

**Your On the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**The Baltic Sea Tour:  
To the Baltic**

# The Baltic Sea Tour

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## **Chapter 1: To the Baltic**

**August 2, 2008**

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Today, your Reporter and Reporterette (Holly) boarded a cruise ship (the Constellation) tied up at a wharf east of London, where we departed for a two week journey onto the Baltic Sea and into Baltic seaports. In the 1980s and 90s, I had stayed in some of the places we were to visit, where I conducted lectures on data networks and the emerging Internet. I wanted Holly to see them, and I wanted to see them again.

### **“Oh, to be Old Again”**

In my younger days, I discounted spending time on a cruise ship. The ideas of scheduled meals, pre-mixed drinks, canned entertainment, and treadmill exercise were too dotty for my youthful and perceived maverick style. We all have our illusions. One of mine? The older I am, the cooler I was in my youth.

Remember those days? We wanted Easy Rider Freedom. Wind in our faces. Bugs decorating our aviator shades. Like the three Easy Riders cascading themselves across America’s landscape, we wanted a piece of that aimless pie.

Aimlessness was cool. Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Jack Nicholson proved it to packed movie houses. Their nonchalance toward just about everything conveyed a detachment from life. Maybe this isolated angst stemmed from the free-wheeling 60s, from their being young. Many senior citizens enviously and vicariously shared their lifestyle.

Up here in North Idaho, I come across many aging Easy Riders. Not too long ago, such a man pulled up next to me in the parking lot at Suzie’s, a local hangout for hangers-on (including me).

I was sitting in my Toyota. He was mounted on his Harley-Davidson. I was a senior citizen, outfitted in Levis, loafers, and a T-shirt. He was a senior citizen, outfitted in black leather, tattoos, and earrings. We looked at each other, likely wondering why in the world we would be dressed like we were. I thought about the past times when he was an Easy Rider, at least in his own mind. Now, he was a soft, wrinkled, tattooed caricature of his past. He seemed out of place sitting on the motorcycle’s musculature.

What was he seeking? Maybe a morsel of freedom for a short while. Perhaps a brief journey into independence while cascading down a congested highway populated with SUVs, sixteen wheelers, and Holiday Inns.

Go for it old man. You cannot do it later. That goes for all of us. I’m not attuned to Harley-Davidsons, but I can relate to your wanting something different in your life. Something other than watching reruns on TV.

A few days ago, a friend and I were playing tennis at a local club. On a court next to us were four young men engaged in a highly competitive doubles game. On several occasions, we paused to watch them play a point. During one action, as we witnessed a fine display of strength, speed, and skill, my partner said to me:

- “Ah. To be 40 again.”
- My response, “For that matter, to be 50 again.”
- To which he replied, “For that matter...to be 60 again.”

For all my readers, old or young, it’s not a bad idea to keep in mind this old saw: “Ah, to be old again.” ...Spoken by a young corpse.

What does all this have to do with a travelogue on the Baltic Sea? Nothing whatsoever. That’s the fun of writing without an editor. It is a new experience for me, and I admit I abuse it occasionally. So, back to the original point of these reports: the Baltic.

### **The Itinerary**

Figure 1 on the next page shows the route we took from England, into the Baltic, and back again. Our seaport, railway, and airplane excursions were to:

- Oslo, Norway
- Copenhagen, Denmark
- Warnemunde, Germany
- Berlin, Germany (by rail)
- Tallinn, Estonia
- St. Petersburg, Russia
- Moscow, Russia ( by air)
- Helsinki, Finland
- Stockholm, Sweden

### **The North Sea**

During my navy days, I was a “West Pac Sailor.” This term described those men whose ships deployed to the western Pacific. I often envied my “Med Sailor” buddies. Their “East Pac” ships sometimes sailed the North Sea, but always stopped off in Mediterranean ports located in Italy and Greece. My ships anchored in Taiwan and Korea. I’ve nothing against Taiwanese or Koreans, but my ports of call in Taipei and Inchon did not compete with my friends’ liberty nights in Naples and Athens.

This trip was my first experience sailing the waters of the North Sea. Later in the night, after unsuccessfully attempting to close the bars on the ship, I spent a couple hours on the balcony of our stateroom.

Little could be seen. The night’s stars and moon radiated diffused lights onto the ocean waters. Their reflections cast a dimly lit image of our ship’s profile onto the water, creating an illusion of twin ships making their way through the Baltic Sea. Mostly silence, but with the steady, comforting resonance of waves against the ship’s hull.

