

## VOLGA - BALTIC WATERWAY AND TOURISM

*Nuran TAŞLIGİL\****Abstract:**

Tourism activities throughout the world are becoming diversified every year. One of these is river tourism. In Russia, these activities took place and developed at different locations and at different times commencing in the 1960s. At first planned to meet the needs of industry, the Volga-Baltic Waterway Project in recent years has emphasized tourism different from its original purpose. This study takes the geographical, touristic, historical and cultural dimensions of the Volga-Baltic waterway as a whole and the area is evaluated within the coverage of the geography of tourism.

**Key words:** River Tourism, Volga, Moscow, St. Petersburg.

**Introduction**

The beginning of the Industrial Revolution, canals were built in Europe in particular in England, France and Germany to carry raw materials and finished goods and thus inland waterways began to appear. Later in other parts of the world with advanced technology, different canals were constructed and important water passages were built, such as the Panama, Suez and Kiel canals (Doğaner, 1994: 64). Built with human intervention, among the longest of these waterways are the Danube-Rhein canal and the Volga-Baltic waterway. Beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a transport system was established that connected rivers, dams, natural lakes through artificial canals in European Russia. Eventually, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the White Sea were connected to each other.

The most important waterway in European Russia, in particular with the role it has played in meeting the needs of St. Petersburg during the seize that took place in World War II, is the Volga-Baltic. This waterway which was first constructed as a means of transportation today serves a very different purpose. Starting in the 1970s the waterway became a very important source of tourism and gained the feature of providing an attraction to a large number of foreign visitors. This article first gives the geographical characteristics of this waterway and later its touristic attractions.

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### **Volga – Baltic Waterway**

Undertakings involving waterways go back a considerable time. Peter the Great planned a waterway to connect Moscow to the Baltic Sea because it would be cheaper and practical and went to the town of Dimitrov near Moscow to carry out the initial research for the future waterway, although the first serious plans began a century after Peter. However, with the laying of the railroad between Moscow and St. Petersburg this plan was abandoned.

The idea to connect Moscow with the Volga River through a canal was once again put forth in 1932 and its construction was completed at an unheard of pace for that period in 4.8 years and put into service. The first section of the waterway known as the Moscow Canal is 128 km and is longer than the Manchester (71 km.), Panama (47 km.) and Kiel (29 km.) canals. The Moscow Canal consists of 56 km. of canal, 53 km. of the Moscow River and 19 km. of reservoirs. In this section of the waterway, in order to overcome the difference in water levels, 5 locks in sequence and 2 locks between the Moscow River and the Volga River at a height of 9 meters each were constructed (Photo 1). In the building of the waterway significant damage was done to the environment. In addition, 202 million m<sup>3</sup> of earth was transported during the building of the canal. This amount is 2.7 times more than the amount used to construct the Suez Canal (75 million m<sup>3</sup>).

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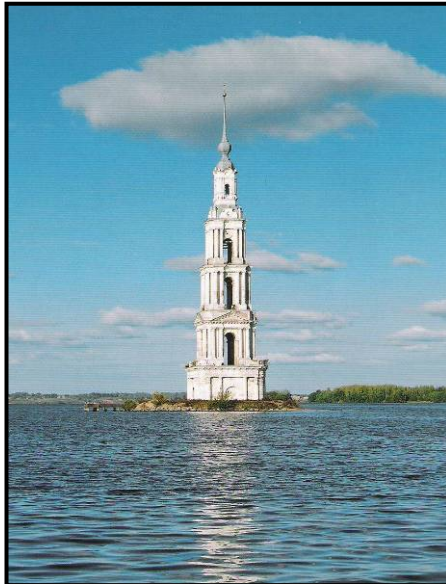


**Photo 1:** An Example of Lock Elevation from Uglich

After the Moscow Canal, the waterway reaches the Volga and follows this river for a while. The Volga River originates in the Valdai Hills northwest of Moscow. At 3,700 km in length it is the longest river in Europe and has a 1,360,000 km<sup>2</sup> area of drainage basin. At the point connecting with the Moscow Canal its width exceeds 200 meters (230 meters). Known as “Idil” or “Itil” according to ancient sources, the Volga freezes in December and although it varies from year to year, it is covered with ice 120 to 160 days of the year and does not melt until April or the beginning of May.

