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All along the shores of the Kola Peninsula in North Russia, Finno-Ugric tribes (Laplander) have lived since the oldest of ages. In the 11th century, the Viking ships appeared here, and then the Novgorods and the Pomors (Russian settlers and traders on the coasts of the White Sea and the Barents Sea) came. All of them adapted successfully to this severe place, went to the sea to catch animals and fish and to trade their goods. They even drew sea charts. This went on until 1594, a year when a secret Dutch expedition, under the leadership of Captain Willem Barentsz, appeared in this place. Their purpose was to find a northeastern sea pass to Asia and China.

During their three years here, the Dutchman organized three expeditions to search for a navigable way through the ice. They discovered new lands,

charted maps, made meteorological observations, and conducted the first wintering of the Dutch team in the Arctic region. They struggled with scurvy, having lost their ship, and made a desperate attempt to get to safety on two cockboats to reach the Kola Peninsula

where they met the ship, *поморов*. The surviving crew members came back to Amsterdam where they had long been considered dead.

The history of these navigations are described in books by Gerrit de-Fera, *The truthful description of three voyages by*

the Dutch and Zealand ships, to the North from Norway, Moskovia and Tataria, to kingdoms China and Cinchona, and Barents's voyages (Diarium nauticum).

During the last expedition, Willem Barents died of scurvy. According to seamen tradition, he was buried in the

sea, which the German geographer, A. Peterman, named the Barents Sea in 1853 in honor of this famous polar explorer.

Diving in Russia?

In discussing the best dive sites of the world with foreign journalists—the elite of



The Barents Sea





does one find authoritative experts, photographers and dive guides from the best diving locations in Russia, to describe all the unique features and beauty of the underwater world of this country?

In the midst of these infinite meditations, we were interrupted by the unexpected offer to dive on the Barents Sea to the north of the Kola Peninsula in the territory of the

Kandalaksha nature reserve. If one has a look on a map, it is to the east of Norway and even further to

the east of the city of Murmansk.

The offer looked routine and not promising of anything especially new. We knew practically nothing about the diving features in this region, but all the same, decided to go, in order to start to build up a personal collection of details on Russian dive sites for our foreign friends.

We had already dived in Norway, and as the north of the Kola Peninsula is a continuation of the Norwegian coast, which is already known as a classic in the best cold water dive sites of the world,

we expected to see an underwater world very similar to the Viking country. It was also interesting to us to have an opportunity to compare diving in the Barents Sea to that of the Norwegian Sea.

The northern coast of the Kola Peninsula, or southern edge of the Arctic Ocean, is straighter than the rest. Here, there are very few warm fjords and only a few good bays. That's why the influence of the Arctic Ocean is felt so very much up here, and strong storms happen quite often.

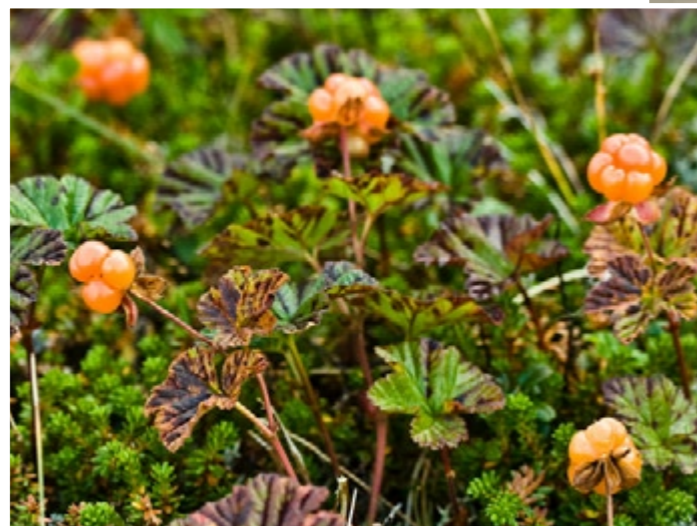
There are three natural landscapes one passes during the four hours of driving from the airport of Murmansk to the region, and 70 kilometers of broken roads up to the fishing settlement of Teriberka where we would be boarding our dive boat. The coniferous and mixed woods came to an end as soon as we crossed the snowy hills, and the forest tundra with rare bush from Karelian birch, thawed streams and snow fields, began.

Nearing the coast at the Arctic Ocean, even dwarfish trees disappear. Here,

the international diving press—we found out with surprise that our writer/diver friends knew practically nothing about diving in Russia.

