FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

A CUSTOM BUILD IN RUSSIA

BY SAM DEVLIN

Blue Fin 54, Lucky Star, *outside of Stockholm, Sweden.*

Sam Devlin

PROLOGUE

Sam Devlin is the founder of Devlin Designing Boatbuilders in Olympia, Washington, an industry leader of the stitch-and-glue method of wooden boat fabrication. We profiled Devlin's beautiful Kingfisher design last year ("Beautiful Mind," November/December 2017), but Devlin is unique in that he also sells his plans around the world to anyone with the heart big enough to take on a build. In this story, we turned the keys over to Devlin himself, who had the chance to visit ultimately one of his most cherished designs, the Blue Fin 54. In 2013, the boat plans were purchased by Temur Rukahya, who lives 125 miles southeast of Moscow. This is the story:

In 2016, my wife, Soitza, and I were celebrating the Christmas holidays, visiting her family in Mazatlán, Mexico. It was the perfect escape for some winter sun away from our home in the Pacific Northwest. Early one morning, I decided to check my email–from which I had also been vacationing–to find this email from one of my design customers.

Hello, Sam!

About four years ago I ordered the Blue Fin 54 boat design project. (This is my second 'Devlin' boat, the first was a Black Crown 30). In the spring of 2014 the boat was launched. I called the new boat "Lucky Star."

This Fall the boat has run over 8,000 nautical miles. This year, I came to the White Sea and was in St. Petersburg.

During this passage, I crossed about 100 locks. On Ladoga Lake was a heavy storm. Technology "stitch and glue" deserves the best endorsement. The boat is very comfortable, quiet, easy to use and loves the water.

Thank you so much!

Regards,
Temur Rukahya

Temur Rukahya included several videos with his email, and after watching them I was nearly knocked off my seat. I had not heard one word from Temur since the day I sent him the plans for the Blue Fin 54 four years previously, and had no idea whether or not the boat had been built. What the videos showed was that the boat had indeed been built–and seemingly built well. But I wouldn't have to rely on these videos for proof of the successful build for long, as two years later I had the opportunity to see the boat in person.

My chance came in the middle of July 2018. Soitza and I flew from our home in Washington State to Stockholm, Sweden, where we met Temur. We were making a significant journey by air, but even more amazing was that Lucky Star was traveling by water, some 1,900 nautical miles from her home in Saratov, Russia, to meet us in Scandinavia. Traveling with Temur were two friends, Alexei and Yuri. They had already been out 15 days, traveling through the waterways of Russia, up the Volga River, across several huge reservoirs, 16 locks, and finally making their way to St. Petersburg and the Baltic Sea. From there they would travel to Finland and finally make their way down to Stockholm.

Temur has already cruised *Lucky Star* for more than 14,000 nautical miles in four years, a remarkable amount of hours for a vessel that spends almost eight months of each year on the hard in storage, bundled against frigid Russian winters. This boat has covered some interesting miles in her short life. On a previous trip, she had cruised as far north as the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea (see map on page 45), a mere 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle. But beyond that, what was so special about this boat and why was I so excited to see her?

BLUE BEGINNINGS

On the flight over to Stockholm I attempted to recall what the original spark of inspiration might have been for my Blue Fin 54 design, but with so much time having passed since working on this project, and a cluttered mind to boot, I found it difficult. But out of the foggy recesses I started to recall a few of the driving factors. When I started working on the Blue Fin, I had come off a long cruise from the Salish Sea to Alaska and back in my converted salmon troller, *Josephine*, and was working on a preliminary design job for Bill and Meri Roberts, a couple who had requested the most economical cruiser possible for making the same Inside Passage trip. Adding the musings and dreams of Temur, a builder located in Saratov, Russia, to this blender of ideas, out came the design that I dubbed the "Blue Fin 54."

Temur Rukhaya is a handsome fellow, and when you meet him his calm demeanor does not give away what must be an amazing amount of drive and passion for life and adventure. He was quick to remind me that this was the second of the "Devlins" that he had tackled; he first built my 30-foot "Black Crown" design to try out building a boat for himself before taking on a project as large as a 54-footer.