Transportation on the Volga dates back to a considerable time back. In particular, timber and fish transportation by steam boats from Astrakhan to Kazan dates back to the 1800s. However, during the dry summer months while shallow areas became dangerous for boats, the dams built on the river have made transportation easier during the summer season.

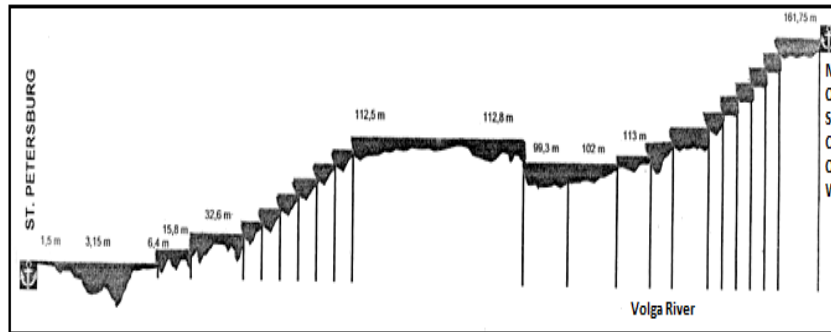
Out of the 5 large dams built on the Volga waterway, the Rybinsk dam forms the Rybinsk reservoir. The Rybinsk (Rybinskoye) dam covers an area of 4.500 km<sup>2</sup> and the dam's average depth is 5 meters. Construction of the dam began in 1936 and water catchment in 1941. During the building of the dam thousands of trees were felled and 700 villages and villagers were forced to move and in particular political prisoners that worked on the construction (Palace employees, affluent villagers, religious figures and intellectuals) lost their lives due to harsh working conditions (Photo 2).



**Photo 2:** The Bell Tower of the Submerged St. Nicholas Church on the Rybinskoye Dam Basin

Although the hydroelectric power plant provides an important benefit, because a vast area of agricultural and forest land was lost during construction, it is considered as an ecological mistake. Passing the dam from the south to the north, the waterway continues on the Sheksna River (185 km). Due to the difference in elevation another lock is entered and the Beloe Sea or the White Lake is reached. The passage through this lake is 45 km. from the White Lake the Kovzha River is accessed (41.7 km). On this river there are 6 additional locks. Due to these locks the waterway drops from a

level of 112.5 meters to 32.6 meters and the Onega Lake is entered (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Changes in Elevation on the Volga – Baltic Waterway Route

Onega Lake is the second largest lake in Europe with 9,840 km<sup>2</sup> (Darkot, 1949: 29). On a platform consisting of sedimentary rocks, it is among one of many lakes formed with the accumulation of frontal moraines with a depth of 110 meters (Ertin, 2004: 34). The Onega Lake is connected to Lake Ladoga with the Svir River (218 km). After two locks of different elevations are passed on this river, the largest lake in Europe is reached. Lake Ladoga has an area of 18.180 km<sup>2</sup> and a depth of 225 meters. Transportation from the south of the lake reaches the Neva River (Photo 3).

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**Photo 3:** Once used as a prison, Oreshek Fortress (Schlüsselburg) between Neva River and Lake Ladoga

From Lake Ladoga 30 km. of the Neva River from a total length of 74 km. flows through St. Petersburg and reaches the Baltic Sea. The width of the Neva varies from 1.200 meters to 4.000 meters with a depth that varies from 14 meters to 24 meters. With the Don being connected to the Volga in

1952, the “Grand Volga Project” for the Volga – Baltic Waterway was realized.

In summary, the artificial canal from Moscow onwards is approximately 1.700 km. in length with an elevation of 162 meters that reaches the Baltic Sea by passing a part of the Volga. A dam lake, rivers, the two largest lakes in Europe and 16 canal locks of different elevations are passed. With the said waterway food products and raw materials are transported to a wide area on approximately 5.000 to 5.590 vehicles.

