and the territory was for many years a military base.

Attempts to restore the monumental Transfiguration Monastery began only in the 1970s, but work accelerated during perestroika, as students and other volunteers from Moscow streamed northward in the summers to help in the laborious task of renovation. With solemn ceremony in August 1992, Patriarch Aleksy consecrated the return of the relics of the monastery's founders, and the restored bells again rang out. Although only a few monks live in the monastery, its renaissance is visually stunning.

The Solovetsky Islands convey a strange sense of enchantment, whatever the season. But on those long summer days when the sun is not blocked by rain clouds, the monastery is suffused with a fantastic range of solar light that gradually illuminates all sides of the citadel and its churches. On a late summer evening, this light gives added meaning to the monastery's dedication, the Transfiguration — which is, after all, devoted to the miracle of light.

And then there is Kimzha. On the upper reaches of the Mezen River, in northeast Arkhangelsk Province, there are pockets of population that seem to exist in another time. Among them is Kimzha, located near the Arctic Circle and perhaps the most distinctive village I have seen in decades of travel throughout Russia. Most maps do not show this rural hamlet, though it stands near the intersection of two rivers, the Mezen and the much smaller Kimzha. Its population varies between winter and summer: a couple of hundred in the winter, and a hundred or so more during the summer, when relatives visit.

Because Kimzha lies buried under severe winter conditions for much of the year, it was appropriate that my first experience of the place occurred in early March 2000. The summer prior, in 1999, I had seen a photograph of the Kimzha church, consecrated in the 1760s and dedicated to the Odigitria Icon of Mary. It showed five soaring towers and cupolas over a structure of massive larch logs. It was enough to convince me that I had to reach this place. Friends in Arkhangelsk warned me of the difficulties: Kimzha would be impossible to reach by land in the summer because of the lack of roads.

Formerly, there was limited scheduled transportation by water from Arkhangelsk, but that had ceased with the collapse of state subsidies. Another possibility was to travel by small plane from Arkhangelsk to Mezen. But I wanted to experience the terrain between Arkhangelsk and the Mezen River, and for that I was told of another mode of travel: over a temporary winter road or *zimnik*.

Fortunately, I had *blat*, an essential Russian concept that combines “pull” and “connections.” Since 1998 I had maintained close contacts with Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk, at that time the leading university in the White Sea territory (Pomorje). The first vice-rector of the university, Yury Kudriashov, was a native of Mezen; and while he had long since left the area, he had maintained contact with childhood friends such as Peter Kondratyev, the director of a lumber factory in Kamenka. Kondratyev provided me with a driver from his company motor pool and a Land Rover, one of several that made weekly runs between Arkhangelsk — the power center — and the twin towns of Mezen and Kamenka. For the driver, this was a regular, if demanding, shuttle trip. For me it was something else entirely.

When we left Arkhangelsk in the early afternoon of March 7, the sun was bright and the frost hard. The Land Rover sped over a paved road along the right bank of the Northern Dvina River until we approached the mouth of the Pinega

River, some one hundred kilometers to the southeast of Arkhangelsk. At that point we turned east and moved along a reasonably smooth gravel road near the right bank of the Pinega until we reached the town of the same name. The gently rolling terrain had presented few challenges to the Rover. A tractor grader kept the surface even, and high snow banks provided insurance for the occasional skid.

Beyond Pinega, the way to Mezen forked sharply to the north from the main road, and we soon approached the deep taiga forest. The grades became much more primitive, and the track narrowed. This was the beginning of the zimnik. Despite the apparent remoteness of the area, the track to Mezen carries a small but steady stream of traffic – including, to my amazement, twice-weekly service in small buses. And where there are drivers, there will be road stops. In the tiny village of Chizgora, we stopped at a log hut with the usual assortment of engine oil, beef jerky, soap, and ramen noodles. A stocky militia captain ate microwave-warmed *pelmeni*, and in the corner a small television projected a flickering black-and-white image of Jamie Lee Curtis in *A Fish Called Wanda*. It would have been funny to watch the scene where John Cleese seduces Curtis with a recitation of some of the most elegant nineteenth-century Russian poetry, but we had a ways to go.

