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A fresh snowfall can make any street in Moscow beautiful. No matter how familiar we are with what lies underneath the snow — a smudgy kiosk, a dusty road, last year’s remont — that layer of white makes our city new.

Perhaps that’s because it offers a new perspective. The winter holidays, too, offer a chance to pause, reflect and, of course, celebrate. In between the Western Christmas on Dec. 25 and the Orthodox one on Jan. 7, the Kremlin’s bells will ring in the biggest holiday of the Russian calendar on Jan. 1, while those at home will tune in to the classic film “The Irony of Fate” for both laughs and nostalgia.

There are lots of ways to enjoy the holidays in Moscow, and we cover many of them in this guide. We put together a list of shopping, outdoor sports and elegant parties, as well as a roundup of concerts and gigs. To make this the season of giving, find out about local charity markets with our colorful account.

Winter wear is covered in an article about valenki, the traditional winter boots that have stepped into the fashion scene, and we look after your health with tried-and-true tips on avoiding Moscow’s health pitfalls. Plus, for a place that truly transforms with the snow, we send you to Vyborg, Gatchina and other destinations outside St. Petersburg.

So what about the new year? We can’t guarantee that it will be what we want when the holidays recede. It could be wonderful, boring, OK, not so bad, or incredible. But no matter how it unfolds, 2011 will be a different year, a fresh snowfall, and that is something to celebrate.

Happy holidays to you.

Rachel Nielsen
r.nielsen@imedia.ru
Experiencing Moscow’s Holidays

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS AND THE NEW YEAR IS EASY TO DO IN MOSCOW, WHATEVER YOUR INTERESTS OR MEANS. HERE ARE WAYS TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THE SEASON — AND YOUR BUDGET.

By RACHEL NIELSEN

THRIFT

Window Shopping
There are malls — and then there are Russian malls, spun with glitter and lights for the holidays. Whether your wallet is light or full of rubles, you can enjoy the season’s ambience — and stay warm — at Moscow’s grandest shopping centers. Choose from the splendid architecture of GUM, the splashy cafes at Yevropeisky Mall or something in between.

• Galereya Aeroport. 62A Leningradsky Prospekt. Metro Aeroport. 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Tel. 771-6080.
• GUM. Red Square. Metro Okhotny Ryad or Metro Teatralnya. 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Tel. 788-4343. www.gum.ru
• Okhotny Ryad Mall. Manezh Square. Metro Okhotny Ryad. 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Tel. 737-8449, 737-8409. www.ox-r.ru
• Yevropeisky Mall. Kievsky Station Square. Metro Kievskaya. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m.-11 p.m. Tel. 921-3444, 921-4444. www.evropeisky.ru

Ice Skating
For a winter experience that chips less than $20 from your budget, ice skating is an option. Many of Moscow’s rinks cost next to nothing: At some places just $6 will put you onto the ice. Children skate at reduced prices or for free, and skates can be rented.

• Gorky Park. Metro Park Kultury. Tel. 933-3301. www.propark.ru
• Hermitage Garden. 3 Karetny Ryad. Metro Tsvetnoi Bulvar, Tverskaya or Mayakovskaya. Tel. 961-5129. www.katokermitaj.ru
• Kolomensky. 39 Prospekt Andropova. Metro Kolomenskaya. Tel. (903) 961-5129. www.superkatok.ru
• Megasport. 3 Khodynsky Bulvar. Metro Dynamo, then Bus 207, or Metro Polezhaevskaya, then Bus 48. Tel. 643-1810. www.hockey-palace.ru
• Sokolniki. 1B Sokolnichesky Val. Metro Sokolniki. Tel. 645-2065. http://sokolniki.info

New Year’s Fireworks
Of course, you may need to buy an extra pair of gloves, as well as bring some extra patience. But the sight of fireworks over Red Square, the Kremlin and the Historical Museum is well-worth both the cold and the crowd on Dec. 31. For a spot on Red Square, you will need to show up at 9 p.m. or earlier, but even an arrival at midnight will let you glimpse some of the show. The steps of the Lenin Library, the foot of Tverskaya Ulitsa and any Moscow River embankment also offer phenomenal views.

