

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-19  
The Road to Murmansk

Åkandevvej 7  
Lille Værløse  
Denmark  
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Dear Dick,

In two weeks I am heading off for North Norway and Svalbard (Spitsbergen) for a look at that part of the northern North Atlantic area. In September 1953 I paid a brief visit to Svalbard together with a Dartmouth colleague, Don Charles Foote. Our trip on that occasion, against all advice in Norway, was with the last coal boat of the year. We almost spent the winter in Svalbard, but for a violent storm which delayed the coal boat's return to North Norway, enabling us to get aboard before winter closed all connections south.

I don't think that the 1953 performance will be repeated this time, as I have chosen the softer means of a tourist boat which makes eleven round trips during the summer between Norway and Svalbard--the northern archipelago over which Norway has sovereignty.

After the return to Tromsø, North Norway, I plan to visit Kirkenes in Norway's far northeast, and possibly Murmansk, east of Kirkenes in the Soviet Union.

If, as they say, "getting there is half the fun", the trip itself should be a real happening. Before even "getting there", I've had a series of laughs (and frustrations) at near comic opera level. The North Norway-Svalbard junket is rather straightforward. One complication, however, is that I would like to visit the Russian coal mines operating in Svalbard, but the tourist boat does not call there. The Russian mines are located in the same fjord complex as the Norwegian coal mines. But my tourist boat's schedule is tight and allows stops of only a few hours at each place. Nor are the local transport possibilities too promising at any time. To add to all this, the supply of fuel oil is about exhausted in Svalbard as of this writing. If the oil tanker does not arrive with fresh supplies soon, no one will be sailing around at all in Svalbard!

The presence of the Russians in Svalbard (allowed as part of the Treaty of 1920) is one of the really interesting reasons for visiting the islands. Because we were foiled in 1953 in our attempt to visit the Soviet camp, I shall try even harder to succeed this time.

The tourist boat, M/S "Skule", (formerly the "Sørøy") stops at Longyearbyen for a few hours before sailing to the northernmost reaches

of Svalbard (and, with luck, to the arctic pack-ice north of 80°N.). I plan to make a quick reconnoiter of transport possibilities during that stop. Then, when we sail back to Longyearbyen three days later, I shall know if a small boat can take me around the fjord to the Russians and also if a ship is expected to leave for Norway in the following days. If all looks promising I shall "jump ship" and take my chances. Of course, I also want more than the scheduled few hours in Longyearbyen in order to see the Norwegian operation, so there is an additional reason for not finishing the round-trip with the good ship "Skule".

All this may work out quite well. I have written to Arktikugol' (the Russian Arctic Coal Mining Trust) in Moscow to inform them of my plan. I have also been in contact with the Norwegian authorities.

On return to Norway, I want to visit Kirkenes, the shipping port for the nearby iron ore fields. Kirkenes lies near the Norwegian-Russian border. Farther to the east is the Soviet city of Murmansk, the main fishing port of Russia and headquarters for her scientific investigations of the northern North Atlantic area. The idea of visiting Murmansk was suggested to me by Trevor Lloyd while we enjoyed a long lunch the other day at a country inn near Copenhagen. The tale of Professor Lloyd's own trip to Murmansk, earlier this year, is for him to tell--but I was fascinated as much by the process of getting there as by the obvious value of visiting this northern city.

After talking with Trevor Lloyd, I looked into the matter of getting to Murmansk. I have never been to the Soviet Union and therefore had no idea of the best method of approach--except for Lloyd's short course on gaining entry and other necessary items.

I took the prerequisite Step One: approaching a travel agent. My Svalbard tour arrangers seemed a logical choice, but they do not deal in Soviet trips. They pointed me across Rådhusplads to the Danish headquarters of Intourist, the official Soviet travel agency through which all visitors are funneled.

The Intourist office was next to useless, except for providing me with a travel brochure on Murmansk. In three languages the brochure challenged: "Interested in the Soviet North? Be sure to contact INTOURIST for a trip to Murmansk." I assured the Intourist representative that I was indeed interested in the Soviet North, and that I was now, at this moment, contacting them for a trip to Murmansk. The answer, what there was of it, was the equivalent of "OK, buddy, let's not press this thing too far... ."

