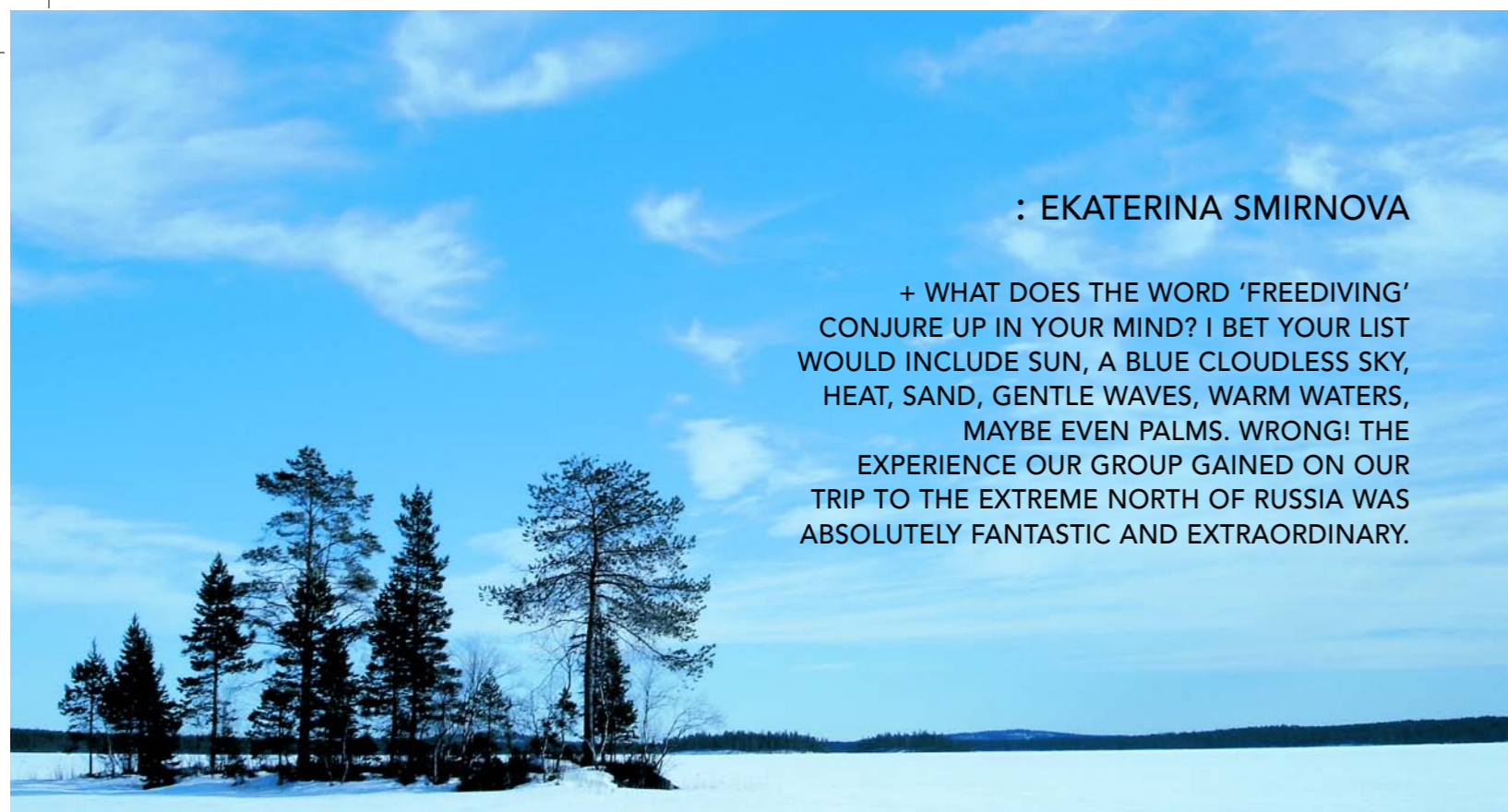


: EKATERINA SMIRNOVA

+ WHAT DOES THE WORD 'FREEDIVING' CONJURE UP IN YOUR MIND? I BET YOUR LIST WOULD INCLUDE SUN, A BLUE CLOUDLESS SKY, HEAT, SAND, GENTLE WAVES, WARM WATERS, MAYBE EVEN PALMS. WRONG! THE EXPERIENCE OUR GROUP GAINED ON OUR TRIP TO THE EXTREME NORTH OF RUSSIA WAS ABSOLUTELY FANTASTIC AND EXTRAORDINARY.



WHITE SEA ICE DIVING



Freedivers take turns to dive and rest on the ice

White Sea is one of the most beautiful northern seas of the Russian Federation; the environment there is pristine and the marine life is prolific. Solitary coastline and numerous uninhabited islands are exceptionally picturesque. Clifty steep shores are followed by flat lands covered with taiga and mixed forest. Here every winter Greenland seals find their breeding grounds and great numbers of birds incubate eggs and bring up their fledging in summer. The underwater world is as rich with beautiful landscapes and inhabitants. Suitably trained and equipped divers can enjoy views of under ice arches, hummocks and cavities with viz about 25-30 metres. Wrecks mention prawns, sea-urchins, crabs, starfishes, sponges, anemones and soft corals.

The weather in the sea area is truly unpredictable, for it's strongly influenced by oceanic and continental air masses. Winter is long and severe with the average temperature about -20°C, though it brings the most beautiful northern lights which makes this remote place worth visiting in themselves. Now if you don't believe me I will understand because I'm going to say that the water temperature during the cold months varies from -0.5°C to -3°C! And yes, we were going to cross half the continent just to have a few days of freediving and beluga-diving in these hospitable conditions.

Our small company consisted of five persons: three freedivers, Julia Petrik, Andrei Lagutin and myself, and two fellow divers. Having come a long way from Kiev, Ukraine, via Moscow and Murmansk, we finally arrived one evening. The diving club astonished us with its beauty, convenient location close to the boat launching site and its harmony with the surroundings. After dinner and briefing, we headed to our rooms to have a good rest before tomorrow.

