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A circuit of the Black Sea

Christopher Smith cruised the Crimea just before the most serious confrontation between East and West since the Cold War

While we were in Sevastopol the streets were peaceful, but we were shocked us by the ill-feeling towards the local Muslim Tatars. In fact, the port's showpiece bar was called 'Whites Only' (meaning all Tatars were excluded). We also got the feeling that the Ukrainians had been forced to learn Russian at school. During Navy Day, the people seemed happy with the combined Russian and Ukrainian fleet, even though Ukraine had just one submarine involved. It did though explain why we were closely watched by the coastguard during our time there!

My regular crewmate Cocky and I were cruising the Black Sea in my 1981 34ft Jeanneau Espace 1000, *Scube*. We were there because we felt the Med had become too crowded. In the Greek Ionian around 5,000 boats are vying for spaces in Preveza. In contrast, only 50 cruising boats entered the Black Sea in 2010, mostly via the Bosphorus with a few coming down the Danube to Constanta in Romania. A container ship hooted loudly as we entered the Dardanelles, leaving the Greek island of Levbos 40 miles behind us. We had been watching the AIS receiver with trepidation as oil tankers and



A combined Russian-Ukraine fleet during Navy Day in Sevastopol



ABOVE: Ropotama Bay, Bulgaria, located in a nature reserve, provided a relaxed anchorage



CHART: MAXINE HEATH. ALL PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER SMITH



container ships entered and exited the restricted passage every few minutes, heading north, south, east and west, with a turning circle two miles wide. AIS is wonderful at telling where ships will be in ten minutes' time – provided they keep moving in straight lines! Our freighter was turning very fast and so did we, backwards.

Visiting war memorials and local harbours, we crossed the Dardanelles four times, something that made crossing the Dover Straits seem easy. Little did we realise what was in store for us in the Bosphorus.

Before Istanbul is the Sea of Marmara, an area about as large as the Ionian and just as interesting – at least in parts. Erdek on the Asian coast was well organised for boats and waterside life, and reminded me of Greek harbours 20 years ago.

Marmara Island itself is a gem with several harbours and ramshackle villages. We sailed round to the commercial port of Saraylar on the north side of the island and inside the small harbour found ourselves surrounded by marble statues. Marmara means 'marble' and the island has been the prime source of pure white marble for 3,000 years. In fact, most of the ancient statues you'll see in the British Museum started their life here.



Kumpaki harbour may be busy, dirty and smelly, with catches of fish coming in day and night – but what a view of old Istanbul. And it's free!

In contrast, the European coast of the Sea of Marmara is dotted with new dormitory towns for Istanbul, with their gleaming minarets and heavily amplified prayers day and night.

Approaching Istanbul, the Princes Islands provided the one crowded occasion in five months of anchoring. It was a Sunday and we practised our anchoring skills in a tight bay with trepidation – only to find that by 1800, the 50 boats had reduced to two. Rather like in the Solent, Turkish boats seem to leave Istanbul's marinas just for weekend picnic trips.

Sailing up the 15 mile-long Bosphorus, the prevailing wind is right on the nose and there's a foul three-knot current.

On top of this, fast ferries are continuously moving on 14 routes and oil tankers pass in edge-to-edge shipping lanes. But we had a following wind, a glorious midsummer day and a memory for life. Well, more than one memory actually: after mooring in the fishing harbour of Turkeli at the east end of the Bosphorus, I had to sail – singlehanded – back to Istanbul to clear out of Turkey.

Istanbul is 85 sea miles and several good harbours from Bulgaria, yet rather oddly it's the only port for northbound clearance. Two days of

tramping the multiple marine offices of Istanbul got us the answer that clearance could only be completed if the boat was at one of Istanbul's three large, expensive marinas. Nobody wanted to see my boat, just the paperwork that showed she was at a marina. Five days later at the last Turkish harbour, Ignadea, I moored by chance alongside the coastguard. I had to explain that I had no Turkish papers as these had been taken, at substantial expense, in Istanbul. 'Then you are not allowed here,' he said with an understanding wink.