From year to year, such erudite divers of most other countries asked us the same questions: Where is it interesting to dive in your country? Where are the best dive locations, etc.?

Certainly, Russia is the country of 13 seas, but how do you talk about all the diving attractions in each of them? Where



THIS PAGE: The north coast of the Kola Peninsula is a rocky ice desert with dwarf plants contrasting with the sea which is filled with life





people still live here. They are fishermen, hunters, biologists, military, coast guard, and those who have no where else to move to from here.

In the near future, there may be a new terminal of "Gazprom" constructed here. People hope to find new jobs and maybe a new life will return to these wild territories.

Diving

We boarded a surprisingly comfortable and specialized dive boat,

at the surface. With depth, it fell to 3-4°C.

The first dive is comparable to falling into liquid nitrogen, with the freezing temperature sharply burning unprotected areas of the face. Time vanishes. Then, the body rebuilds on calorification, and the water doesn't seem so cold any more.

For extra safety, all the divers in our team dived with two valve cylinders and duplicate regulators in case of freezing. At the surface, we met a layer of muddy fresh water. At three meters, we crossed the hallocline and came into an ice cold zone of Arctic water with 30 meters visibility.

This was a world of seaweed kelps, fishes, starfishes, hedgehogs, crabs, mollusks, actinium and soft corals. All of them look so active, occupied with such important business, well fed and happy with their lives.

In the first 40 minutes of making an acquaintance with the underwater world of the Barents Sea, one gasps with astonishment. We were amazed and inspired by



Ice burning water, great visibility, kelp jungles, sea-urchins, small crabs and incredible multicolor sea anemones—and this is just in the first dive!

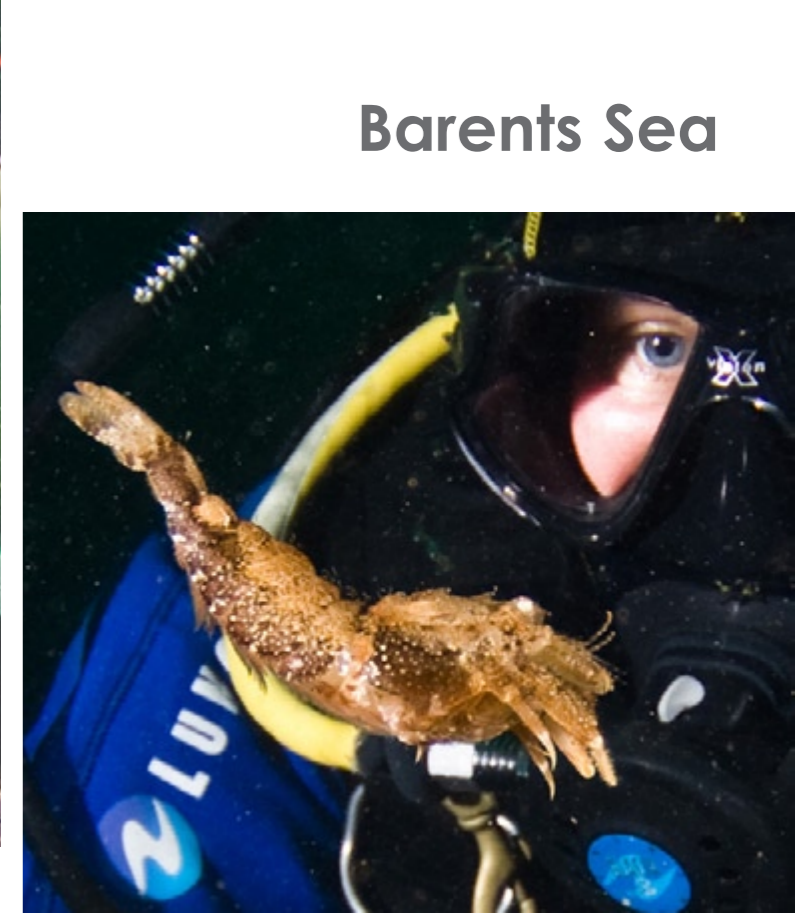
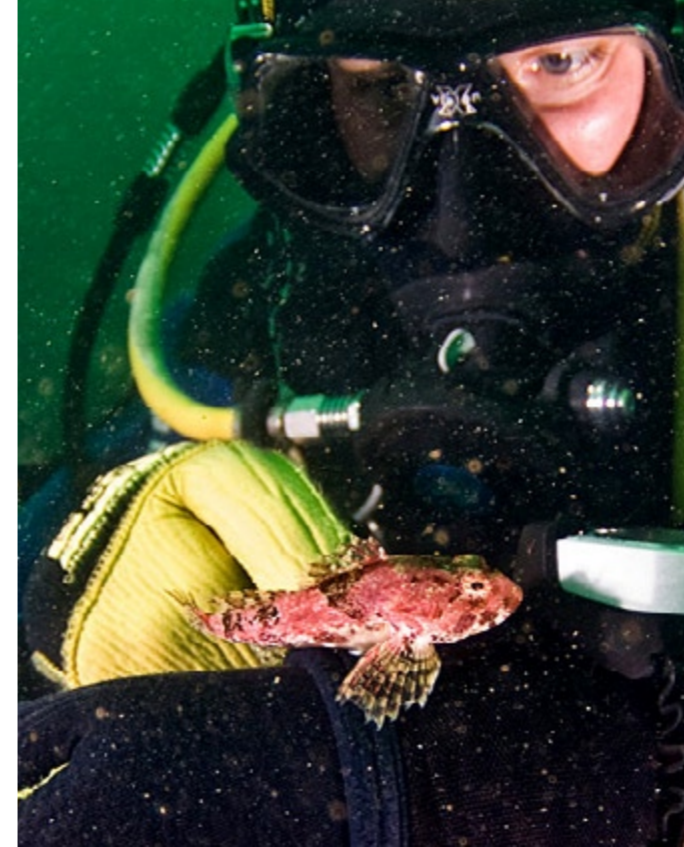
it's a tundra kingdom. Frequent Arctic winds, with mid-annual speeds of nine meters per second sweep away all that is in the way. Only lichens, reindeer moss, black crowberry and herds of reindeers survive.