MID-RANGE

Dec. 13-25
Nibble on holiday sweets in a sleek setting. During December, you can buy treats at the oversized gingerbread house inside Swissotel Krasnye Holmy, where the hotel will be selling ginger cookies ($5) and Santa Claus in chocolate ($20). Stop in the Lightbar cafe bar, also on the lobby level, for coffee, tea and light fare. Reservation tel. 221-5452. Swissotel Krasnye Holmy. 52 Kosmodamianskaya Naberezhnaya, Bldg. 6. Tel. 787-9800. www.swissotel.com/moscow

Dec. 16-19
Perhaps even hockey can be peaceful during the holidays. Find out with the Channel One Ice Hockey Challenge Cup, a series of matches between European teams. Sweden and Russia will battle for the puck on Dec. 16, while a match against the Czech Republic will be on Dec. 18 and a match against Finland on Dec. 19. Seats can be purchased at the Megasport Sports Palace ticket windows. See above for Megasport’s address. Tel. (499) 246-2846. www.hockey-palace.ru

Dec. 31, from 10:30 p.m.
“The Best New Year’s Eve” is how Starlite Diner, that staple of American cuisine and culture in Moscow, is billing its Dec. 31 party. It is definitely pulling out the stops: It has
lined up an open bar, DJ, contests and a “secret super-prize” for a drawing. The price is $185 per person.

Starlite Diner. 16 Bolshaya Sadovaya (Aquarium Park). Metro Mayakovskaya. Tel. 650-0246. The chain has four other Starlite Diners in the city. www.starlite.ru

Dec. 31
For $150, the New York-themed Japanese restaurant Megu invites guests to the floor of its New Year’s Eve revelry, complete with a welcome cocktail, DJ, go-go dancers, and champagne at midnight. Reservation tel. 287-0520.

Lotte Hotel Moscow, 8 Novinsky Bulvar, Bldg. 2. General tel. 745-1000. www.lottehotel.ru.

HIGH-END

Dec. 24, 7-11 p.m.
Christmas dinner for the Western calendar can be found at Swissotel Krasnye Holmy’s Café Swiss on Dec. 24 from 7 to 11 p.m. Live music. A price of $120 per person will include the set menu of Russian and international dishes, as well as sparkling wine and nonalcoholic beverages. Children aged 3 to 12 can have dinner for $35. Reservation tel. 221-5350. See above for Swissotel Krasnye Holmy’s address.

Dec. 31
The Kai restaurant is planning a night of elegance and fine dining for its guests, also at Swissotel Krasnye Holmy. Kai promises live music, a five-course menu and a waterfall of champagne at midnight. The price for two people is $1,300, including VAT. For dinner plus a hotel room and breakfast, the fee is $1,500. Free parking. Reservation tel. 221-5358. See above for Swissotel Krasnye Holmy’s address.

Dec. 31
Facing the Kremlin and the Historical Museum, the Hotel National is a classic location for ushering in the next year. An open bar and buffet dinner overlooking Tverskaya Ulitsa cost $500 and includes entertainment with a DJ and dancing. The hotel’s grand views of the Kremlin can be seen on New Year’s for $830. That includes an open bar, dinner and performances by various musicians, a DJ and dancing. Hotel National. 15/1 Mokhovaya Ulitsa. Tel. 258-7000. www.national.ru.

Jan. 1, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.
Various brunches are on offer at Lotte Hotel Moscow. Its Les Menu restaurant, run by three Michelin star chef Pierre Gagnaire, is offering brunch for $120. The same price and the same hours apply to brunches opened by Lotte’s Megu and by its lounge. All include champagne in the brunch. See above for Lotte Hotel Moscow’s address.

Jan. 7, 1-5 p.m.
Mark the Russian Orthodox Christmas at Swissotel Krasnye Holmy’s City Space Bar, with a special Christmas buffet, sparkling wine and desserts. Live music. Children aged 3 to 12 eat for $35, while grown-ups dine for $150 per person. Free parking. Reservation tel. 221-5357. See above for Swissotel Krasnye Holmy’s address.
Winter in Russia is a playground of both sights and sounds. But don’t let the whine of the subway, the whoosh of traffic or the silence of snowfall be the only sounds to fall on your ears this season. A host of music awaits the intrepid listener in Moscow's clubs and concert halls, whether you’re looking for holiday classics, bleeding-edge artists or a show for the whole family. Here, the Moscow Winter Guide presents you with our picks for this winter.

Torba-na-Kruche. St. Petersburg pop veterans Torba-na-Kruche hold the dubious distinction of being a rock band that even your mother could tap her toes to, but don’t let that throw you off. Their Brit Pop-influenced melodies and lyrical poeticism come alive with old-fashioned rock’n’roll energy in their live show. Their fan base is fairly rabid, as well, so expect a good time when Torba celebrates its 12th birthday with an “abundance of surprises” at club Shestnadtsat Tonn on Dec. 11.