As we drove, the forest suddenly thinned, and the road improved into a straight causeway through what appeared to be a marsh. Although the hour was close to eleven, floodlights loomed in the distance. Excavators tore at rock-hard earth, and the roar of heavy dump trucks shattered what had been the unbroken silence of the forest. The driver explained that “they” had decided to build an all-year road through forest and marsh directly to Mezen, via Kimzha. In the meantime we plunged back into the forest, with nothing in front of the headlights but a snow track and endless rows of fir and pine trunks. Around midnight, the driver, nodding and exhausted, mumbled that we were finally there.

To arrive at Kimzha in the middle of a winter night produces an unsettling impression, all the more because the first thing one sees is not the village – which is located to the side of the road – but a group of large crosses, stark and ghostly in the sharp contrast of the headlights’ glare. This was a startling apparition, and eerily beautiful. But, I wanted to know, where was the village and my promised shelter? Despite the late hour a workshop on the edge of Kimzha was brightly lit, part of a service area for the road builders. The directions we received there took us into the village, where we again lost ourselves in a maze of log walls. Stumbling through snowdrifts, I found the small log house where I was to spend the night. Before going inside, I looked upward and saw the aquamarine shimmer of the aurora borealis. This was the last clear sky I would see in the Mezen region on this



Drawing of author with Kimzha village and Church of the Hodegetria Icon of the Virgin in the background.

Artist: Aleksandr Tiarin. Originally published March 22, 2001, in the Arkhangelsk daily *Pravda Severa* to accompany the article “William Brumfield, Enchanted Wanderer,” by Sergei Domoroshchenov. Republished in Domoroshchenov’s book *Svoi korabl* [My ship] (Arkhangelsk: Pravda Severa, 2002).

trip. The next hour brought a new weather front of constant snow and wind for the next three days. But in that brief moment I could clearly see the looming specter of the Kimzha church.

As for my accommodations, I had been told that the house was new—unfinished, as it turned out. But the small abode was warm and dry, and I had no trouble with the spartan room, with its window that looked out upon the village. The next morning my host, Georgy Fedorkov, and his brother (both retired on a pension from the lumber plant) provided a hearty breakfast of kasha, fresh milk, and simmering beef stew. The wind and snow continued unabated, and my attempts to call Mezen from a neighbor’s house failed; the telephones were out. Kondratyev had planned to bring me from Kimzha to Mezen, but I was stranded in the middle of a snowstorm.

Despite the stiff wind and treacherous snow drifts, I decided to photograph as much as I could, partly as a way to relieve the tension. The church, of course, was my primary objective. This was the sole surviving example of its type, apparently created by a group of carpenters active only in this part of the North. The brilliance of their design, perfectly proportioned, is still a source of amazement to me.

But for all of the monumental power of the church, what surprised me still more was the extent to which the village’s massive log houses, built during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had been preserved. This was not an open-air museum, with a few reconstructed log buildings. Yes, some of the houses had been abandoned or at least shuttered for the winter, while a few others had been modified with plank siding. Yet the main thing was that Kimzha remained a functioning, living environment.

How to explain this degree of preservation—of the buildings and of the community? Perhaps the very absence of roads, the “isolation factor,” protected the integrity of the environment. Yet that alone was not sufficient to explain the survival of Kimzha, when hundreds of other villages throughout the North had vanished. It occurred to me that the existence of the church, although closed until 1999, might have contributed to the village’s endurance. I decided to revisit Kimzha under more favorable conditions, during the summer, in order to explore further the sources of its strength.

The morning's photography produced two rolls of film before driving snow threatened the workings of camera and lenses. By eleven my primary concern centered on finding transportation to Mezen before the roads became completely snowed in. Fedorkov suggested that I turn to the road builders, whose shop I had seen the night before. Now I got a closer look. Even under clement conditions, it is extremely difficult to build a road straight through a northern swamp. I was told that the crews work throughout the year, day and night, on a week's rotation. At this rate the road should be completed within another two years. In view of the budget difficulties in the Arkhangelsk region, it is unlikely that the project would have gotten this far without some form of subsidy or promise of a payback in natural resources.

