

## **CRUISING THROUGH THE ICY SEAS: PUTTING TOGETHER THE BITS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

*Alexander P. Golikov*

*The author has been employed as lecturer, zodiac driver and logistics officer by the Quark Expeditions annually from 2001 to 2008. This article is primarily based on his personal experience of working onboard icebreaking ship KapitanKhlebnikov in the Russian and Canadian Arctic, Greenland, Iceland and Svalbard (Norway).*

**Keywords:** the Arctic, the Antarctic, icebreaker cruises, adventure tourism, Kapitan Khlebnikov.

This short essay accumulated personal experience of the author, who, during the period from 2001 to 2008 annually participated and/or was involved in organizing the Arctic cruises onboard i/b KapitanKhlebnikov. Far from being in-depth analysis, the author's objective is to present generalized outlook on the tourism in the Arctic and Antarctic (including sub-Arctic and sub-Antarctic regions) with emphasis on both positive and negative contributing factors.

Historically, Polar tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon, which emerged following the rapid growth of average incomes in Western Europe and North America in 1960-1980 (known locally as *Wirtschaftswunder*, *Trenteglorieuse*, etc.).

### **Spatial dimension of the Polar tourism**

The principal regions of the Polar tourism are: fjords of Norway, sub-Arctic Islands (Iceland, Svalbard), Atlantic Canada (Baffin Island,

Labrador Peninsula, Hudson Bay) and Greenland (both Ostgrønland and Westgrønland) in the Northern Hemisphere. Following 1991, the Russian Arctic also became an area of the Polar tourism, including visits to the North Pole (on nuclear-powered icebreakers *Sovetskiy Soyuz*, *Yamal*, and *50 Years of Victory*), Barents Sea islands (Franz-Josef Land, northern part of the Novaya Zemlya).

The main area of the Polar tourism in the Pacific are: offshore of Alaska, e.g. the Aleutians. After 1991 the coastal seas of the Russian Federation were added: Kamchatka, Chukotka, Wrangel Island.

Some particularly large-scale cruises should be mentioned here: several passages through the North-east Passage (better known as the Northern Sea Route) were done by the diesel-electric icebreakers *Kapitan Dranitsyn* (Murmansk Shipping Co.) and *Kapitan Dranistyn* (Far Eastern Shipping Co.) as well as by smaller ships. The KD made historical circumnavigation of the Arctic in 1990s.

The focal areas of the Polar tourism in the Southern Hemisphere are: sub-Antarctic Islands (Falklands, South Georgia, South Shetland) and the Antarctic Peninsula. The cruises along the Pacific coast of the Chile, with her spectacular fjords are also quite popular. The less accessible areas of the Antarctic are often visited by the *Kapitan Khlebnikov*, she also performed several full and semi circumnavigations of the Southern Continent.

### **Destinations**

The vast majority of the Polar cruises are attracted by the natural phenomena and wonders of the Arctic and Antarctic. This includes various Earth's Poles (geographic, magnetic), rare natural phenomena (Aurora australis/borealis, Solar eclipse), as well as glaciers, ice caps (Danish: Inlandsis), icebergs, geological formations.

The flora and fauna are by no means less popular – especially visits to the marine mammal's rookeries, bird cliffs, migration routes. The whole industry that adds human dimensions to the various local species became a cultural trend during the last 20-30 years. The penguins, polar bears, some bird species (puffins) became icons of the mass media, all through merging human and animal features.

Quite naturally the human presence in the Polar Regions is of lesser attraction. But, still one should mention ethnographic (or anthropologi-

cal, in western sense) components of many Polar tours – particularly in the Canadian Arctic, Greenland, Alaska, and more recently in Chukotka. The passengers visit camps sites of various Eskimo groups (Kalaallit, Inuit, Inuvialuit, Yupiit) and Chukchi, Sami to encounter their traditional culture. There is certain interest towards the archaeological sites of the Bering Sea, Dorset, Thule Palaeo-Eskimo cultures as well as the sites of early European presence (Viking sites in Greenland and ancient Vinland, now Newfoundland). Potentially the WWII and Cold War era remains might be an attraction.

As well as the Arctic nature, the history of the Arctic becomes an attraction only when it is embedded into the collective memory and culture – for Scandinavians the Vikings, Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen are the names that bear more than just history. For Anglo-Saxons the same emotional response are caused by the names of Sir John Franklin, Ernest Shackleton and Robert Scott.

### **The Passengers**

The bulk of the passengers in 1990-2000 were Western Europeans and Northern Americans (with smaller number of Australians, New Zealanders, and white South Africans).

It is clear that culturally they were either residents of the British Islands or their descendants. The continental Europe is represented, principally by the Germans of northern *Länder*, Scandinavians, Dutch and Flemish. Basically all are the residents of the North Sea coasts.

Additionally to the cultural and historical reasons, the specifics of the tour-booking are an important condition – it is based on personal networks and the tours are usually sold among the friends and families. The countries, which are lying outside the Anglosphere are receiving significantly less information, while the tour agents tend to sell the most popular tours, often ‘forgetting’ about the less popular.

