



Solitude

in the wake of Willem Barentsz

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with a historical epilogue by Diederik Veerman















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IN THE WAKE OF WILLEM BARENTSZ

BY PETRA SJOUWERMAN

‘Which road? The Parents Road?’, the young man from the car hire company at Bodø airport asks. He looks astonished. When we explain that we want to follow the so-called Barents Road from Norway to Russia he nods understandingly.

Just ten minutes into our car journey, the snow starts to fall in large, thick flakes. Carefully, we drive into Bodø. The white, wooden houses are barely visible in the white world that surrounds us. The people on the street are no more than dark figures with large hoods that completely conceal their heads. A mother struggles to manoeuvre her pushchair through the fresh snow.

We are going in search of solitude, emptiness and the breathtaking natural world in an area that has been described as Europe’s last wilderness: the Barents Region, the most northerly parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Just like the Barents Sea, the region is named after the sixteenth century Dutch explorer, Willem Barentsz. We planned to follow the ‘Barents Road’, a route that begins in the Norwegian town of Bodø and runs via Sweden and Finland to the Russian town of Murmansk, covering a distance of over a thousand kilometres. We chose the month of April, when the winter is drawing to a close. This may not be the most beautiful month to visit the land of the midnight sun and the polar night, but it does have the advantage of being the period in which there are almost no tourists. We had decided to leave questions of whom we would meet along the way, and where we would spend the night, to chance, inspired by the wanderlust and courage of Willem Barentsz. One of his crew members, Gerrit de Veer, kept a diary in 1598, and I had a copy of it in my suitcase.

Despite leaving so much to chance, our trip was not unprepared. On the contrary, my travelling companion Jeroen has frequently worked in extremely remote areas for his book *Nomad*, about the last nomads in the northern hemisphere. He knows from experience how hard it can be to travel in remote areas. He has tales to tell about the time he rode for days through the Gobi Desert on a horse with a mind of its own. And about his harsh, night-time ride on a snow scooter over the wafer-thin ice of a frozen lake near Murmansk, where his companions sunk through the ice behind him. When we began our journey in Bodø, we therefore had a small shovel on the back seat of the hire car next to our clothes, in case we should get stuck in the snow; a jerrycan containing ten litres of petrol; a spirit burner that would keep on burning even during a storm; a candle, which in the event of a breakdown, would warm the car sufficiently for us not to freeze to death; and last but not least, a bag full of soup powder and crackers.

The road from Bodø to Murmansk is an old trade route of the Sámi – the indigenous population of this vast area – and has existed for centuries. The name ‘Barents Road’ is actually new, and is designed to support collaboration throughout the region. The Barents Region itself was given its name in 1993 on the initiative of the then Norwegian Foreign Secretary, Thorvald Stoltenberg, the father of the subsequent Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg. He wanted to improve collaboration between the countries in the region in the fields of culture, education, environment and indigenous peoples.

Improving infrastructure was part of this, so the deep holes and cracks in the road from Norway to Russia were repaired. One of the ideas behind this was that the improved road would also attract more tourists to the area.

Indeed, there are more and more tourists coming to the Arctic, particularly in Scandinavia, but few choose to follow the Barents Road. Right from the start of our journey in Bodø in Norway, no one seemed to have even heard of the road. Later on too, in Sweden, Finland and Russia, the road failed to ring a bell with the people we met along the way. ‘Why are there no signs?’ Jeroen would frequently complain during our journey.

We were taking the west-east route, which largely traced the Arctic Circle, in the hope of coming into contact with people who have grown up in this area or who came to live here in later life. We initially taken the unknown and unmarked Barents Road, but then started marking out our own route, with curiosity as our guide. We ended up travelling over three thousand kilometres by car, bus and snow scooter. At times we felt absolutely tiny beside the immensity of the landscape, and ecstatic with joy because we imagined ourselves to be totally alone in the world. At other times, the gloomy environment disheartened us, but time and time again, the people we met along the way would surprise us with their openness and hospitality.

PART I NORWAY, BODØ

From Bodø harbour, a ferry sails to a group of rocky islands some thirty kilometres off the coast. Fleinvær means ‘the bare islands’: there is not a single tree growing there. But in recent years, the islands have also become bare in a different way: just eleven, mainly elderly residents are left, spread across the different islands.

On the small ferry to Fleinvær’s main island, an information film tells us that there is an orange thermal suit beneath our seats, which we should put on in the event of emergency. It looks like a thick skating suit. ‘Fasten at the ankles, and draw the hood over your head. Put the lifejacket on over the top’, the film instructs. In the cold water we would only survive for a few minutes without this kind of suit. The only other passenger is a woman who is to take us in her small motorboat to another island, from where Otto will collect us by boat.

In the distance, I can already see him standing there. He stands out against the snow in his blue-yellow thermal suit. As I draw closer to his boat, I see that he has bright blue eyes and a brown, unlined face. As we sail away towards his island, he stands bolt upright at the wheel. When we disembark onto the snow-covered, rocky island, which rises up quite steeply, his wife is waiting to moor the boat to the landing stage. Now that the boat’s motor is turned off, the only sounds are the soft lapping of the seawater against the boat and the breathing of the woman, who must have hurried down the hill to welcome us. Her name is Gerd, and she motions for us to follow her uphill, to their white wooden house. We have difficulty in keeping up with her on the path through the snow, and the crackling of our footsteps is the only thing to break the silence.

Inside, there is a welcoming warmth. It smells of a mixture of wood and freshly baked bread. The house is full to the gunnels with books, trinkets and plants. The table is laid, and on it are two baskets filled with Norwegian rolls and cakes, baked especially for us. They are still steaming.

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