I looked into the equipment garage, saw a bulldozer under repair, and wondered what could ever bring this inert lump of metal back to motion. The blade was encrusted with a type of local clay that hardens to the consistency of rock, especially in the winter. While we discussed the possibility of my hitching a ride to Mezen with one of the road crews, I managed to see the bunkhouse and workroom, thick with cigarette smoke, as well as the canteen, where a fresh load of bread baked in a nearby village had just arrived. The hash hound, who appeared to be just out of the army, cooked up a crude but edible, calorie-laden fare of several dishes. I could only eat my way through two.

At noon we heard of a group of surveyors who were heading to Mezen in their UAZIK and were willing to take me along. As they packed their gear, a small car drove up with three passengers—Russian Baptist missionaries from St. Petersburg who had come to the Mezen region to spread the Good News and distribute copies of the New Testament. A bit later I noticed one of the crew idly thumbing through a copy in the bunkhouse, where only a little before a quick card game was in full swing with the usual incessant profanity. As for the villagers, one noted laconically: "They won't get very far here." While I pondered that judgment, a woman in a quilted jacket opened the long village stable, and out came several horses, some of whom rolled in the snow, while others ambled through the drifts. I remember very clearly the rime of snow on their dark coats.

In Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *First Circle*, the ruins of a church tower cause a member of the Soviet elite to ponder his previously unexamined fate. Certain cultures seem drawn to their ruins, their relics, their ghosts, and their shadows. Russia is one such culture. The American South is another.

During my work in the North, Russian colleagues often commented on similarities between their attitudes and what they interpreted as my southern spirit

of respect for tradition and cultural legacy. Indeed, it has been easier for certain Russians to accept me as the representative of a region (even one they know primarily through the translation of *Gone with the Wind*) than as a citizen of the United States.

But the affinity between Russia and the American South first struck me during a stay in Leningrad in 1971. The beauty of the city, even in its decrepitude, haunted me — and reminded me of New Orleans, founded fifteen years after Petersburg. The original designs of both owe much to French military engineering. That year I also gained a deeper appreciation of the appeal of southern literature in Russia. Translations of Faulkner’s novels and productions of Tennessee Williams plays were the most obvious examples, and my still imperfect Russian described mysterious New Orleans to Russian listeners.

The Russian North has in common with the American South the feeling that, as Faulkner himself put it, “the past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past.” In the Russian North I visited dozens of villages whose surviving architecture bears witness to creative and resilient cultural traditions. Unfortunately, many villages have disappeared or been depopulated as the result of demographic shifts and the aftermath of the Soviet regime’s economic and social policies (including ruthless collectivization).

Russia and the South also both have ghosts in a more traditional sense: those who have fallen in battle on blood-stained ground. In the course of travels throughout Russia, I have noted — and in many cases photographed — war memorials that exist in almost all Russian settlements, even small villages such as Kimzha. One can endlessly debate the reasons and responsibilities for this huge loss of life, but the scale of the sacrifice is beyond debate. Growing up in the American South, I gained an interest in military history that has continued to play a role in my understanding of Russia. I have taken this interest — in a very personal sense — as a lesson in defiance: to take from every setback a determination to recoup. By going north I return to the South.

After the winter visit, I could think only of returning to Kimzha with summer light. In late July 2000, again in Arkhangelsk, I purchased a plane ticket to Mezen and left from the small regional Vaskovo airport. The view from the air was spectacular during the hour-long trip. The taiga forests, bogs, and meandering rivers took on an otherworldly look. I could scarcely imagine the terrain that I had covered with such difficulty a few months earlier.

Upon arrival in Mezen I was escorted by the major who headed the local militia and, after due formalities, was driven in a brand-new UAZIK to the village of

Dorogorskoe, across the Mezen River from Kimzha. There I met the head of the local village council, Aleksei Zhitov, who made it clear that he pretty much controlled what happened in Kimzha. Not an easy job, as it happens, and the silting of the Mezen River has made it much harder. As I later saw, simply getting a small barge of fuel oil over to the other side was a very difficult, even dangerous, operation — and without oil the village of Kimzha has no electricity. It came as no surprise to learn that Zhitov was suffering from a serious ulcer.