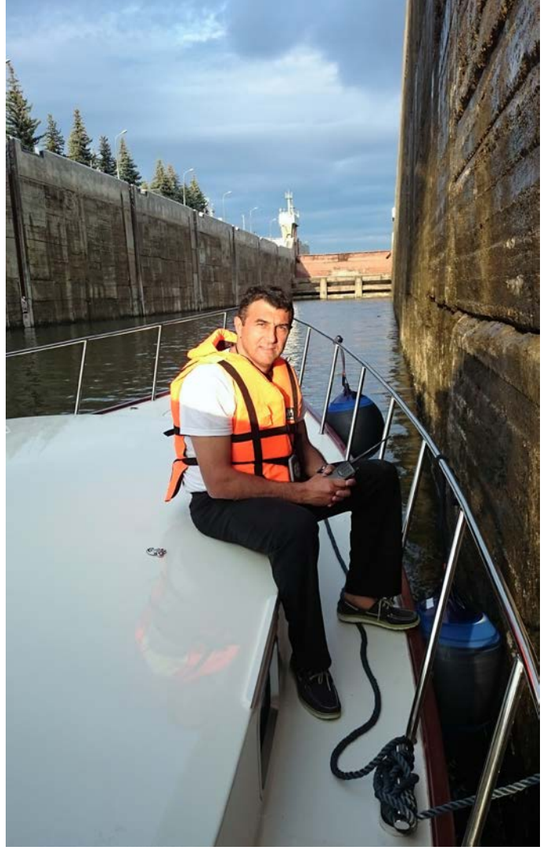
But after preparing the Blue Fin 54 plans for him, I did not hear a word about whether he was moving ahead with the project. Like I said, it wasn't until he emailed me in December 2016 that I learned of his success with the new build and design. At that point, he had already cruised more than 8,000 nautical miles aboard *Lucky Star*. Checking back in my files, my notes show that I sent him the set of plans in September 2013. By my calculations, Temur must have started working the day he received the final plans: Somehow Temur had fit 20,000 hours of labor into just 20 months of construction time; *Lucky Star* was ready to be eased into the water by May 2015, just as the ice had totally cleared Temur's home waters on the Volga River.

DESIGN COMES TO LIFE

Having only seen her from the pictures and few videos that Temur had made during construction and in the first year of cruising, now I was going to see her in the flesh. I must admit I was a bit nervous about this meeting. While I was excited to see her in person, there was always that nagging possibility that I wouldn't really like her, that her fit and finish or some other details wouldn't be quite what I envisioned. When seeing your designs come to life, there is always the potential of not really loving the boat, and in this case, there was the additional possibility of having to spend several days trying to act like I loved her and not really feeling that love deep down.

The original plan was that Soitza and I were to have several

Opposite: *Temur at the helm of the very boat he built using Sam Devlin's plans.*
This image: Lucky Star *on a day cruise through Stockholm, Sweden.*



This page: Lucky Star*'s lines are Sam's design, but Temur's attention to detail on the remote build made the whole project sing.* **Opposite:** *Temur locking through; The route that Temur and his crew took from Saratov, Russia. The dotted line shows how far north he has taken her.*

days in Stockholm to orient ourselves to the city and get past the inevitable jet lag. But Temur was several days ahead of schedule, and it was on our first full day in Stockholm that we made our way over to the marina where *Lucky Star* was moored. Walking down the dock, those inevitable and nagging doubts (the same ones that I feel every time I launch a new design) flashed through my consciousness. But before these anxieties rooted and started to grow, I saw her bow-on the outside float. That lovely and unmistakable bow profile of a "Devlin" design, there was no hiding that from view. And as I approached and the whole length of her was visible, any lingering doubt was replaced by pure admiration.