Early morning was still and sunny. The temperature was slowly crawling up. Since we arrived at the end of the winter season, the bays were partly free of the ice, and the rest of the white cover was extensively crossed with leads. This made us take additional precautions when moving around either on foot or snowmobile. We were all anticipating the main event of the day - meeting belugas. The whales live in an open-water cage which is accessible by boat once the ice is broken or gone. However, in winter the surface of the cage is threatened with the possibility of becoming completely frozen, so the staff have to cut off the ice edges 4 times a day to leave sufficient space for the belugas to breathe. The beluga is the only whale that can move its head and in this way they are similar to dolphins.



In spring the ice cover gets very thin and crossed with leads



The belugas are very playful; they allow you to grab them by the tail or fins, or give them a big hug

While we were approaching I could clearly see the belugas curious faces peering out at us and hear their calls. Honestly, at first it seemed a bit terrifying to be surrounded by two 5 metre long white torpedoes, but you get used to them quite quickly, and it is then that you start feeling this wild enthusiasm and childlike glee. You dive together, touch them, talk to them, feed them in and out of the water, and they chase you, push you (and playfully bite your fins) to get a fish faster. They even took me for a ride on their backs! There are not enough words to describe the spectrum of sensations and emotions you experience...

Meanwhile, our scuba diving friends went for a dive to a cliff 5 minutes out by boat. A really unique piece of rock has its top just a few meters below the surface and goes down to a hard sandy bottom 20-25 metres deep. Why is it so special, you may ask? Because it is densely covered with many forms of marine life peculiar to this area only. So, don't forget your cameras!