Pendulum. Although electro-pop has been in vogue for several years already, Australian outfit Pendulum takes the trend a step further with breakbeats too fast and synths too processed for most groups in the rock/pop game. The electronic slant is hardly surprising given that the band started as a pure drum-and-bass outfit before incorporating stadium-ready choruses and live instruments to form a kind of Aphex Twin-Muse love child, with moments reminiscent of Chromeo or even Justice. The results of such genre bending don’t require the ear of a DJ to appreciate; this is syrupy pop-rock inside a hard electronic shell. Find out how many licks it takes to get to the center of the concoction when Pendulum plays Arena Moscow on Dec. 15.

Arena Moscow. 31 Leningradsky Prospekt, Bldg. 4. Metro Dynamo. Tel. 258-0000. www.arenamoscow.ru

Fruktovy Kefir. The Last.fm biography for Fruktovy Kefir, a quintet originally from Rostov-on-Don, describes the group as an “oxymoron.” But the group is less an oxymoron than a carefully selected blend of complementary styles: Melodic meets dissonant, funk jam meets radio ditty and straight meets swung in the group’s highly listenable jazz-soaked brand of pop music. This is what you get when hardened jazz hands turn their carefully honed grasp of sonic nuance to the more black-and-white world of pop, and indeed most of the group has musical training in jazz. Although all the musicians are more than competent, whether playing a simple refrain or stretching out in an extended jam, the true standout is singer Alexei Busurin’s nimble tenor, a kind of a choirboy-meets-Tina Turner warble that will surprise you with its dynamism. Catch him and the rest of Fruktovy Kefir at Shestnadtsat Tonn on Dec. 16.

See above for Shestnadtsat Tonn’s address and contact information.

Animal Jazz. These days, an overblown MySpace description is almost as common among rock’n’roll bands as dark-washed jeans and sculpted windblown hair. Animal Jazz, however, actually delivers on its MySpace metaphors. On the site, the band explains its sound as a mix of the “vanity, chaos” of jazz with animal energy, and this description fits the music of the band’s latest album, “Egoist.” Guitars and the ensemble’s signature keytar sidestep each other playfully behind a solid beat, only to give way to a full-blown rock chorus displaying the group’s animal side. See this interplay of light and dark for yourself when Animal Jazz celebrates 10 years of beastly music in the historic palace of culture CDK MAI on Dec. 17.


Yevgeny Grishkovets. We probably shouldn’t be recommending two different concerts on the same night, but we just couldn’t leave out Yevgeny Grishkovets. The Kaliningrad-based playwright and performer returns to Moscow with his musical project Bigudi, ready to blend not only different genres but different disciplines of the perform-
ing arts at the show. In the vein of Grishkovets’ breakthrough one-man show, “How I Ate the Dog,” which mixed elements of drama, comedy and memoir, his Dec. 17 appearance at B2 promises to feature elements of spoken-word and musical performance.


Those acts should keep you up-to-date on the best new music on stage in Moscow this winter. But if you feel like going for a more classic sound to get in the mood for Christmas and New Year’s, the following shows will set you right:

**Mikhail Shuftinsky.** It’s difficult to determine all of the musical styles that Russian chanson actually incorporates, but one end of the spectrum surely is Mikhail Shuftinsky. The emigrant artist is less a mortal being than an abstract ideal, from the blinding sheen of his ultra-white smile to the flawless production of his songs and performances to the not-a-hair-out-of-place uniformity of his beard, which rounds out his face like a chrome bumper on a classic car. All joking aside, however, Shuftinsky is a fixture of Russian chanson and second only to Vladimir Putin in terms of his romantic appeal among aging housewives. On Dec. 18, Shuftinsky will present a show titled “Chanson Before Christmas” at the concert hall of the luxury boutique shopping center Crocus City Mall. If past performance is any indicator, the concert will be a well-produced “show” in every sense of the word, as well as the perfect way to experience the essence of Russian chanson, whatever it is.


**Christmas Gala Concert on Ice.** Music is only one-half of any good concert; if there weren’t anything to look at you could just as well get a souped-up stereo and listen at home. Luckily, this season is peppered with visually stimulating musical spectacles, the most grandiose of which may be the Christmas Gala Concert on Ice produced by former Olympic figure skater Ilya Averbukh. The show is hardly a one-off, as his company has been putting on figure-skating shows in Moscow for several years. Averbukh promises both musical and skating feats from stars of the ice and of the stage at the concert, which runs Dec. 25 and 26 at the Megasport Palace of Sport.