Today, this is the deserted territory of a collective of fishing villages still exhibiting the era of communist construction—empty houses, beaten out glass, ruins—a zone of alienation like a scene from a science fiction novel. It seems surprising, that some

a vessel with the unique name, *Kartesh*, and headed to the Barents Sea. The heavy lead color of the water, long oceanic waves, naked stone rocks on the coast, even a midnight with no coming sun and infinite polar day, greeted us. "If it is so deserted on the surface, what then should we expect to see under the water?" was the first crazy thought that popped into my head.

Noisy seagulls circled around us and the first curious seals kept far off from the dive boat, when we prepared for our first dive into the Dolgaia Guba Bay. The water temperature was eight degrees





what we saw, and came back to the surface impressed with the wondrous biodiversity of the underwater life, so contrasting with the lifeless ice desert at the surface.

We came aboard the boat with questions for our dive guides and sea biologists. Why was the water here greenish in color, and the majority of fish consumed by humankind (thousands of tons) caught here? It appeared, that freezing under ice during the long polar winter, the ocean became heavier and squeezed out to the surface, benthonic water—water that is saturated by a lot of organic material, which is made up of all kinds of animal substances useful and necessary for life).

The vertical convectional currents found here create the necessary

conditions for rapid growth of microscopic seaweed and krill. As a consequence of this, the sea becomes a never-ending source of food for fishes, birds, seals and many other sea animals.

Not so many divers know that the seaweed of the northern seas is one of the largest manufacturers of atmospheric oxygen. There is an authoritative scientific opinion that suggests that it is precisely these seaweeds of the cold water in the northern seas that make more oxygen than all the planet's forests taken together, providing the major reason for the survival and existence of humans on land, which is so small in comparison with the area of the global oceans. Overwhelmed by such important scientific information, we understood that we

were diving in a place absolutely unique in the world.

Dalnie Zelentchy Bay

Thirty sea miles even further to the east though ocean waves, along coastal rocks laden with snow, we stopped to anchor in Dalnie Zelentchy Bay. This is an historical place for Kamchatka (King) crab expansion into the Barents Sea and Norway. It is precisely from this place that its biological experiment was begun.