A local fisherman got me up and over the river to Kimzha in an aluminum boat with a sputtering outboard. Now I was here, but where was the sun? After leaving my gear in Fedorkov's house, I moved through the village with two cameras. What a relief to walk without the constant impediment of snow drifts, however picturesque. Now the land was swathed in green, and I stanchied my disappointment over the sun. A stiff wind was pushing the cloud layers around. A group of children followed me, the visitor from another planet, with a patter of questions. Then the sun appeared. As I ran toward the center, with the village kids cheering in my wake, the church acquired that rich glow that only late northern light can impart.

The next days brought the same alternation of cloud and sun, and I had time to contemplate the ever-changing image of the church. I also met some of the people from the local parish. This dedicated group — predominantly women — had succeeded in 1999 in having the padlock removed from the church, which was then reconsecrated by an Orthodox priest.

Although there is no resident priest and no regular service, the church is now opened by the women of the church committee at ten in the morning. They have also created a small prayer table (the altar has not been re-created) with an icon of the savior. The door over the vestibule has a reproduction of one of the “tenderness” icons, with Mary and the Christ child. The church ladies are very concerned about the state of the building, and worried that Zhitov is unwilling to make basic repairs, particularly to the windows. Their appeals to various foundations have so far gone unheeded, although the church is a registered national landmark. A rather slipshod attempt at restoration in the 1980s has long been abandoned, and this, too, has disfigured the appearance.

As I asked about the parish, I also learned more about the community. Although the former dairy kolkhoz, surrounded by rusting machinery for which there is no fuel, is a shadow of its Soviet size, a large part of the dairy herd has reappeared through individual ownership. I had ample opportunity to partake of the fresh milk, cottage cheese, and *ryazhenka* (similar to buttermilk) produced throughout the week by individuals who own one cow or a few. The villagers are also sustained by the forest and by the rhythm of its seasons — a time for berries, a

time for mushrooms, a time for hunting and fishing. Late one afternoon Elena Repitskaya and Antonina Mamontova arranged a tasting session at which I sampled over a dozen types of jams and other concoctions from the various types of local berries. No Moscow restaurant could offer better.

It also came as a surprise to find that Kimzha has retained a number of residents in their thirties, with young children. These families tend to be large and are of modest means. Much of their income will eventually go to educating their children in a large town. But in the meantime these families — and others who come for the summer — are quietly proud of being a part of the village.

Like all complex environments, Kimzha does not submit to easy definition. I came to realize that it was not some isolated pocket of the past. The villagers no longer sit around singing authentic folk songs. Many of the residents are retirees from the lumber plant, and their children have moved to larger places. When they return for the summer, more urban elements appear in the culture of the village. Television is widespread. In other words, life here shares much with life anywhere in Russia. And yet, these surviving ancient villages are essential microcosms of Russian traditions, many of them now forgotten.

Fortunately, I had succeeded in photographing the Odigitria Church before a decision was made to restore it a few years later. As is often the case in such remote locations, the project was clumsily managed from Arkhangelsk, and as late as 2010, there were concerns that the components would rot before the task was completed. More recent information suggests that at least the roof is back in place. One can only hope that this unique, soaring wooden church will remain, when so many others have been lost.

VARZUGA: BACK TO THE KOLA PENINSULA

Few places in the Russian North give a greater sense of the elemental force and beauty of nature than the village of Varzuga, situated on the high banks of a river of the same name in the southern part of the Kola Peninsula. The Solovetsky Islands rival Varzuga in their strange beauty, and indeed Varzuga was long associated with the Transfiguration Solovetsky Monastery located on the other side of the White Sea to the south (of which more later). But Varzuga, located near the Arctic Circle and set within a background of high sandy hills covered in juniper, pine, and small birch, projects its own unique aura. I can think of no more appropriate setting for one of the most impressive tower wooden churches of northern Russia — the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, standing since 1674.

I had long thought of the possibility of traveling to Varzuga to see the Dormition Church, but the specific means of getting there had eluded me. However,

in the spring of 2001 I found an ally in Nikolai Utkin, a specialist in traditional wooden architecture of the Arkhangelsk region. We departed from the Arkhangelsk station on the evening of July 18 and proceeded by rail to Kandalaksha, a major rail station on the Murmansk Railway. Passing through Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelia, we arrived at Kandalaksha at ten thirty the following evening. We made few specific arrangements, but had high hopes.