Megasport. 3 Khodynsky Bulvar. Metro Polezhayevskaya, then Bus 48; or Metro Dynamo, then Bus 207. Tel. 643-1825. www.hockey-palace.ru

**New Year’s Eve Concerts.** Russian New Year’s is traditionally spent **za stolom**, or at the table, but wouldn’t your champagne and Salade Olivier taste that much more satisfying after your ears have already been gratified with a New Year’s Eve concert? The first two of our picks will tire out your feet as well as gratify your ears, as DJs will be spinning well into the night. Radio DFM’s New Year’s Spark at Arena Moscow will feature enough Western and Russian hits of the past 20 years to bring you to a dancing fervor and, according to Arena Moscow’s web site, make you say, “Happy New Year!” Meanwhile, across town at Shestnadtsat Tonn, German group De Phazz will be playing jazz, lounge and house music. Tickets are pricey but include free alcohol and food to get you into the New Year’s spirit. Finally, for those who prefer a good old-fashioned rock’n’roll celebration, well-established St. Petersburg outfit Billy’s Band will ring in the new year with its blend of rock, jazz and blues at Tochka.

Charity, Russian Cheer

MARKETS, BAZAARS AND GIFTS GALORE: MOSCOW’S HOLIDAY CHARITY EVENTS PROVIDE ALL OF THESE WHILE SUPPORTING THE CITY’S NEEDIEST.

By ALEC LUHN

S
lava Gusev turned the mug that he was decorating with paint drips, blowing on the wet paint and trying in vain to keep it from running down the side.

“We’re improvising,” he explained.

But Gusev and the other young people who gathered at St. Andrew’s Anglican Church in central Moscow on a recent evening were hardly trained craftsmen.

Usually they spend their weeknights receiving extra instruction in math and other school subjects from the volunteers at the Center for Equal Opportunities for Child Orphans known as Vverkh, or Going Up, a charitable organization for helping young people without parents finish high school.

Tonight, however, they’re making handicrafts to sell at the Dushevnoi Bazar. That will be just one of a handful of charity markets unfolding in Moscow this holiday season.

Vendors at these markets sell their handicrafts, products and wares — with both commercial and nonprofit vendors taking part — and the proceeds go to participating charities.

The organizers of Moscow’s charity markets said they offer a fun way to spend a holiday afternoon while sharing in the season’s generosity.

“The general theme is that you can spend a weekend day pleasurably and find some interesting presents for loved ones’ while helping others, said Irina Ganza, manager of social projects at the Agency for Social Information, organizer of the Dushevnoi Bazar.

That market is one of Moscow’s largest holiday charity markets, with at least 20 charities and noncommercial organizations participating, Ganza said.

In addition to stands selling handicrafts, the Dec. 19 event will include a concert of professional musicians and Vverkh students, as well as master classes for making origami and Russian folk dolls.

Organizers were expecting the event to draw about 3,000 visitors.

“Our confidence that we will reach these [fundraising and attendance] goals is based on our experience conducting charity events,” Ganza said.

ASI is dedicated to developing civil society through charity-promoting events, volunteerism and social responsibility on the part of businesses, the agency’s web site says.

There’s an upside for the charities themselves in the markets: They get to advertise their causes and recruit new volunteers.

“On one hand, the money raised won’t be unwelcome, but on the other hand, a lot of people will visit this fair, so it gives us a chance to inform about our activities,” said Olga Tikhomirova, director of Vverkh.

Deloitte & Touche CIS held what may have been one of the early-comers to charity markets in Moscow when it launched the Deloitte Foundation Christmas Bazaar in 2005.

Deloitte audit partner Tim Copeland, who is a board member at the nonprofit Deloitte Foundation, said the idea of a holiday market has taken off.

“At first people were not too familiar with the idea of charity markets, but Russians really seem to be taking to the idea and lots of people come along and drink mulled wine, happy that the proceeds benefit our partner charity Downside Up,” he said in a comment e-mailed to The Moscow Times.

Last year’s bazaar proved just how committed its volunteers and customers can be: With temperatures outside at roughly negative 25 degrees Celsius, the entire bazaar was moved — that is, moved inside.

This holiday season, AIG/Lincoln Russia had planned to organize a substitute event, the White Square Christmas Market at the Belaya Ploshchad, or White Square, office complex in northern Moscow. But AIG/Lincoln Russia won’t be holding the bazaar this year, it said in an e-mail.