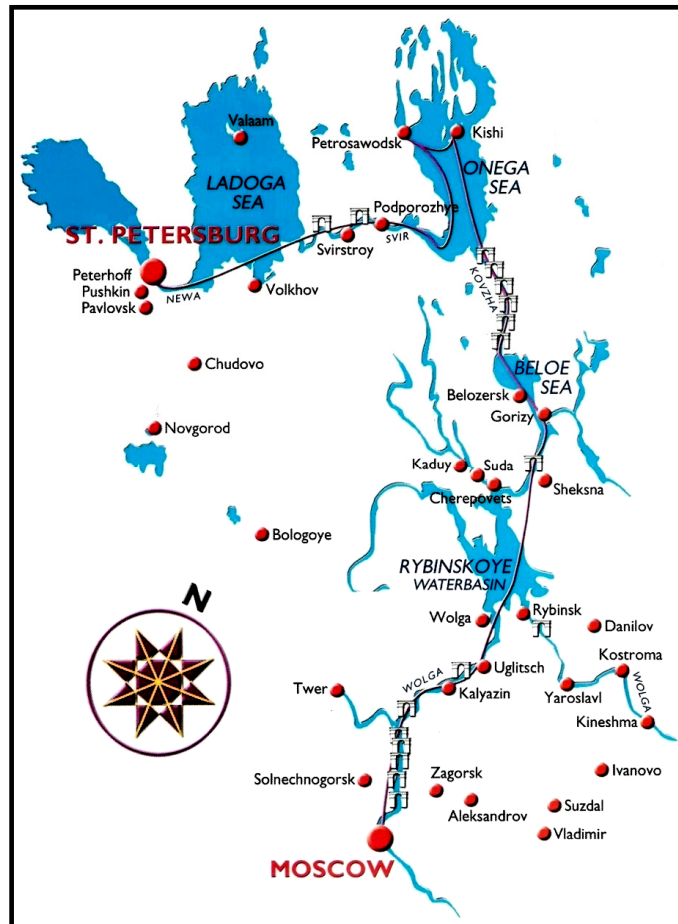
### **The Importance of the Waterway on Tourism**

Covering an area of 17.075.200 km<sup>2</sup> wide and possessing various tourism potential, Russia, with her undeveloped tourism infrastructure, limits this wide potential. The most important tourism centers are Moscow, St. Petersburg, the Black Sea coast (Sochi) and in the Far East, Kamchatka and Sakhalin. Among these centers, starting in the 1960s and in particular after 1990, the development of cruise tourism that includes Moscow and St. Petersburg become more significant. Starting in Moscow or St. Petersburg these tourist river boats cover the Volga and Baltic Canal in 5 days and aside from visiting the two most important cities in Russia, settlement centers that have witnessed important events in Russian history can be seen en route with a vacation trip among history and culture through rich taiga forests. In the passage through different elevations, the water elevators entered into makes the trip even more interesting (Figure 2).

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### **Touristic Attractions**

Among the most important attractions of this touristic trip are the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Moscow was founded in 1147 as a fishing village and was surrounded with wooden walls. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century it became the capital of the Russian state and lost this feature in 1712. In 1812 it was burned down by Napoleon and later rebuilt (Ertin, 1994: 36). Moscow again became the capital in 1918. The city’s architecture was shaped with the effects of the Tsarist Period, the Socialist Period and the New Period (Ertin, 1994: 38). It has gathered its historical structure, art and architectural beauty within its fabric and, in addition, with its wide and kept parks it has become one of the most beautiful cities in the world.



*Figure 2:* The Route Followed on the Volga-Baltic River Journey

The most impressive architecture in Moscow is considered to be the Kremlin and its gardens. The Kremlin and other structures in Red Square, such as St. Basil's Cathedral, are included in the world cultural heritage list.