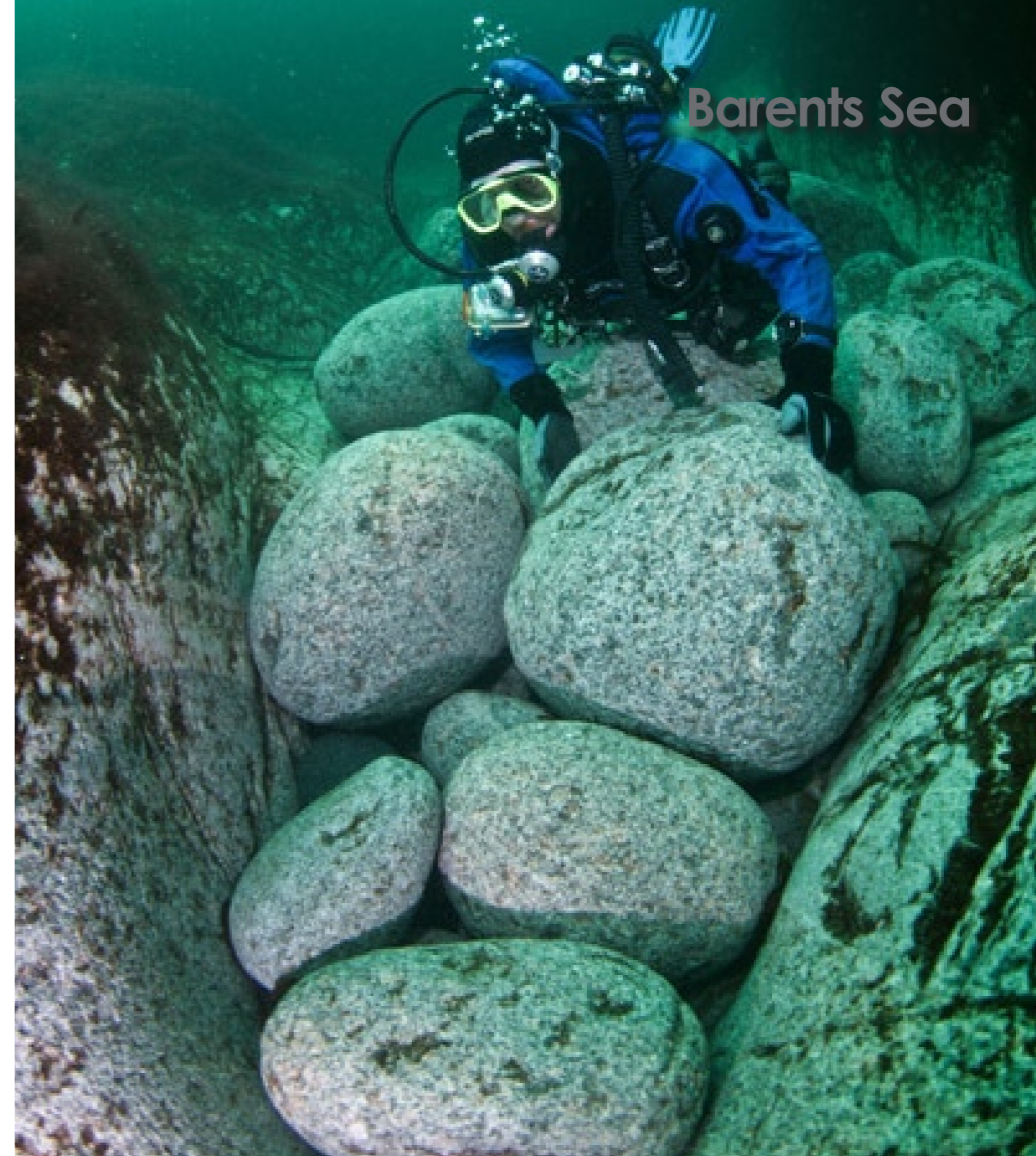
During the 1960s, the Soviet Union scientists experimented with crabs. Thousands of Kamchatka crabs were brought here from the Far East, from year to year, and were issued into this bay of the Barents Sea.

But no matter what the biologists



The Barents Sea is full of small and big creatures (crabs, ruff, prawns, lumpfish, comb jellies) who are all hungry and ready to hunt all day and into the night. An even more amazing underwater flower (a sea anemone that on first look, appears so passive) catches a jellyfish by its rays and draws it into its gluttonous mouth





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did, the crabs completely disappeared into the bottomless sea. It seemed to the scientists that the crabs were not able to survive here. The arrogant scientific project was officially deemed a failure, and was tossed.

The sea laboratory of Murmansk Sea Biological Institute was established in Dalnie Zelentchy Bay. Of the many scientific projects realized in this laboratory, the most astounding one was the success of settling Kamchatka crabs in the Barents Sea.

The Kamchatka crab lives almost 30 years,

Kamchatka King crabs integrated very well in the biocenose of the Barents Sea. TOP LEFT: Small crabs like to be together (especially during moulting time) for better protection from big cods and other predators

and it gets big enough in size suitable for industrial catching only after it reaches 15 years of age. This is the reason why some malicious gossip suggests that just the right amount of time has passed for the first crabs that were started here 30 years ago to have multiplied just enough to be caught now.