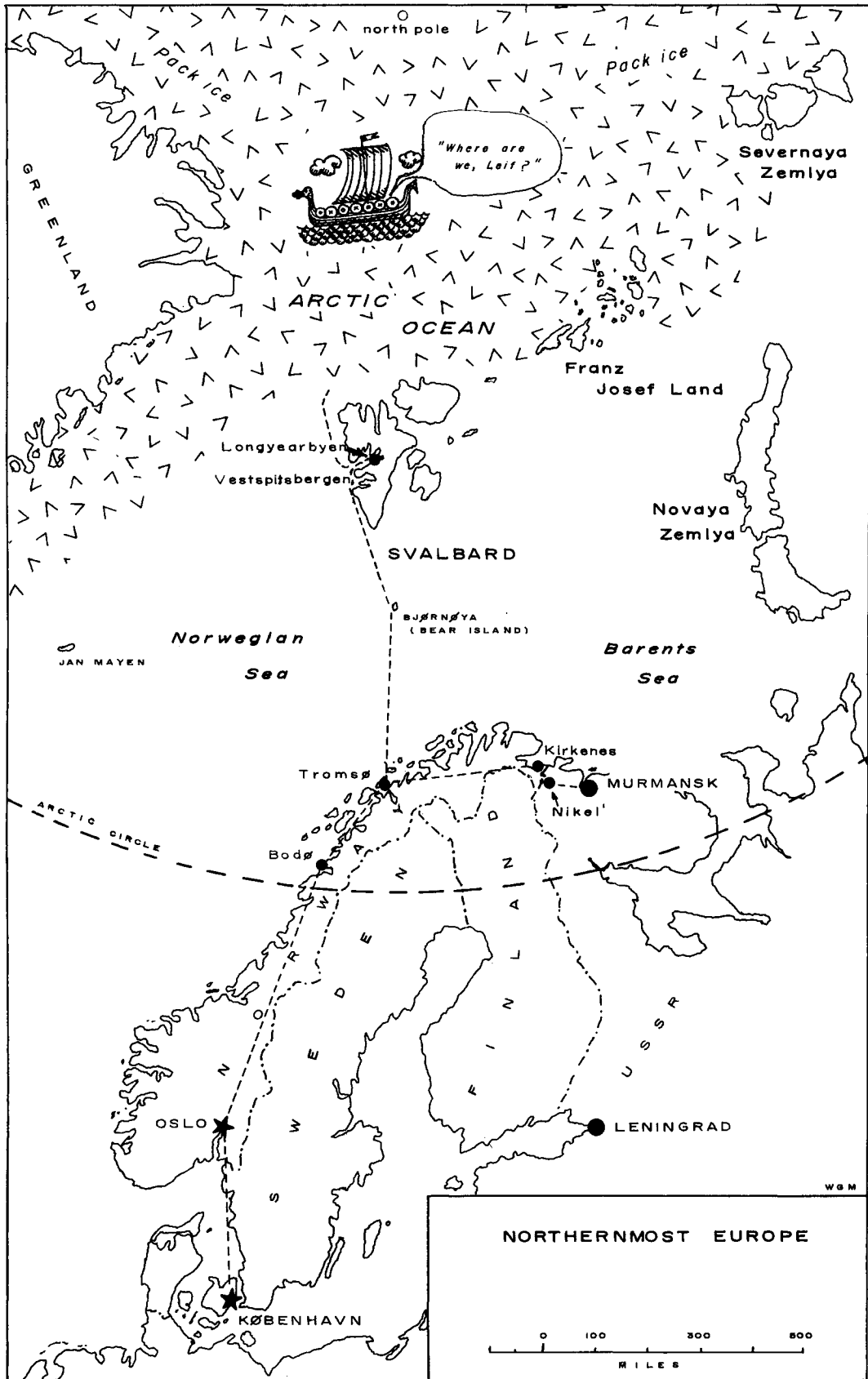
I should add at this point that the brochure's Danish heading translates as: "Are you interested in the Soviet North? INTOURIST will arrange your trip to Murmansk." And the Swedish come-on stated: "Are you interested in the Soviet North? INTOURIST will help you to travel to Murmansk."

