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Without Russian Visa, Cuban Sails Baltic Sea for 2 Months

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Cespedes

A Cuban man who spent 47 days in visa limbo on a Baltic Sea ferry has arrived on dry land after Russian border guards took pity on him and allowed him to disembark in St. Petersburg.

Luis Cespedes, 41, thought he was taking a routine trip back to Russia, his adopted home, when he left Helsinki aboard the Princess Maria on June 4.

But Russian officials refused to grant him entry because of multiple visa infractions, and Finnish officials wouldn't take him back after his Schengen visa expired at sea.

So Cespedes, who lives with his Russian wife in St. Petersburg, sailed back and forth, back and forth — 21 times — until Russian border guards at last threw him a bone Monday.

It was unclear who was to blame for the visa nightmare, which immediately drew comparisons to the film "The Terminal," in which Tom Hanks' character gets stranded in an

airport after his Eastern European homeland ceases to exist.

Cespedes, an architect and Latin dance teacher who has lived in Russia for about a decade, told Ekho Moskvy radio that the trip was necessary to avoid overstaying his 30-day tourist visa for a third time. “I don’t want to offend anybody, but it was an idiotic situation,” he said, adding that appeals to the migration service, human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin and other government agencies fell on deaf ears.

But an official at the migration service said that the adventure was Cespedes’ own fault and that he could have sorted his visa troubles out without leaving Russia.

“I don’t know who thought of putting him on a ferry. ... He should have sorted out the entry ban up front instead of later accusing the border and migration services of callousness,” Yelena Dunayeva said, RIA-Novosti reported.

Cespedes is currently recovering at home with his family. “He just cries and says nothing. Sometimes, however, he smiles and almost jumps with joy,” said Alexei Zlobin, a film director who is preparing a documentary about the trip, Fontanka.ru reported.

It’s not yet clear how this visa story will end. Dunayeva said Cespedes still needs to submit papers to remain in Russia. “I can’t yet say what we’ll do. The situation is extremely complicated,” she said. To make matters worse for Cespedes, he’s also in danger of running afoul of migration rules in his native Cuba, which require that he visit once every 11 months — a trip he can’t afford to make.

Incidentally, he can receive a new Schengen visa only in Cuba.

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