Today, the famous historic sea research institute is totally abandoned. Everything was destroyed after Perestroika. Now there is only a private farm for growing the crabs in natural sea conditions.

With great interest, we dived this historical place and explored the various underwater landscapes.

A huge seal-hare, or bearded seal, with a wonderful gray-haired moustache and big dark eyes, slowly floated around us. Inquisitiveness motivates these animals. He made a few circles around us, studying us, these strange fin-footed

carnivorous relatives. But when I attempted to come closer to him to take a close up photograph, the seal moved farther away from us odd fellows, as he was blinded by flashlights from the strobes.

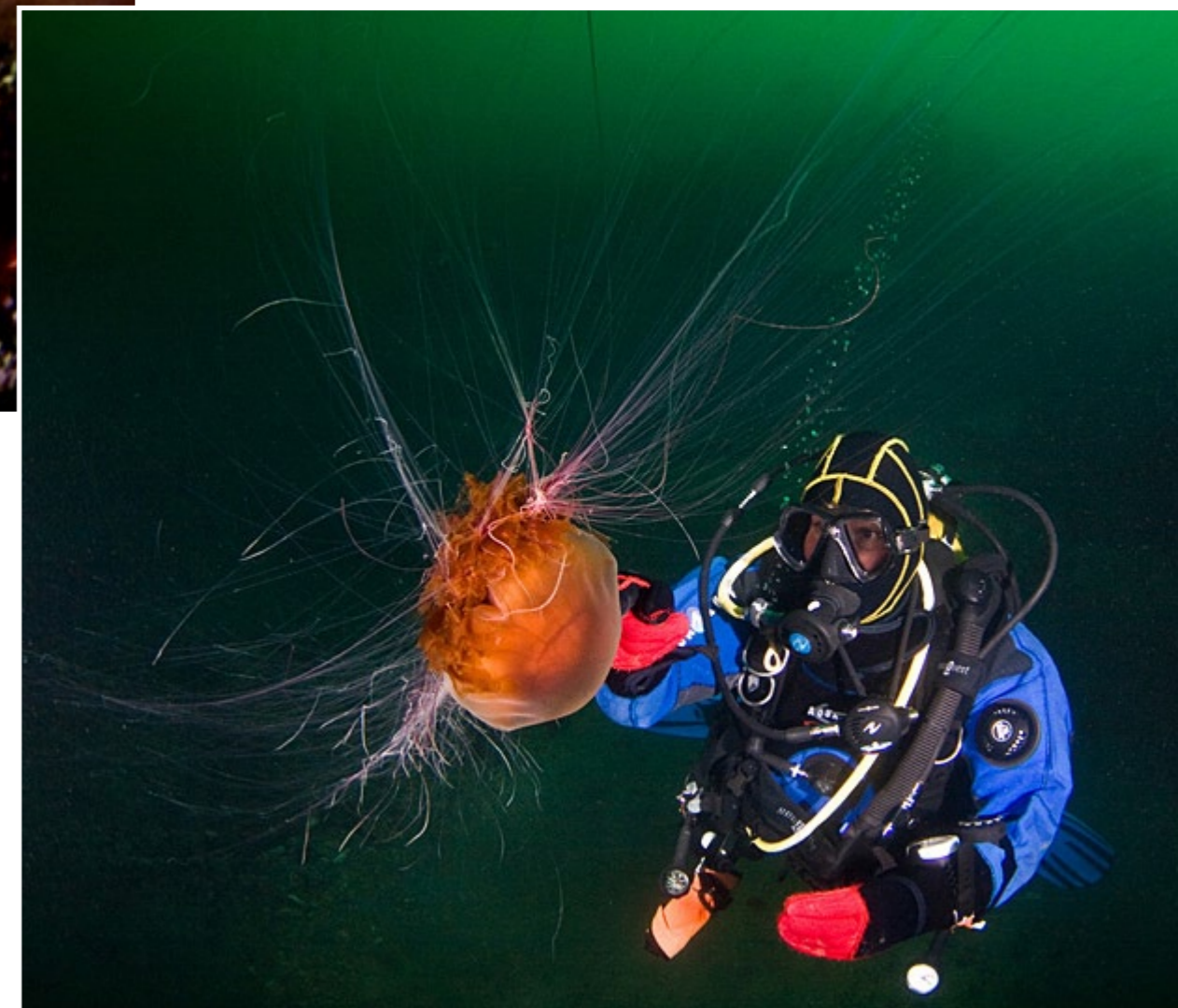
It was an underwater jungle at this site, from finger kelps, developing tidal currents, Kamchatka crabs, delicious scallops, curious seals, underwater canyons, steep walls, grottoes and the picturesque rocks densely covered in hundreds of multi-colored predatory actinium, pleasing our senses from dive to dive.