What a difference a national border can make. Bulgaria was welcoming with simple paperwork – and basic bottles of spirits that cost £4 instead of £20. ➔



War games: locals turn out to enjoy the sight of amphibious landing craft coming ashore at Sevastopol



The entrance to Sevastopol, Crimea, is guarded by these huge (40m) heroic statues, and lots of rusting gun emplacements

Entry and exit formalities

With twelve exits or entries in Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Georgia we were kept busy with paperwork. We met no documentation problems, although I was asked at Odessa to provide a full history of bills of sale. Other than that, our Small Ships Register certificate and insurance documents were all we needed. My RYA International Certificate of Competence was very useful, too. I had no intention of attempting Russian paperwork: agent fees for each entrance and exit were €1,000 (£830) and, after lots of emails, we were told that sailing to Abkhazia, a Russian enclave in Georgia, was not possible.

BULGARIA & ROMANIA Easy and cheap
UKRAINE Lengthy paperwork. Entry cost €50 (£41) in Odessa where the marina acts as an efficient agent. Exiting with no agent, at Yalta, took three days and cost €100 (£83). An agent would have cost a lot more, but been gentler on the nerves.
CRIMEA At the time of writing, it's unclear whether foreign cruising yachts will be allowed to visit, nor what entry and exit formalities they will face.
GEORGIA Friendly, free and fast
TURKEY We collected three logbooks for our three transits of Turkey, each costing €50-100. Exits ranged from nothing in Canakkale to €300 (£249) in Istanbul, where desperation led us to hire agents.

Customs at Tsarevo made the only real inspection of *Scube*, tapping bulkheads for contraband. A quiet sail on to anchor in the bay of the protected river Ropotama was a delight: a feeling of peace with the world.

Either side of the bay of Burgas are the medieval towns of Sozopol and Nessebar, both with marinas and a supply of tourists from the Golden Sands region. The archaeological museum at Varna is large, almost deserted and displays the world's oldest gold jewellery, made 6,500 years ago. The enthusiast yacht club at Varna will find space for you. Balchic, an easy sail northwards, houses the Bulgarian ex-royals' summer palaces, preserved for their still wonderful cliff-top gardens and as luxury rental homes.

A southerly Force 5 then hurried us past the border into Romania, and a neat, cheap marina at the entry town of Mangolia.

Whilst many of the buildings were in the old Soviet style, there was a keen sense of optimism and growth. Eferie Nord gave us the first taste of silting from the Danube.

A complex dog's leg of assorted-colour marker buoys showed a possible passage way into the small harbour so we were pleased when a local boat came across to show us the way in. Amazingly it is nine miles round the walls of Constanta's

harbour from Eferie to pretty Port Tomis. Tomis has ancient origins, but Constanta grew – after the Danube-Black Sea canal was built in 1984 – to become the largest port in the Black Sea. Tomis is the best place in the Black Sea to meet other yachtsmen, as it is a resting point for those entering the Black Sea via the Danube and a junction for the routes north to Odessa or east to the Crimea. Tomis illustrated the violence of Black Sea winters to us. The



Yalta, Crimea, famous for its Russian summer palaces, is now full of 'workers' palaces' – holiday centres catering for East Europeans

shore was littered with the remains of pontoons and a 43ft Irish yacht called *Wolfhound* lay on her side, punctured by her cradle. Water flying over the harbour wall had repeatedly frozen on her until the weight eventually overcame her.

Summertime in Constanta was very

different: hot and sunny with a nice beach.

The Danube delta was a siren call to me. We anchored inside the sandbars of Laguna Sacalin, surrounded by seabirds and sands, swam and enjoyed a glorious sunset. Next day it was three miles into the delta to the strange town of Sulina.

Surrounded by marshes, Sulina has no road routes so boats of every form are its lifeblood. Mooring along the riverbank is a matter of negotiation with the changing pattern of boats. Some shops survive from the few tourists. It's the exit port for

Romania and, at times, was the exit for my chartplotter, which blacked out being unable to match charts.