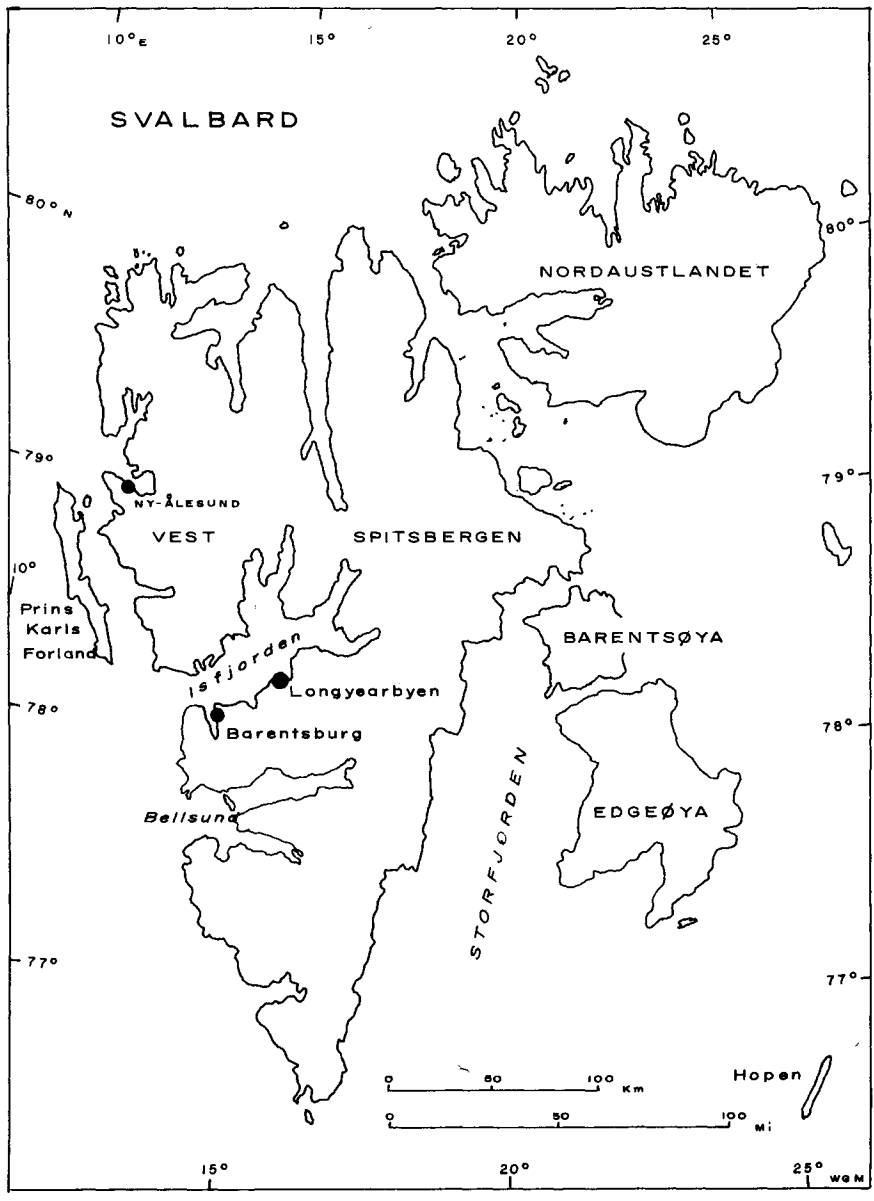
I quickly sensed which way the stream was flowing (as one is wont to do in this part of the world) and, to save further energy expenditure, beat a hasty retreat to think the matter through over a chilled Tuborg. Danish pilsner is often a source of great inspiration. In this case, the gem of wisdom printed on the paper sticker around the neck of my Tuborg flask stated: "Norway has a common border with the Soviet Union of some 195 kilometers." Of course, the whole thing was crystal clear! I would approach a Norwegian travel agent about my proposed trip; they were obviously well-versed in the Norway-USSR travel procedure. But first, I would be sensible enough to visit the Soviet consulate in Copenhagen to ask a few questions, for I knew that my visa would eventually be issued there.

The Soviet Consulate is just around the corner from the American Embassy, so I had no trouble in finding it. A large plaque on the gate stated that the Consulate was open from 11 to 1. Well, that put it off until the next day; and by that time I was devoting all systems to the challenge at hand. Next day, on the dot of 11, I made my way to the Russian Consulate. A friendly and sympathetic gentleman ushered me in to a great living room and made me comfortable as I stated my mission. I was interested in the Soviet North and I wanted to visit Murmansk. He told me that this would be no problem and that I should visit a certain Wilson Travel Bureau, which specialized in trips to the Soviet Union and was one of eight authorized agents of Intourist in Denmark.

After sharing a pleasant half hour with the friendly Russian consul (he also had two children; had also been in Denmark for over two years, also found it expensive; also had difficulties in finding a place to live; also liked Denmark, but...), I took my leave and attacked Wilson Travel Bureau. I didn't attack them directly, because it took 20 minutes to find a place to park. But, by that time, I felt things were definitely on the upswing. Wilson & Co. have a young man, a gem at any price, who arranges the Russian tours for them. Mr. Søren Nielsen offered me a chair, a cigar, and a cup of coffee while he completed a few pressing matters. I settled for the chair (as I get enough smoke in Danish offices just by having to breathe) and, in a few minutes, we were at the heart of the matter.