The company is hoping to continue the tradition with the 2012 New Year’s, it said.
Markets such as Dushevoi Bazar are helping start a new tradition, as the concept of charity is still nascent in Russia, ASI’s Ganzha said. “For now, we don’t have a tradition of charity,” she said. “It’s only beginning to form.”

The idea of a Christmas market in December is atypical for Russians because Russian Orthodox Christmas is observed Jan. 7 and New Year’s Eve is traditionally the more widely celebrated of those two holidays.

But there is an increasing number of seasonal markets around the capital as evidence that the trend is taking root. Besides these markets, several holiday charity fundraisers also take place online on sites such as LiveJournal.ru.

Still, some obstacles exist for organizers, including legal considerations. Charity funds are not legally allowed to sell goods, so many simply ask for donations in return for a gift.

“Taxes on donations are less and the bookkeeping procedure is easier, and for this reason the majority of [charity] organizations proceed in this manner,” said Vverkh volunteer Darya Alexeyeva.

Getting an event sanctioned by the local authorities can be a long process. Although Vverkh is allowed to sell goods, many organizations at the Dushevoi Bazar aren’t — so Vverkh will be seeking only donations in return for its crafts.

For Gusev and the other teenagers and young adults at Vverkh — none of whom have ever been to a holiday market before — the chance to sell or seek donations for their goods at the bazaar is not nearly as important as simply supporting their organization, which gives them knowledge they can’t get in the regular school system.

Gusev estimated that his mug might fetch 20 rubles at the market.

“If I draw a woman, then it will be more,” he grinned.

“I hope you mean Snegurochka,” Alexeyeva retorted, referring to the female helper of Ded Moroz, the Russian New Year’s equivalent of Santa Claus.

For her part, Vverkh director Tikhomirova has high hopes for Vverkh’s first-ever holiday market.

“It’s a time of wonder, when everybody actually awaits some wonderful change,” she said. “It becomes normal to wish to make the holiday good for the maximum amount of people.”

She added, “It’s the best time to do good.”

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**Holiday Charity Markets in Moscow**

**Charitable Christmas Bazaar** (United Way of Russia) Wednesday, Dec. 15, from noon to 4 p.m. Dukat Business Center, 6 Ulitsa Gasheka. Metro Mayakovskaya.

**Dushevoi Bazar** (Agency for Social Information) Sunday, Dec. 19, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Hotel Aerostar, 37 Leningradsky Prospekt. Metro Dynamo.

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**МЯСНОЙ КЛУБ**

This is a restaurant with a clubbing atmosphere, addressed to admirers and experts of meat dishes.

Only here you may find various kinds of meat, like Vogue, Prime, Black Angus all together.

The menu of the restaurant is like a real map of all world’s meat regions: starting from the United States and finishing in Italy and Australia.

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Outside of St. Petersburg, History, Sea and Spa Await

THERE ARE A FEW THINGS THAT A FOREIGNER SHOULD DO BEFORE OVERWINTERING IN RUSSIA. THE FIRST IS TO THINK TWICE. THEN TO THINK COLD. FINALLY, GET OUT OF MOSCOW!

By DEREK ANDERSEN

For the Moscow expat, a trip to St. Petersburg is the automatic getaway — perhaps a bit too automatic. Not many travelers take full advantage of the possibilities that such a trip provides, especially those beyond the city’s borders.

That’s why you may want alternatives to the usual haunts. So pack a few books or pick up a couple magazines. There is a lot of train riding ahead of you.

Trains from Moscow to St. Petersburg run several times a day. Travel time ranges from four hours to 10 hours, depending on the train you select. Prices range from about $50 to $100 each way. Buying tickets at Leningradsky Station can be extremely trying, even humiliating, and not always successful. Spare yourself, and book your tickets well in advance at www.rzd.ru (registration on the web site is required) or at a remote outlet. The Mostransagensbo window by the escalators of the Turgenevskaya metro station is never crowded, and the sales ladies there are surprisingly nice.

Finding affordable accommodation is much easier in St. Petersburg than in Moscow. A quick Internet search will yield ample results. A random sampling of hostels showed that there were plenty of rooms available a month in advance, with prices starting at $40 a night and the opportunity to spend much more. But call ahead, as a holiday influx is expected.