We'd been told that an easy entry into the Ukraine was up a branch of the Danube at Ust-Dunaysk: maybe, but we ran aground three times following the buoyed route shown in a 2001 pilot. As dusk was coming, and we had no taste for grounding again, we decided on an overnight passage to Odessa. It was perfect: a windless motor through the night and a Force 3 dawn sail past the rich suburbs of Odessa.

The marina is friendly and welcoming – at £35 a night, it should be! It's right at the Odessa Steps, known as the Potemkin Steps from the 1905 Eisenstein film. The climb up the steps was heart-stopping, both in emotion and temperature.

The grand avenues of Odessa are majestic and modern. We went to the grand opera and a great jazz café. Close to Odessa is the commercial port of Yuzhnyy: one pilot book said there was space in the estuary for yachts but when we tried sailing in we were refused permission. Quite understandable, as this is now the main terminal for Russia's fuel pipelines.

A Force 3 broad reach took us to the 15-mile sandbar outside the River Bug, where we anchored and were inspected by the Ukrainian authorities. Early next morning the wind blew up and by 0600 we were sailing double-reefed at seven knots straight towards the Crimea.

Despite the good progress it was dark when we reached Chernomorkoe, which had no clear harbour lights, so we anchored overnight in the bay rather than risk the shallow harbour. We then sailed on to Yevpatoria, a busy and friendly local resort. Several yachts were giving hourly tourist trips, run by young lads using sails only and no engines. Their skills put our slow approach by motor to shame.

Sevastopol felt rather like a warm-water



Approaching Yalta you are greeted by a succession of cliff-top palaces. This mock castle was built in 1912 for an oil trader. A constant stream of tourist boats and coaches means it is always crowded



Scube's winter berth in Trabzon, Turkey. Beyond it is an Olympic-size swimming pool. Like the unfinished marina, it is little used

Portsmouth. Its naval importance led to its destruction both in the Crimean War and World War Two, and to it becoming a closed Russian city until 1996. But we found it to be a lively and glamorous place.

The Barker & Borre pilot lists five moorings but only the Russian Yacht Club seems practical. We were bluntly told 'Private, go away!' at the Ushakova Club, so we anchored immediately off for the night.

Our move to the shabby and expensive Russian Yacht Club next day was enlivened by teams of sailors practising for Navy Day with smoke, gunfire and crowds.

The beautiful coastline of the Crimea has always been a holiday region for rich Russians and we passed many a cliff-top mansion. Approaching Yalta, a three-mile exclusion zone was in force for a top dog.

Balaclava has a wonderful estuary and a turbulent history. Its nuclear submarine base, now a museum, resulted in the town being closed to everyone until 1993. The marina there is fashionable and well-run but expensive. Our stay was spoiled only by the noise of 24-hour mining near by.

At Yalta we moored stern-to in the large open harbour, taking long lines ashore because it's so choppy due to prevailing swell and wash from commercial cruisers.

It took us three days to get our exit visa, tramping around a variety of banks to pay \$15 into their account for mooring.

The authorities would not accept →

Navigational Hazards

CHARTS Electronic or paper charts can be way out of date: for instance, Trabzon harbour, built 12 years earlier, was missing! The number of errors where electronic charts don't match reality is acute: one chart suggested I cut through headlands then moor up a hundred metres into town. Overlay between electronic charts can also be poor or hopeless. Gaps in our C-Map chart at the Romania/Ukraine border resulted in the Standard Horizon plotter completely shutting down three times.

RIVERS The Danube, Don and many more rivers flow into the Black Sea resulting in salinity a third of that in the Med, or ocean. Obvious problems are silting and currents that continue miles beyond the estuary mouth. Around the Danube, dredged routes can be completely disbanded and new ones added. The north Turkish rivers emitted large quantities of debris, mainly tree branches. Always think twice before sailing at night.



Dolphins are a common sight in the Black Sea

ANIMALS There were jellyfish everywhere, especially along the Turkish coast. We didn't see any poisonous species, but chose not to swim with them often. We saw a sea snake and kept clear of that, too. More benign were cows basking on the beach in Turkey. We kept a daily tally of dolphins seen: 26, 8, 68, 30, over 200!