I announced, as an opener, that I would like to visit Murmansk from North Norway. "It is impossible," announced one of Søren Nielsen's associates. This, I have learned, is a typical Danish response. I countered that I had a friend who had just been there (implying, rather dishonestly, that it had been from North Norway) and that Intourist in Murmansk were crying for visitors (which is 100% true). Well, that first encounter brought no results, other than the suggestion that I try a Norwegian travel agent (Tuborg really gets around!). Nielsen, as a matter of course, rang up Intourist. "They know nothing," was the reply (fully anticipated). I decided to call it a day, gave Nielsen one of my two copies of the Murmansk brochure (he had none) and left for the peaceful suburb of Lille Værløse.





My Svalbard tour agency has its main office in Oslo, so I gave them my request by phone and had a reply the following day by letter which stated:

"We have made investigations through the Soviet Embassy in Oslo, through the ministry of foreign affairs and through Norwegian State foreign office, and we are sorry to inform you that individual tourists can not cross the boarder (sic) between Norway and the U.S.S.R. at any points.

We suggest that the best way to go from Kirkenes will be through Finland by bus to Rovaniemi and further to Helsinki or by air the whole way or part of it, and cross the boarder going from Helsinki to Leningrad." Yours faithfully...etc...

They might have added, but didn't, that the only way from Leningrad to Murmansk is by rail--23 hours.

This, then was the state of things when Søren Nielsen (as I said before, a gem at any price) of Wilson & Co. rang up to say that he had sent a telex to Intourist in Moscow, and had received a positive answer with transportation rates from Kirkenes, Norway to Nikel', USSR by private car, from Nikel' to Murmansk and return by train, plus hotel rates at the Intourist hotel at Murmansk.

"Come down," said Søren Nielsen, "and we will arrange your trip."

I once again made my way to inner Copenhagen, took only 15 minutes this time to park (eventually spawning a parking ticket), and got to the bread-and-butter of making final arrangements to go to Murmansk.

By this time I was just about beaten into humility--and, after the involved business leading up to putting everything down on the counter, I had little heart to tell Nielsen that I was unable to give him definite dates when I could be at the border. In my naive way of thinking, I had assumed that I could make tentative arrangements for a visit to Murmansk, get a visa, and let things take their course. Oh, no! I had to give an exact date when I could proceed from Kirkenes by car to Nikel' and from Nikel' by train to Murmansk. To get a visa, one must produce paid vouchers for a hotel reservation in Murmansk. A visa could be issued for two days prior to and following such reservations to "give a leeway, as a convenience for travelers". Ah, and therein was the stickiest of wickets. For, as you remember, I was jumping ship in Svalbard, on the chance of getting a local boat to take me to the Russian mines, to then catch a coal boat to North Norway. To get a visa, my final dates in Murmansk had to be stated in order to get my hotel reservations, paid vouchers thereunto, etc. And why not reserve a week or two on either end? You pay for the room at \$20 a day, used or not, that's why!

In the end, I carried my sanguine planning to the extreme, guessed at suitable dates, and made the best of arrangements to follow suit.

In the following days I saw the Russian consul two more times and he has agreed to give me a visa with four days leeway.

The final kick in the back was provided by friend Søren Nielsen yesterday, when he duly informed me that Intourist, Moscow, have now decided that Mr. Mattox is allowed two days in Murmansk...or rather that Mr. Mattox shall be in Murmansk from 23 to 25 July, period, end of telex.

So there is where the situation now stands. But I suppose I can take consolation in the fact that one travel agent told me that one couldn't visit Murmansk except by ship--and then only for two days!

Interested in the Soviet North? Be sure to contact INTOURIST for a trip (they will arrange, they will help you, etc.) to Murmansk.

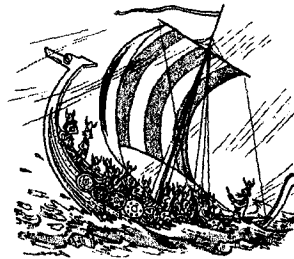
I need not bore you further with the other advice (from authorized Intourist agents) I received about visiting Murmansk. Suffice it to say that the road to Murmansk is rocky at best. Had I written you about all this at the end of the trip, it would have been an anti-climax and no doubt colored over by the vivid impressions of Svalbard and Murmansk as I found it--or hope I find it!

I need not add (but will) that this is all "old hat" to seasoned travelers in the ICWA family, and that it is pretty mild stuff compared with your recent Middle East experiences. But Middle East or Middle North, this is that last newsletter that I will be addressing to you, Dick, and the temptation to ramble a bit was insuppressible. Your successor, Dennison Rusinow, is also a seasoned world-man, and will be getting the full blast of my impressions of Svalbard and beyond.

Sincerely,

*Bill Mattox*

W. G. Mattox



*"I wish they'd hurry up and start  
SAS so we could do these  
Polar trips in comfort."*