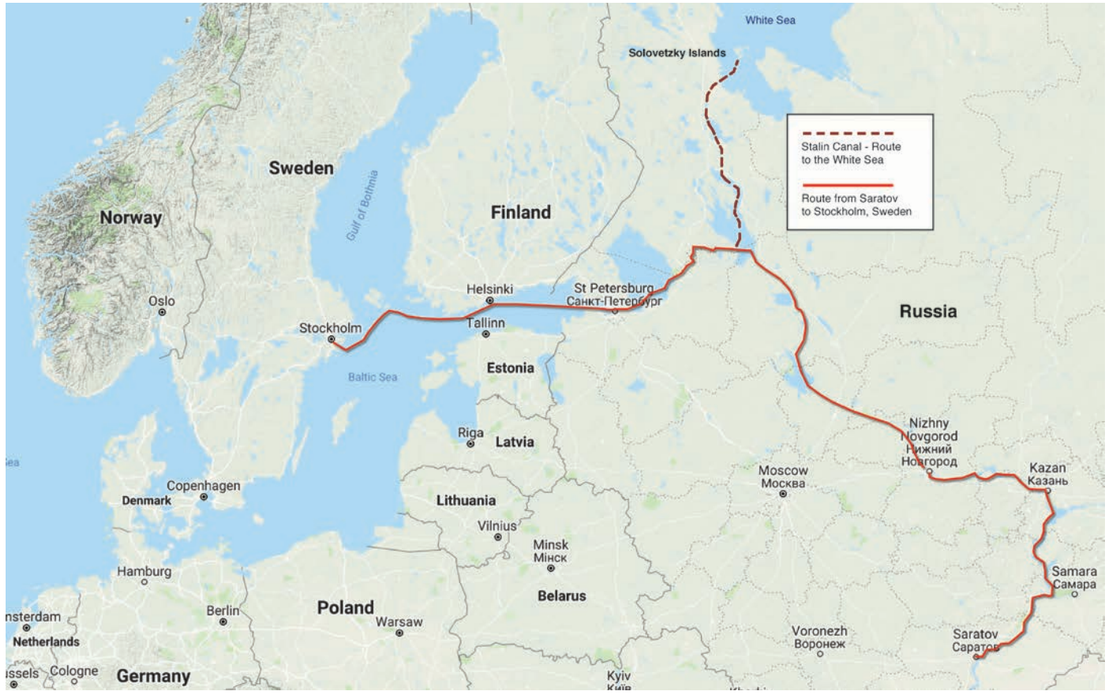
Temur welcomed us aboard, and I have to say that *Lucky Star* felt like a much bigger boat than I would have thought. Sure, she is 54 feet long, but her displacement is just shy of 19,000 pounds. and I have built much larger boats myself where you can feel all their weight and size viscerally. *Lucky Star* had her own commanding presence. Although she's long, I truly expected she might feel like a 30-foot boat stretched out to her final length. But that was not the case at all. Instead there was a feeling of size and stability on the water, and once we ran her, I found that she truly has her own groove, with a running attitude and specifications that are remarkable. Imagine a boat that can run very economically at very near 10 knots but still has the horsepower and speed potential to run at 17 knots if necessary. By Temur's accounting, after many miles on the water he found that her most economical speed is 9 knots, getting about 4.8 miles per gallon. Those numbers fit my expectations almost perfectly, but what really surprised me was how little her bow rose when accelerating.

As of the writing of this article, Temur has cruised *Lucky Star* over 14,000 nautical miles over just four seasons of use. Calculating that he ran her at an average of 9 knots, this means a total exceeding 1,556 engine hours, which is quite a feat when typical cruisers see an average of 150 hours per season.

When asked if he was pleased with the boat, Temur smiled broadly and I noticed his eyes quickly scanning around the interior, looking at this vessel that he had built with his own hands, resources, and energy. It was clear the answer did not need to be vocalized; as he looked around, the pride was clear in his eyes, and it was as though he was silently intimating, "Answer that question yourself. What is not to like?"