We won’t dawdle in St. Petersburg, though, but use it as a base for further adventures. Information about the Northern Capital’s clubs, bars, dives and museums can be found easily on the commercial site www.saint-petersburg.com or via The St. Petersburg Times at www.sptimes.ru.

LET’S START WITH SKIING

There are several ski spots that can be reached by public transportation from St. Petersburg. Igora is one of Russia’s most modern resorts, opened in 2006. Bus 859 goes 54 kilometers directly to Igora from the Devyatkino metro station. It leaves every 40 minutes. Or you can take an elektrichka, or commuter train, from Finlyandsky Station to the ‘69th kilometer’ stop (find the schedules for all elektrichkas at www.tutu.ru/spb) then follow the crowd for about 15 minutes.

Call the resort in advance, at (812) 960-0055, for times and prices. (Be prepared to pay about $70 for rental and lifts, with a special holiday add-on admission charge.)

If your taste and budget run toward luxury, there are cottages to rent, shops to browse, a skating rink, spa, swimming pool, restaurant, bars, bowling, movie theater and everything else the well-heeled sportsman could ask for. The slopes are good, too, and accommodate various skill levels.

After a day of skiing, you are sure to feel invigorated and alive. So now let’s work our way back in history, stopping first in Imperial Russia.

Gatchina Palace has 600 rooms and was built in the 1760s by Catherine the Great’s paramour Count Orlov. It passed to the royal family after his death and remained a royal palace until the Communist Revolution. The last tsar, Nicholas II, spent his childhood there. It was badly damaged by the Germans in World War II, and restoration continues to this day.

The town of Gatchina has a population of 80,000. It can be reached by marshrutka, or minibus, No. 18 from the Moskovskaya metro station in half an hour, or in about an hour by elektrichka from the Baltiiskaya station (take the one that stops at Gatchina Baltiiskaya). The museum is open every day except Monday, the first Tuesday of the month, and Jan. 1 and 2. Call (813) 719-3402 for more details.

The palace’s facade has been restored, and several halls are open. Original artwork from the palace recovered after the war is on display. There is also an exhibition of ceremonial weapons from the former imperial collection. On the palace grounds is a charming smaller palace, the Priory, which also has been restored.

The park adjacent to the palace dates to the same era. There are three lakes and a variety of monuments to walk around, weather permitting. Within walking distance of the palace, across the park, is the P.E. Shcherbov House (4 Ulitsa Chekhova). Shcherbov was a Silver Age artist and caricaturist. His mansion is an impressive, cream-color brick building from 1911. It houses a modest exhibition. Walk by while you’re there, but call (813) 712-0864 or (813) 712-1088 to find out about access to the exhibits.

Since Gatchina is close and easy to get to, you might be back in St. Petersburg in time for more exploring. Take a look...
GATCHINA PALACE WAS BUILT BY COUNT ORLOV, CATHERINE THE GREAT'S PARAMOUR, IN THE 1760S.

Sanatoriums are spread throughout the former Soviet Union. They were a mainstay for Soviet vacationers, who traveled to them in organized groups, often with their co-workers, for rest and restoration.

As with skiing, there are a number of choices in the area, but this is one of the nicest. Note that for only slightly more money than your hostel in St. Petersburg (accommodations at Sestroretsky start at about $70 a day for a single room, $45 if you double up), you also get three meals.

For entirely reasonable additional charges (starting at about $6), there you can have a massage, mud bath (indoors, with local mineral-rich mud), therapeutic workout, aromatherapy (with essential oils), take a dip in a hot tub, swim in mineral water and a try host of other "procedures." You could even have a session or two of psychotherapy. Medical consultations and more specialized therapies are also available.

There are billiards, movies, parkland and the shore of the Gulf of Finland, with its colorful horizon and drifting clouds. Chances are there will be dances in the evening.

The manager promises that rooms will be available and staff will be happy to see you. There is a minimum stay of four days during the holiday season. If you are in danger of becoming too well-rested in that time, take a look at Sestroretsk, a suburb one stop away by elektrichka and placed on a beautiful strip of coast on the Gulf of Finland. Early in the last century, an array of Silver Age literary greats (Anna Akhmatova, Leonid Andreyev, Kornei Chukovsky, later Mikhail Zoshchenko) had dachas there. Some lovely dachas survive from that era, though not theirs.

On the northern side of the town, the local cemetery, founded at the turn of the last century, has an array of Russian-style ornate gravestones. It is the resting place of Zoshchenko and a number of local heroes; it also has a mass grave from World War II. Unusual for Russia, it is divided into Russian, Jewish and German sections.