On the morning of July 20, we took an early bus eastward from Kandalaksha along the Tersky Coast to the regional center of Umba. There we descended upon the startled local administration to ask for the best way to Varzuga. The answer was difficult: once-weekly scheduled transportation would not be for several days. Private cars were available for hire, but at a steep price inflated by the fact that Varzuga had become an attractive destination for sport fishermen with ample money. The alternative was to stand at the turnoff to the road to Varzuga. The local police stopped cars headed in that direction and vouched for us, but no driver was going all the way to Varzuga.

After lunch we explored the other side of Umba, where the parish priest was working with carpenters on restoring a nineteenth-century wooden church located on the left bank of the fast-flowing Umba River. Restoration of the church, which was surrounded by a few wooden houses as well as docks and boat sheds, seemed to me an excellent idea, yet I later found out that part of the parish objected to its relatively distant location and wanted to remain in the temporary place of worship closer to the center.

Later in the afternoon we walked back across a low wooden bridge to the center of Umba and continued our wait for a passing car to Varzuga. As the hour approached eight in the evening I began to wonder about the possibilities for reaching Varzuga, even though the summer sun was still very high and rich this far north. In this mood of languid resignation I hardly noticed a passing car with an attached trailer filled with boxes of vegetables. But Nikolai did, and after a brief conversation, he motioned to me with a quick gesture. Just like that, we were on our way.

The memory of this trip still seems miraculous to me, and not just because of the unexpected serendipity of our meeting. (The driver and his wife were on their way back from a large market with garden vegetables to sell in Varzuga.) As the sun dipped lower behind us, the light became richer, bathing the coastal landscape with its small pines in a warm orange glow. And the road itself, a mixture of red clay and sand, shared in that glow. With the solid clay base and packed sand as a leveling agent, this coast road was virtually without ruts or bumps, and in most places smoother than asphalt. The car flew along, and I began to have hope that we would get to Varzuga to share the last, best part of this rich light.



Author with abandoned log house in the background, Shelomya village, Arkhangelsk Province. Photograph: June 22, 2000.

We did, despite a tense interval of several kilometers when we turned north from the shore onto a deeply rutted sandy track through a pine forest leading to Varzuga. I saw the towering form of the Dormition Church just as we cleared the forest on a short descent into the village. The car had not come to a complete stop before I was out the door with my cameras. For the next hour (already after ten in the evening), I photographed the Dormition Church and its neighbor, the nineteenth-century “winter” Church of St. Afanasy, until the bemused driver insisted that he had to get us across the river to the house of Peter Zaborshchikov, our host for the next few days. As we crossed the Varzuga in a low, wooden skiff, I saw the Dormition Church not so much receding as taking more clearly its place in the surrounding landscape.

Although there may have been a settlement on the site as early as the twelfth century, initial references to the village of Varzuga date from the fifteenth century, when it served as an outpost of Novgorod and flourished through its advantageous location on the Varzuga River, near the abundant fishing grounds of the White Sea. In 1450 the prominent Novgorodian Marfa Boretskaia (Marfa posadnitsa, renowned in Russian history for her attempt to defend Novgorod’s ancient independence against the encroaching power of Muscovy) donated her holdings along the White Sea to the recently established Solovetsky Monastery.

As the village developed along both sides of the river, churches were also built on both sides. But nothing in Varzuga would rival the elevated form of the Dormition Church, created by a master builder known as Kliment in 1674. An early twentieth-century photograph reproduced in the first edition of Igor Grabar’s *Istoriia russkogo iskusstva* shows a soaring tower clad in planks and painted white — a modification that dated to the middle of the nineteenth century. Fortunately, other changes in 1867 did not substantially affect the original form, which was largely restored (at least on the exterior) in 1973. The remarkable stability of this, as well as other large tower churches of the Russian North, is grounded in a thorough understanding of the properties and strength of the pine logs composing the main structure.

Both Kimzha and Varzuga are living environments that exist in a rapidly changing world with new hopes and expectations. They are not museum displays. At the same time, there are legitimate concerns about preserving their traditional wooden architecture. Each village will survive in some form, but Russia can ill afford to lose the aesthetic and cultural traditions so richly embodied in these two outposts of the North.