CUSTOM CONFIGURATIONS

Built using my stitch-and-glue method of plywood/epoxy/composite construction, *Lucky Star* is a great example of how quickly a builder can develop the skills necessary to construct a well-finished and, to my eyes, very good-looking boat. As it



GoogleMaps/Jonathan Cooper

Top image: *Temur (left) and friend (right) flank the author (and designer) Sam Devlin.* **Bottom:** *Beautiful helm layout on* Lucky Star.

was Temur's second stitch-and-glue project, she shows a level of finish that is outstanding; he obviously spent the hours of sanding and fairing necessary for a fine finish both inside and out. *Lucky Star* is strongly built and has the equipment and gear that one would expect from a well-equipped modern cruiser. Early in the design process we had talked about a double stateroom versus a single stateroom configuration, and Temur decided on the latter option. This choice makes the cabin very comfortable and no space feels cramped or crowded.

She is powered by a 260-horsepower Vetus, and I was impressed with how large this engine is. It doesn't appear to be anything brought up out of the automotive industry, and if it was, this one must have come out of a full-sized truck. Though Vetus engines are a bit of a rarity in North America, in Europe and western Russia they are common and well liked. Just aft the rear bulkhead of the cabin, the engine box is well insulated. She's quiet underway and very smooth running with an Aquadrive hookup to the shaft. This is a straight-shaft configuration with a shaft angle of 8 degrees, and the thrust line is easy and efficient. *Lucky Star* is a single-screw boat, and, considering her length, we needed to get some real prop area under her, ending up with a 28-inch-by-29-inch four-blade propeller coupled to a 1:2.78 gear. This blade area allows her to react quickly and decisively to the shifting and throttling, and she backs down well and balanced in close maneuvering with her bow thruster set well forward to push the bow when needed. Her draft is just under four feet with a balanced rudder on a skeg that offers plenty of protection for the propeller, with a long keel in front of it. Fuel is stored in twin 290 gallon tanks for a total of 580 gallons. That would give her a useful range well north of 2,000 nautical miles at Temur's favored 9-knot speed. This boat was set up to work around those of us that tend to fret more than we should about fuel capacity and range.

Lucky Star also has a 4kW Vetus-built generator. As summers can get hot and muggy in Russia, she has air conditioning and needs the generator to run that system. The generator also allows the refrigeration to stay charged up when the drive engine is not running.

It was quickly obvious to a boatbuilder like myself that Temur had thought long and hard about the equipment needed on a proper cruising boat and how she needed to be laid out to take full advantage of her potential. The result is that *Lucky Star* has everything that a cruiser would need, from heating to waste management, to the regeneration of battery charging.

This is all coupled with a low profile. *Lucky Star* is a long and sleek boat that likes the water and doesn't hesitate to put her shoulder into a patch of rough going. Visibility from the helm is good, and she does not exhibit much change of running angle while underway. Pictures show her angle of attack is very flat and level throughout the speed range.

With my counsel, Temur chose a galley-down arrangement which keeps the pilothouse space uncluttered and spacious. The galley has its own dinette area, which also doubles as an extra berth. In fair weather, though, the preferred option is to cook in the covered cockpit area, which has its own barbecue, range top, sink, and refrigeration. With this "cockpit galley" arrangement and a sizeable dinette/seating area aft, this is the space that is most often into duty when the hook is down at the end of the day. There are solar panels on top of the aft deck cover that help keep the electrics charged and functional. Side panels can also be attached and lowered to turn the back deck into a usable area even when the weather deteriorates.

After a lovely day spent on the water and several days of kicking about Stockholm, it was time for Temur and his crew to head for home across the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland. It would be another 15 days on the water before they returned to their homes in Saratov, and just before landing at her dock, *Lucky Star* crossed the 14,000 nautical mile threshold: an incredible achievement for a 4-year old boat.

While flying home, I had time to reflect on the experience of seeing my design fleshed out and experiencing the boat myself on the water. Seeing how my original interpretation of the best overall cruising boat for the Inside Passage translated so well to cruising central Russia and western Europe, I was truly struck by what an amazing boat *Lucky Star* is and how very efficiently she accomplishes her job of being a "most proper little boat." And there was clearly no question left about whether I would love the Blue Fin design as much as Temur does. ■