BOSPHORUS This is a very busy waterway with currents of four knots, and even faster

in patches, many of which you can't avoid. Never attempt the upstream (easterly) passage if the wind is blowing against you.

COASTGUARDS We frequently faced demands over VHF radio and fast boardings by the coastguards, especially in Ukrainian waters. Handled positively, the crews quickly became friendly and even enjoyed being photographed at work.

PILOT BOOKS *The Black Sea* (by Read Barker & Borre, Imray, 2013) is excellent, with remarkably few errors for a first edition. However, all the older pilots should be considered as background reading only.

CURRENTS These can run up to three knots, usually anticlockwise round the Black Sea, so conventional wisdom is to travel that way, too. We went clockwise, being more concerned with north-easterly winds for our long-distance passages. Except for some headlands, currents are weak close to shore, or may have useful clockwise eddies.

ADVENTURE

The Amasra peninsula has double-sided harbours – so there's always a way in no matter which way the wind is blowing



direct payment 'to be clear of bribery' and the banks would not accept payment from non-locals. Eventually the authorities took our \$15 together with 'a small payment' of \$50 to allow someone to process it.

It is 160 miles across the Black Sea to Sinop in northern Turkey and our decision to go clockwise round the Black Sea paid dividends. North winds blew us steadily at five knots, rising eventually to a maximum 8.4 knots so that our planned two-night trip ended in the dark of the second night.

We anchored off again, a wise choice as Sinop is a small and very crowded fishing harbour. In the morning we moored alongside a fishing boat. It's a pretty and historic town famed for model boat building. The customs authorities were nowhere to be seen, even after several redirections from the fishermen, so onward we sailed to Samsun the next eastward port of entry. We ran goose-winged for five hours at 4-7 knots, but then came lightning all along the coast.

Lightning is my greatest fear, so we sailed further out to sea, only to be met by a strike close to our starboard side. The wind stopped for a few minutes and we recovered our breath – then wham! A massive gybe. Perhaps we should have thought more about the eye of a storm.

Afterwards the Meteoman showed we had endured ten minutes at 85 knots of wind – a severe hurricane. It broke the main traveller block, a mounting for the lazyjacks and part of the dinghy's davits. Somehow bits of string enabled



The Sumela Monastery, inland from Trabzon, in Turkey, is a popular tourist site. Its pretty, narrow streets get very crowded on a Sunday

sufficient repairs for us to carry on. The bimini was ripped, too, but that could wait for a gentle evening. The block was finally welded back together, free of charge, by a kindly engineer in a small boatyard.

The north coast of Turkey, 300 miles from Sinop towards Georgia, becomes progressively more mountainous with steeply rising wooded valleys. First with hazelnut trees managed by homestead

farmers, then tea bushes around Rize, the centre of Turkey's large tea trade, and finally cows. Most days we had cloud cover from the sea rising up the slopes.

Several times we wondered if we had arrived at Switzerland-by-sea. Trabzon has an enormous commercial harbour and a lively city centre, though it takes a while to realise that the few pubs are at first-floor level with unannounced entrance stairs, northern Turkey taking religion rather seriously. The authorities moved us daily, juggling us with the cargo boats.

Two miles east is a large marina, built in 2000 but never finished. It's now owned by Trabzonspor Football as a recreational base, mainly for Optimist sailors. With negotiation, they were happy to let us stay there and on our return from Georgia we left *Scube* there over winter in exchange for a moderate payment to the club funds.

Logging out of Turkey at Hopa, we faced the 22-mile passage to Georgia with trepidation. We short-cut the 12-mile exclusion zone at the border because Hopa's harbourmaster said six miles was fine, and were met a high-speed Georgian coastguard boat. Once they realised that 'Stop!' takes a while to obey when a yacht is running goose-winged, they were friendly enough and directed us to Batumi.