There are 300 museums, 80 galleries and an exhibit hall in the city. In addition, together with churches and monasteries there is the Novadevichi cemetery where the family members of the Tsar, artists and well-known Turkish poet Nazım Hikmet's grave is located; it is an important tourist attraction. With its wide and orderly avenues, large parks scattered throughout the city, unique architecture, Moscow is in fact one of the exceptional cities in the world that must be seen.

St. Petersburg is remembered by different names such as Russia's exit gate to Europe, the Venice of the North and city of islands, bridges, canals and palaces. Founded in 1703 as a Baltic commercial port on the Neva River delta, St. Petersburg is situated on Rabbit Island. The city's plan was designed by French and Italian architects and became the capital in 1712.

Later the 42 islands and the two sides of the Neva River were connected with elegant bridges. Among these bridges the most important one is the Anichkov Bridge with its four famous horse sculptures.

The oldest structure in the city is the St. Peter and St. Paul Fortress built in 1703. In the cathedral located inside the fortress there are the tombs of Russian tsars, in particular Peter I, and tsarinas among others (Pepova, 2007, 24). The wind rose in the shape of an angel in the cathedral's spire is among the symbols of the city. The prison cells inside the bastions once housed in particular Dostoyevsky, Trotsky and Lenin as well as artists and statesmen as political prisoners.

Even though the sea freezes 3 – 4 months of the year, St. Petersburg is the most important port and cultural center in Russia. The first thing that comes to mind when St. Petersburg is mentioned is the Hermitage Museum that is on UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage list. Built during Catherine the Great's reign between 1754 and 1762 first as a winter palace, this building with its every facet architecturally a work of art draws attention with its triumphal arch at the entrance and its landscaped garden (Pepova, 2007, 44). In order to preserve its rapidly increasing valuable art collection, the museum today includes five buildings: The Winter Palace (the former residence of the Russian tsars), the Small Hermitage, the New Hermitage, the Old Hermitage (also called Large Hermitage) and the Hermitage Cathedral which exhibits the works of Russian and world painters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Picasso, Renoir, Monet and Matisse as well as the treasury section of the palace. Although the number given for the museum's collection varies with 12.000 statues, 15.000 paintings, 225.000 art objects and 600.000 prints and drawings, the Hermitage is considered as one of the three richest museums in the world together with the Louvre and Prado.

Another richness of St. Petersburg is its cathedrals. Among the leading cathedrals is the Kazan Cathedral built as a replica of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome by Tsar Alexander I. Among similar dome temples the Kazan Cathedral is the fourth tallest with a dome height of 101.5 meters. Inspired from St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow's Red Square, the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ also called the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood as well the Church of St. Alexander, the Church of Three Saints and the Alexander Nevsky Monastery are other examples of monuments of St. Petersburg.

Built in 1875 as the world's largest shopping center or shopping arcade, the Gostny Dvor and Nevsky Prospekt in St. Petersburg is the most important commercial center in Russia. Sprawling over one km and embracing an area of 53.000 m<sup>2</sup>, the Gostny Dvor is an indoor complex of more than 100 shops that took 28 years to construct.

The area surrounding St. Petersburg also embraces noteworthy architectural buildings and monuments as well. Among these are the Peterhof Palace and the Grand Cascade and Gardens; the Amber Room located in the Catherine Palace of Tsarskoye Selo (Tsar Village); the Catherine Palace with its Gardens and Pavlos Palace and Park to the south of Tsarskoye Selo. The Konstantinovskiy Palace which was destroyed during the 1917 Revolution and restored in 2003 and other palaces such as Mariinsky and Belozersky (Beloselsky) can be included within this group.