After a good day's diving, a real Russian bath called 'banya' is perfect for unwinding and restoring your energies. You will be surprised with the power of its reviving effect. The next days brought more diving with belugas, freediving sessions for us and wreck dives for the divers. There were lots of records made and shots taken to show others this absolutely uncommon, extreme, challenging and so delighting way of living your life.

Apart from diving, we would go for walks in the pine and birch forest that grows all around. There was also a traditional fishing village not far from the centre. It looked nice and old, but what was totally amazing was the absence of any basic services in it, even electricity (believe me; I could not imagine something like this would still occur in our modern world)!

Well, time goes by fast, especially when you are so captivated and absorbed. It was a pity that we had only three days to spend in the 'Polar Circle'. I would advise everyone to stay at least five. Leaving White Sea we all had a tiny part of great, harsh and beautiful Northern Russia saved forever in our hearts.



Diving upside down under ice is confusing, you feel like a fly on the ceiling!

subzero freediving°

USEFUL TIPS

- Our trip was organized with Polar Circle diving centre based out of Moscow. www.ice-diving.ru



- The best time for diving under the ice is February through to April, as at the beginning of May the majority of bays and gulfs lose their ice cover.

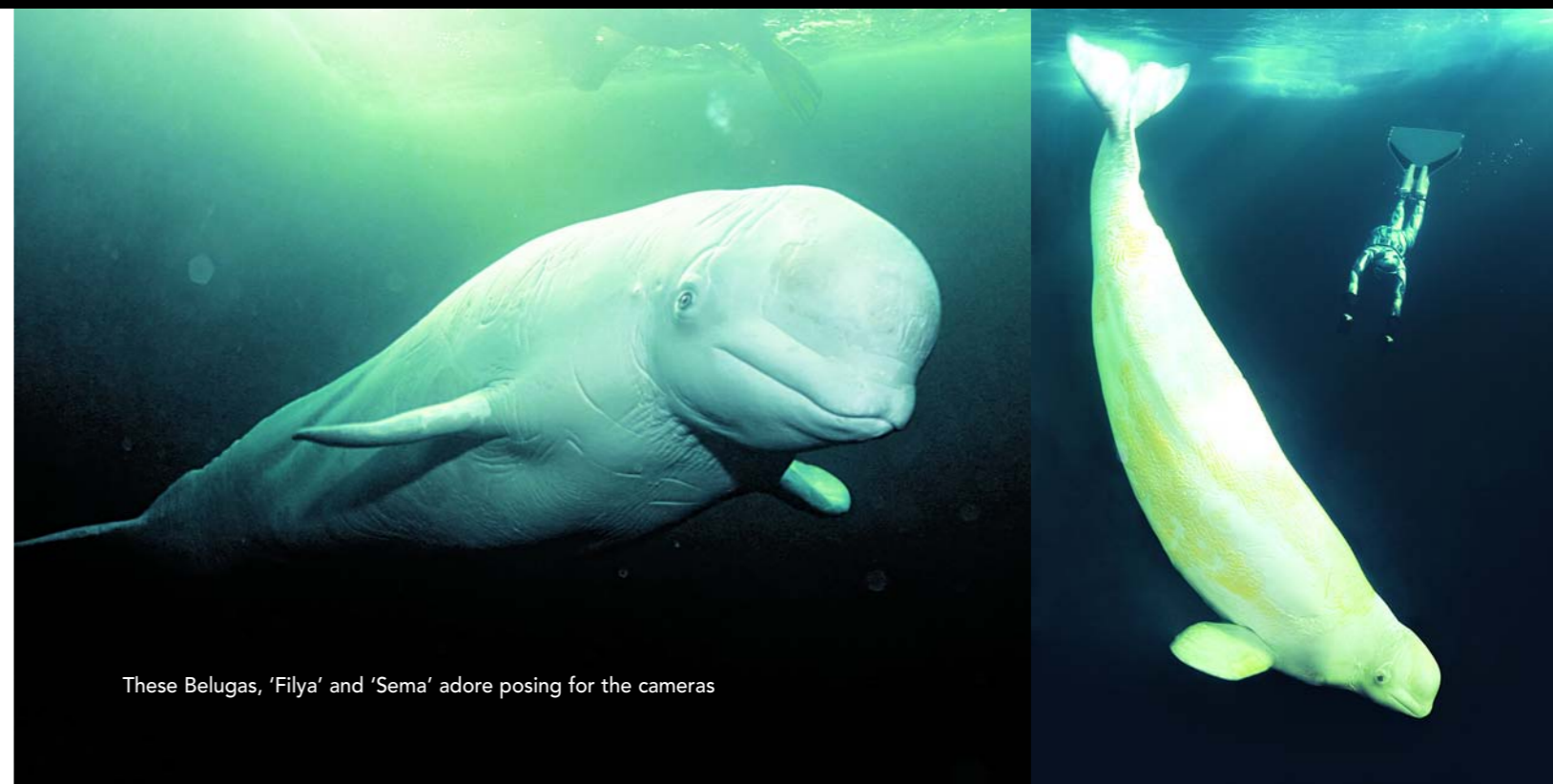
- Several domestic airlines fly to Murmansk where you'll be met by car and transferred to the centre; an 8 hour drive. Or you can catch the Moscow-Murmansk train to Chupa Station and from here a 2 hour drive will get you to the centre. Note: local airlines are very strict on a maximum allowance of 15kg, so pack only things you really need, the rest you're welcome to hire over there.