The following evening transfer took us even further east where we dived around several islands: Anonymous, German, Inhabited and Krechetov. Huge blocks of rock were covered with seaweed taller than a human. There were heaps of rock fragments, grottoes and tunnels, masses of sea





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Attractive and exciting underwater landscapes and great biodiversity awaits every diver

hedgehogs and sea stars, rare fishes and, as always, great visibility with temperatures at 4.5 - 5°C.

We still can't deny our first impression, that the Barents Sea is considerably more filled with a life than even the Norwegian fjords. Here, the water is more clear, and there are more animals and underwater beauties.

Following is a list of just a few of the local animals that would be interesting for underwater photographers: crab-spider, King crab, cancer-hermit, skeleton shrimp, hairy hermit, Eulaus shrimp, sculptured shrimp, Acorn barnacles, sea

spider, trumpeter, scallops and more than five kinds nudibranches, mollusks, star fishes, sea cucumbers, hedgehogs and carnations, catfish, lumpfish, (Pholis) gunnel, sea scorpion, cod, herring, whales and seals.

The most distant and amazing dive site was off the island of Kuvshin (or 'Jug') in the archipelago of Semioströv'e. The island is a nature reserve for birds. Guillemots, unique birds that can fly under the sea, nest here.

We dived directly under the steep rocks hosting a noisy bird market. We submerged to a depth of 15m and met

a jungle of finger kelps. Huge king crabs walked between the stones. One of the crabs, having torn off an arm of a starfish, was busy devouring it, savouring it with pleasure.

We moved along rocks and looked upwards to the surface of the water from time to time. We were waiting for the guillemots to start diving. It could happen at any moment.

Two kinds of guillemots nested here. One of them likes to search the sea bottom for sandhoppers and can dive to 30 meters depth. The other hunts for small fishes in the open water.



We hoped that guillemots would become interested in us, the unusual fin-footed creatures, and come dive with us. We continued to wait for them underwater, but we ran out of air, and we realized that our attempt was in vain. The guillemots wouldn't come dive with us.

Then we decided to use a second method: after submerging underwater, we fixed ourselves to three-meter long ropes that were attached to an inflatable rubber boat, and then drifted along with the boat, which made its way along the birds' market place.

We hoped that the birds would get used to us, cease to be afraid and pose for our cameras nevertheless. Our persistence and patience paid off after 20 minutes of drifting with the boat, the flying birds suddenly appeared in the depths of the cold green water. It was surprising that they literally flew under the water, rowing intensely with their wings, and swiveling their heads to examine us.

One of them made a circle around us, and after inspecting us, disappeared somewhere in the depths of the ocean filled with plankton. But in a minute, new individuals, who probably found out about us funny creatures drifting

under the boat from the first envoy, flew into the sea to meet us. They also turned around, swiveling their heads and peering at us.

Guillemots are birds with black backs, wings and white breasts. Underwater, they look completely made of silver. Their bodies are covered with little air bubbles protecting their feathers from getting wet.

The show was amazing! The world had turned upside down. Birds flew not across the land, but underwater, and in the Barents Sea in Russia of all places! Our curiosity in the birds became even more intense after seeing them in action, especially with the knowledge that there is uncertainty in their survival.

We finished our diving adventure by visiting one of the noisy bird markets on the island of Harlov. Thousands of sea birds arrive here during this time of year, in this lifeless ice desert, to lay their eggs and raise their young. Yet, it is here that there is a surprising sea filled with food for the

hungry birds. The trip to the Barents Sea and the discovery of the magical underwater world of the Russian North made an indelible impression upon us all. We can now make an authoritative recommendation for these places to our friends and divers worldwide. It is typical of Russian diving, where adventures leave only delightful emotions and memories—perks of experiencing the life-filled cold water seas of our country. ■

Special thanks to Nataliya Chervyakova and Mikhail Safonov, highly educated marine biologists, who showed us the unique underwater world of the Barents Sea.

THIS PAGE: There is a lot of food here, if you know how and where to get it. Hence, millions of birds come here to lay their eggs and raise their babies each spring and summer