Outside Europe and North America, some tours are sold in Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The recent five to seven years experienced gradual growth of Mainland Chinese tourism (mostly attracted by the North Pole and Antarctica). Still the underdevelopment of the tour-agents network is a significant obstacle for the ‘Rise of China’ in the Polar Areas.

## **Icebreakers**

The ice conditions during the summer seasons allow the ships with low, or even without, the ice class, to operate relatively successfully in the sub-Arctic and sub-Antarctic. Despite several shipwrecks, operating the low-ice class ships allowed cheaper tours, available for the middle-class passengers, who are rarely repeating their tours.

Contrary to the cheap tours, the icebreaking cruises expanded significantly the geography of tourism, still acceptable (money-wise) only to the quite limited social stratum. The regular icebreaker passenger belongs to the relatively stable group of repeat passengers, whose share, on most popular destinations, may reach 50-60%. The stability of tourist inflow used to a advantage of the icebreaker cruises, but the growth of fuel prices in the end of 2008 caused considerable downfall of the majority of the tours.

### **Russian Icebreaking Fleet**

Russian Federation definitely possess a variety of the Arctic tourism resources – both natural objects, traditional lifestyles of the indigenous population, reach history of the explorations and, last but not the least, permanent bases in the Polar Regions. The icebreaking fleet is another advantage, which exceeds others in importance. Moreover, Russia possesses the crews with unique skills developed during the active exploitation of the Northern Sea routes in 1970-1990. The prevalence of the political goals (including defense considerations, developing civilian and military infrastructure) over the economic feasibility became the contributing factor for training the crews (navigators, marine engineers, ice musters, helicopter pilots, etc.).

The crisis of 1990s made a catastrophic blow to the icebreaking business, caused considerable reduction of many ships (many were literally scraped) and reoriented the rest to the tourism as a mean of survival.

The growth of government involvement (not only in Russia, but in Canada and US as well) in the exploitation of the Arctic resources in 2000s reduced the interest of operating companies (e.g. FESCO) to the tourism. Many ships began to be used by the petroleum companies. While the naïve dreams of multi-billion oil contracts didn't come true, the epoch of the icebreaking tourism is possibly reaching its final phase.

## **Growth of Regulations**

Another factor, that slows down the commercial tourism in the Polar Regions, is the growth of government regulations. It is not exclusively Russian, but a global phenomenon. The world governments are far from supportive towards the Polar tourism. Partially it caused by the environmental concerns, often by the protectionist politics (the US and Canada are definitely not happy with the Russian icebreaking cruising in their control zones). It is often openly declared (for example by Adm. Greenwood, Royal Canadian Navy during the Conference in Vladivostok in November, 2011), but usually takes the form of administrative barriers (occasionally absurd, but still effective).

The Russian specific is the existence of multiple bureaucratic obstacles (claimed to be related to the security, environmental protection, various senseless procedures, special régimes, etc.) which, even under close inspection, can hardly display any signs of protectionism.

Quite often, the environmental protection is merely the pretext for limitation of commercial activity. For example, the ban on heavy fuel oil in Antarctica is not applied to the ships performing governmental or scientific missions (presumably the oil spills from the scientific ship is less pollute in comparison with the commercial ones).

## **Prospects**

It is still hard to foresee the future of the icebreaking tourism. The global economic slowdown would surely impact global tourism, with China being possible exception. If Polar tourism becomes more Asian, this may pose a serious challenge to largely West-focused business model.

The ship operators may ‘cut off’ (actually already started) less popular destinations and become concentrated on the most profitable ones.

The most stable segment of the icebreaking tourism may developed the demand for less traditional destinations, possibly combining extra services – helicopter sightseeing flights, camping, diving, kayaking, etc. This, in turn, would raise the standards of the personnel and management of the tourist companies (formerly obsessed with financial indicators without understanding the importance of the cruise management and logistics).

If so, the current economic crisis may cause significant changes (and positive) in the whole industry.

## REFERENCES

1. Howard, R.. (2009). *The Arctic Gold Rush*. London, England: Continuum.
2. Naumov, I. V. (2006). *The History of Siberia*. London, England: Routledge.
3. Stewart, J. (2011). *Antarctica: an Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc.
4. *The Arctic*. (2002). Darien, CT: Quark Expeditions and Zeagrahm Expeditions.
5. *The Nunavut Handbook*. (1998). Iqaluit, NU: s.n.
6. Артюхин Ю. Б., Бурканов В. Н. Морские птицы и млекопитающие Дальнего Востока России. Москва, АСТ, 1999. (Russian). [Artyuhin Yu.B. & Burkanov V.N. *Morskiye ptitsy i mlekopitayushchiye Dalnego Vostoka Rossii*. Moskva, AST, 1999]. Artyukhin, Yu.B., & Burkanov V.N. (1999). *Sea birds and mammals of the Far East of Russia*. Moscow: AST.