- Russian is the spoken language, but the staff can speak English to a certain extent.

- Currency: Russian rubles. It's preferable to bring cash for there are no ATMs for hundreds of kilometers around.

- Keep in mind that the water is cold, to put it mildly, so 10mm wetsuit plus, and no less than 7mm boots and gloves are a must.

3 BELUGAS IN THE WHITE SEA



These Belugas, 'Filya' and 'Sema' adore posing for the cameras

DIVING INTO THE RECORD BOOKS

A 10-year-old schoolboy became the world's youngest professionally qualified scuba diver. Patrick Delaney passed his two-day Professional Association of Diving Instructors (Padi) on Monday, the day after his tenth birthday.

The exam involves scientific theory and diving to depths of 12 metres. Patrick, who has been diving in his local swimming pool since he was just eight, took his qualifications in a disused quarry in Frome, Somerset. He'd have passed the exam even sooner if it hadn't been for the course's strict age restrictions.

Patrick couldn't sign up for the exam until he turned 10.

Patrick's proud dad, also called Pat, promised his son a scuba diving trip to the Red Sea if he passed his exams.

www.westpress.co.uk

SHARK TIDBITS

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), state that up to 100 million sharks are being caught worldwide each year. Shark finning has skyrocketed by 2,000% in some parts of the world since 1991. As human population grows and resources worldwide decrease, sharks are being over exploited and some species have declined by 80%, and international trade in shark parts (fins, meat, cartilage, skin, oil, teeth and jaws) is increasing. To date, global shark exploitation and trade are unregulated and no international management scheme exists.

Whale sharks are the largest sharks in the world, and the largest fish in the sea. They are of whale-like proportions, can grow up to 50 feet long and are thought to live 100 years and beyond. Whale sharks are found in warm tropical waters in numerous locations around the world. Like other massive creatures in the sea, they feed entirely on tiny plankton and are generally observed swimming at approximately two knots close to the water surface with their giant mouths wide open.

Modern research indicates these gentle giants are harmless and simply curious about people and boats, often circling and observing them for hours on end.

Unfortunately, whale sharks are currently hunted in many countries for their meat and large dorsal fin, which has decreased their numbers dramatically.

Basking sharks are the second largest sharks in the world, measuring up to 40 feet in length. They're plankton filter feeders. Very little is known about these large sharks due to their migratory habits and because they're most commonly found in waters with limited visibility, making scientific research difficult.

Basking sharks are considered a threatened species.