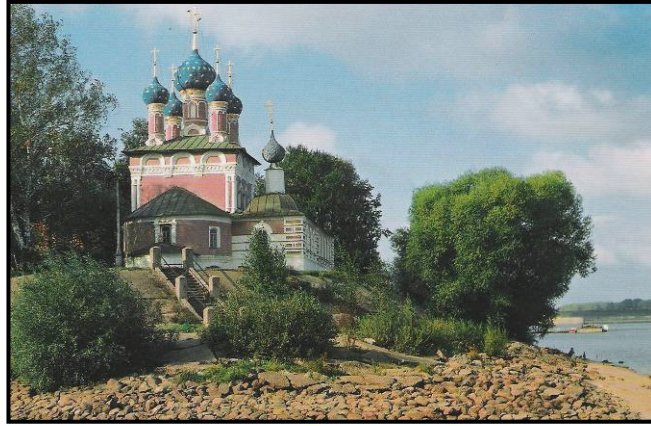


*Photo 4:* The starting point in Moscow for the river tours

### **Tourism on the Volga – Baltic Waterway**

Boats starting from Moscow (Photo 4) after passing through the Moscow Canal stop at Uglich on the Volga River (Photo 5). The suspicious death of Dmitry (Dimitri) the crown prince and son of Tsar Ivan the Terrible marks an important place for Uglich in Russian history with its numerous churches, such as the brilliant red Church of St. Dmitry on the Blood, the Church of the Transfiguration and the Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist on the Volga.





**Photo 5:** Church of Prince Dmitry and martyrs' cemetery on the shores of the Volga River

The second stop Yaroslavl is older than Moscow built around 1010. With its magnificent domes and spectacular icons like the Church of Ilia the Prophet, the Spassky Monastery (Savior monastery) and in particular its art museum located in the former Governor's House provide important insights on the lives of Russian aristocrats.

The icon collection is one of the most important works in the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery in Goritsy. In addition, the Goritsy Monastery of Resurrection was a Russian convent monastery built around 1544 and which today is part of Kirillo-Belozersky Museum of History, Art and Architecture.

At Kizhi located to the north of Onega Lake at the tip of an island 6 km. long and 1 km. wide is 68 km. in distance from the capital of Karelia. The island has a national ethnographic and open-air museum built in 1966. The most famous work on the island is the Church of Transfiguration. Built from pine logs and according to various accounts constructed with an axe and gouge by a single person and assembled without any nails, the Church of Transfiguration has 22 domes and 5 halls and is a large summer church. Next to this church is the 9 dome Church of the Intercession rebuilt in 1764 (Photo 6). Together they are called the Kizhi Pogost and are a UNESCO World Heritage site.



**Photo 6:** Church of Transfiguration on the left and on the right, Church of the Intercession on Kizhi Island

Mandrogi on the banks of the Svir River is a settlement area with unique wooden houses where traditional handcrafted souvenirs are sold and with a newly constructed shopping center that adds a separate charm to the tour.

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Starting from St. Petersburg or Moscow a large part of the 5 day journey on the waterway passes through Taiga forests with history on the one hand and the existence of natural beauty like forests and water on the other hand, the waterway is slowly becoming recognized by the world as an important tourist destination with an increasing number of visitors arriving each year.

Another attraction of this tourism journey and depending on seasonal changes (the period between June and August) is the length of the days and the white nights which makes the trip even more unique. Both the sun on one side and the moon on the other provide a separate charm to this cultural activity.

### **Conclusion**

First commencing in Greece and diversifying in particular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an example of this diversification of tourism can be seen in Russia. The Grand Volga Project that began as a transport purposed project brought tourism to the forefront after 1960. With the touristic features carried out in the project area, the Volga-Baltic section starting from Moscow has gradually gained importance in the tourism sector.

With its natural scenery, vegetation, wildlife, rich architectural structures and historic fabric, Russia is a very diverse country. However, the

tourism infrastructure of the country has not reached the desired level. It has not provided the requirements of foreign tourists in the areas of entertainment, sports, transport and gastronomy. Although the aim in river tourism between Moscow and St. Petersburg is not faith tourism, the most interesting feature on the river journey is churches. This tourism activity must undergo certain endeavors to diversify it. The most important resource on this subject is the potential of the untouched natural beauty of the taiga. Although the number of tourists and boats are increasing each year based on our personal observation, Russia possesses a very rich natural asset, but does not as yet make adequate inroads in this area.

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