What a surprise! Sailing close inshore along the steeply sloping town beach we saw a holiday city with skyscraper hotels – we had imagined it would be little changed since Jason found his famous Golden Fleece somewhere nearby. The enterprising mayor has made use of the freedom from state religion to make Batumi a little Las Vegas for the surrounding Muslim countries, especially Turkey, with regular coach loads arriving

'In the nine weeks returning from Trabzon we met two cruising yachts – and not much else'



for the sins that we all enjoy. The little yacht marina is run by an enthusiast and has plans for future expansion. The four authorities needed for entry and exit promptly all come to you free of charge.

We really enjoyed Batumi, with its old houses both battered and well renovated, large parks with major sculptures, and an endemic belief that life is for living.

Sailing back this year, firstly to Trabzon then to the Med, gave us a wonderful feeling of knowing what we were doing!

Springtime in northern Turkey is perfect for long walks and dolphin-counting. They travelled in pods of 10-20 from the Bosphorus towards Georgia – a mixture of bottlenose dolphins, who played beneath

our bow, and common dolphins, who watched us cautiously from 100m away.

Eregli, despite its dirty steelworks, provided the best strawberries I've ever tasted. Closer to Istanbul, both Amasra and Sile are beautiful castle towns well worth our three-day stops. In the nine weeks returning from Trabzon we met just two cruising yachts – and not much else.

Finally the Bosphorus yet again. We thought we knew it all, but the climb up from Poyrazkoy at its Black Sea entrance gave views of Clashing Rocks and the narrowing Bosphorus that proved it all.

Even now, with its north-eastern shores effectively off-limits, there's plenty of cruising potential in the Black Sea. ▲



Early summer mists hide the mountains around Inebolu in Turkey. Lots of room for anchoring!

Pilot book

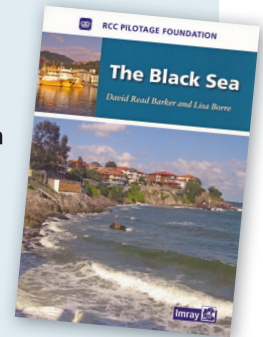
They will now have to change the flag depicted over Crimea from that of Ukraine to that of Russia in the next edition of this pilot book. And, as the authors point out in this edition published in 2012, 'Political changes affecting the leisure sailor cruising the Black Sea are possible and may happen rapidly.' That said, this book really deserves the clichéd use of the word 'essential' for any cruising sailor exploring this fascinating inland sea, which is rarely visited by more than 50 yachts per year.

The authors deliberately undertook a voyage in their Tayana 37ft cutter to write the book as there was little literature available to assist the leisure yachtsman.

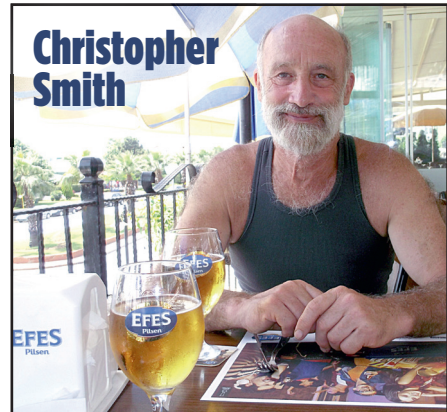
The guide begins at the Bosphorus where most yachts enter the Black Sea and moves in an anti-clockwise direction taking in Turkey, Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria and then back to Turkey. It also includes the Sea of Azov and the narrow Kerch Strait.

With over 180 chartlets, details of entry and travel formalities, it offers advice on cruising routes, weather forecasts, currents, facilities and history.

The Black Sea by David Read Barker and Lisa Borre of the RCC Pilotage Foundation
Published by Imray at £29.50



Christopher Smith



Christopher Smith, 69, was born in a Thames boatyard where the most important job of the boatmen seemed to be picking him out of the water. Rowing gave way to sailing in Chichester Harbour in his teens and then in Greece from his late twenties until now. Having retired from academic life as a physiologist at King's College London three years ago, he can at last go sailing all summer long.

Christopher cruised the Black Sea with his regular crewmate, Cocky Taanman, 60, from the Netherlands. Another Dutch friend, Maxine Maters, 47, joined them for part of their trip.