Sestroretsk has ancient roots but got its real start when Peter the Great built a summer residence there. It grew into a usual town in the 1950s, with a population of 40,000 now, and you will have to hunt for the sights. But it's worth a couple of hours since you're close.

After that it will be time to go home to Moscow and its own familiar joys. Happy trails!
Valenki Step Back Into Style
WITH CREATIVITY AND A PASSION FOR CULTURE, DESIGNERS HAVE BROUGHT TRADITIONAL FELT BOOTS FROM THE VILLAGE TO THE RUNWAY.

By ALEXANDER BRATERSKY

Sheepskin boots may be keeping feet fashionable across the globe, with young women sporting square-toed, pull-on styles. But boots made from sheep’s wool have been protecting Russian feet for more than a thousand years, and they are now becoming a fashion item here.

Valenki, or felt boots, have been lifted from their rural use to haute couture by Russian designers, artists and entrepreneurs who want to reintroduce the traditional footwear with a modern edge.

Olga Chernikova, head of Moscow’s Chernikov Studio, has been one of the most successful at convincing Russians that shoes can be both felt and chic.

With seven years of business under her belt, she said she recently received an order for valenki from the government, with a state official telling her that the boots would be presented to guests at November’s tiger conservation summit in St. Petersburg.

“I was very surprised that they sent a plane to grab my felt boots,” she said.

Felt boots were a hard sell at first. Many Russians associate them with old village life or rustic childhood memories. They have been part of Russian life for more than a thousand years, and wearing Chinese-made sneakers.

“Valenki are our local answer to Ugg shoes,” she said while wearing a pair with flowers.

For Chernikova, designing stylish valenki for young hipsters, hunters, business men and fashionistas was a way to return to her cultural roots as a Russian.

“Valenki are our local answer to Ugg shoes,” said Chernikova, referring to the popular Australian-designed boots produced from sheepskin.

“We are eating Turkish strawberries and wearing Chinese-made sneakers. Some day, we won’t have anything of our own,” she said with a touch of anger in her voice.

Chernikova started her business in 2003 after coming back to Russia from the Tambov region.

“Afanasyev, a spokesman for the local Neftyannik sports club, told The Moscow Times.

“We wanted to bring people’s attention to this classical sport, and in Russia this game was traditionally played during the winter by players who wore felt boots because they didn’t slip,” Vitaly Afanasyev, a spokesman for the local Neftyannik sports club, told The Moscow Times.

Also in 2009, Zaitsev, together with fashion designer Yelena Moskalenko, displayed a collection of male and female costumes that drew inspiration from Russian folk art.

As shoes with humble roots, valenki can have their drawbacks. They are made entirely from woolen felt, and traditionally, they have to be worn with galoshes to keep feet dry. Commercial versions like Chernikova’s have a rubber sole.

Yet she is hardly the only entrepreneur to jump with both feet into the valenki market. Last year, Khabarovsk authorities carried out a field hockey championship with all of the amateur sportsmen dressed in felt boots. “We wanted to bring people’s attention to this classical sport, and in Russia this game was traditionally played during the winter by players who wore felt boots because they didn’t slip,” Vitaly Afanasyev, a spokesman for the local Neftyannik sports club, told The Moscow Times.

Afrenasyev said the championship was popular and will be held again this year. He added that valenki for adults are difficult to find in his city. Most of the buyers of valenki are parents with children. “The youth don’t wear them,” he said.

While Chernikova’s felt boots have developed a cult status among Russian buyers, several designers in the regions are also cashing in on the popularity of valenki. Among them is Masha Ivanova, a designer from Novosibirsk.

“Felt boots are a means of communication, and you can use them to draw attention to your culture,” Chernikova explained during an interview in her design studio while sporting dark blue felt boots with flowers.

Her valenki come in various colors, shapes and sizes, and some include patches ranging from sunflowers to the image of Che Guevara. Some of the felt boots are ordered by corporate clients as presents for their business partners.

Lyudmila Chernikova, creates the patchwork looks at valenki as something neat and prestigious Moscow universities … who looked at valenki as something neat and wanted to wear them for self-expression,” she said.

Garayeva, director of Moscow’s Russian Valenki Museum.

Because the boots conjure up rural backwardness — there is the Russian phrase “dumb as a felt boot” — some would-be buyers were turned off by valenki, Chernikova said. She tried to change the public perception by showing the boots at a Moscow fashion expo and trying to attract a younger audience there.