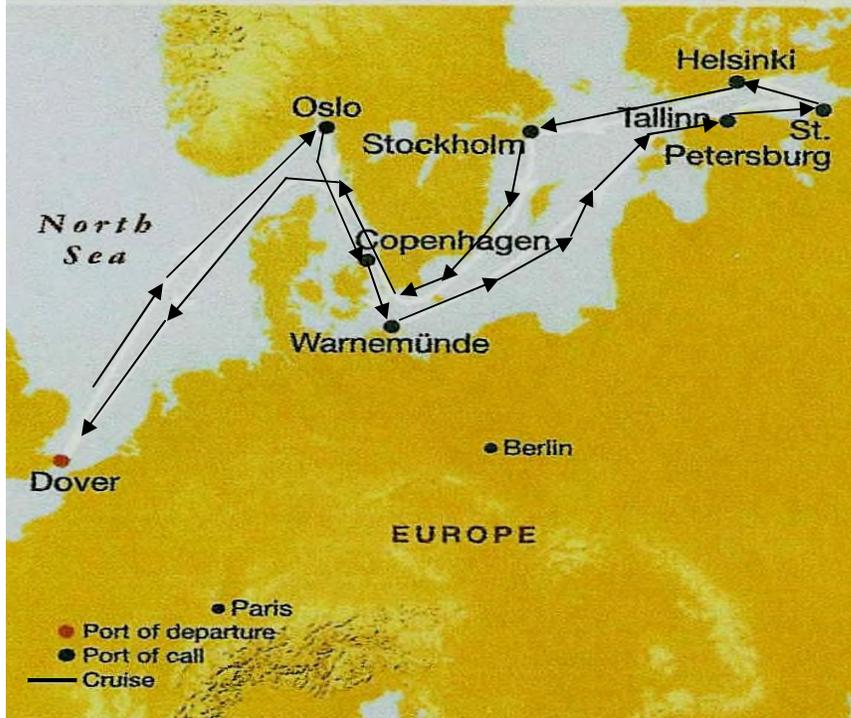


Figure 1. The Baltic Sea cruise.

Occasionally, a cargo ship passed, headed south toward the English Channel. The vessel appeared as a solitary and small traveler. But then, our ship must have seemed the same: a speck in the sea. Even with the Constellation's seemingly large profile on the waters of the North Sea, it remained a mere fleck in the ocean.

Here I was, on-board a fine ship making its way through waters where the history of much of northern Europe had been formed: The Vikings rule of the North Sea and their dominance of the sea's coasts. The merchants' Hanseatic League in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The 15<sup>th</sup> century, with the dominance of the Netherlands as a shipping power. Then later: the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Swedes, the Russians, the English, all vying for control of this body of water.

Later, WWII Germany's submarines played havoc and destruction with both military and civilian ships in this part of the world. Reflecting on that time, I sat in my deck chair, taking in the breeze and the sound of the waves around the ship's hull. I thought about the Shetland Bus, an amazing clandestine operation between Scotland and Norway---an effort to help combat the Nazis occupation of the latter country.<sup>1</sup>

The crossings were mostly made during the winter to ensure the Norwegian coast was reached under the cover of darkness. This meant that the crews and passengers had to endure very heavy North Sea conditions, with no lights, and constant risk of discovery by German planes or boats. There was also the possibility of being captured whilst carrying out the mission on the Norwegian coast. However, early on it was decided that camouflage was the best defense and the boats were disguised as working fishing boats, the crew as fishermen. The fishing boats were armed with light machine guns concealed

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shetland\\_Bus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shetland_Bus).

inside barrels placed on deck. The operation was under constant threat from German forces and several missions went awry.

Those nights were tough on the sailors. Tough in the sense of not only being wet and cold. Tough in the sense of their risking their lives.

I was embarking on a wondrous trip into places of my historical fantasy. Some I had seen. Others I had not. But from the start, WWII loomed in my mind. And I discovered WWII was not just on my mind. This war was still resonant with the Europeans I visited over the next two weeks.

How could that be? For centuries, the Europeans' succoring tit to feed their hunger for power and land was gained through warfare. What was one more war? WWII changed the Europeans' mind-set about war, about aggression, about battles for turf and water.

For now, enough about the North Sea and theories about why the Europeans disavowed their love for warfare. In the next report, we land in Oslo, Norway.