“The first buyers were students from prestigious Moscow universities … who looked at valenki as something neat and wanted to wear them for self-expression,” she said.

“Valenki are our local answer to Ugg shoes,” she said while wearing a pair with flowers.

“We are eating Turkish strawberries and wearing Chinese-made sneakers. Some day, we won’t have anything of our own,” she said with a touch of anger in her voice.

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Ivanova, who used to work in the publishing business, said she has turned to designing felt shoes because she simply “was freezing.”

When she first wore her felt boots, her feet may have been warm, but the reaction was not. “Some five, six years ago, people looked at me strangely when I came to the office wearing valenki,” she recalled.

Today, the majority of her clients come from her native Novosibirsk and from Moscow. “Most of the buyers are young girls, as well as women with children. Men are generally more conservative,” said Ivanova, who sells her felt boots, made from wool that she imports from Kyrgyzstan, for prices ranging from $150 to $250.

Though designer items aren’t affordable for many valenki fans, they can choose from the less-expensive, mass-produced items made at the few remaining valenki factories.

“Felt boots are in high demand in Siberia, the Far East and northern Russia, and during the last five years the demand also has been growing in central Russia,” said Grigory Shmykov, deputy head of a Yaroslavl factory that makes 600,000 pairs of valenki and other felt shoes per year.

“No winter shoes are more reliable than valenki,” he said.

Get Healthier, And Happier, in 2011

ADVICE LEARNED THE HARD WAY ON HEALTH & SAFETY.

By RACHEL NIELSEN

For native Muscovites and newcomers alike, Moscow can place hurdles in the way of good health. There is the bitter cold, the stinky pollution and the sweltering heat in the summer. It can be rough. Sometimes we conclude that nothing could be made better — or worse — and give up on taking care of ourselves. Yet, spending time here also can point to simple practices that make life a lot healthier.

Here are some pointers for surviving the winter and beyond in Moscow.

Of course, get your doctor’s advice before making changes to your physical routine.

Don’t eat cold foods in the a.m. Perhaps you aren’t eager to fill up each morning with a bowl of kasha bigger than your head. That’s OK. A cup of tea or a dish of oatmeal can go a long way in warming your commute. Babushka was right.

Cover your neck. It’s vital to keep your neck swathed with a scarf or covered with a collar. That isn’t just for the benefit of your skin: Warming the air in your passageways lets you breathe more easily. Your nose, mouth and throat will be less likely to pick up bacteria and viruses. This is a tip from winter runners: Even when they are breathing out icicles, they are wrapped up in scarves.

Good posture prevents pain. Many of us recoil when we hear the phrase “sit up straight.” If that phrase had been “sit up straight while parked in front of your computer so you aren’t in pain,” it might have been less annoying and more convincing.

The Mayo Clinic in the United States explains that because the spine has three natural curves, “good posture helps maintain these natural curves, while poor posture does the opposite.” In fact, when we are curled over our keyboards like Quasimodo, our muscles and ligaments “struggle” to keep us balanced, the Mayo Clinic says.
Co-workers at The Moscow Times found that their back pain disappeared when they improved their posture — in other words, when they sat level with their computer screens, pulled their shoulders back and kept their abdomen, shoulders and head in line. I tried this wonder technique for myself, and it worked. You can be sure, though, that I won’t give my mom the pleasure.

Quit. Or cut back. It’s difficult to tame a smoking habit in Moscow, where a pack of cigarettes costs just a buck. Compare that with the oh-so-sobering price in New York of $12 to $14 per pack, and you might even feel that you are saving money. Alas. We breathe in polluted air just by living here (even without the burning peat bogs). So be kind to your lungs.

Know how to deal with strays. If you have lived here for more than a month, you probably have encountered one of the city’s stray dogs. There are about 30,000 of them. With city efforts to decrease the stray population ineffective at best, it’s a good idea to get used to these homeless pups.

When you encounter a stray dog, don’t panic. It is either disinterested (ideal) or interested in protecting its space (less ideal). Either way, you need to convey that you are calm and in control. If possible, avoid the dog. If a stray approaches you, stop, stand still and don’t look the dog in the face. Some dog handlers suggest tucking your hands beneath your underarms, while others recommend extending an umbrella or other object to make yourself bigger. In any case, stand your ground and let the dog get bored, then find yourself another route. Dogs, 30,000; you, 1.

Go beyond potatoes. This tuberous vegetable has been a staple of the Russian diet for centuries. That doesn’t mean it’s great for you. While it is a source of fiber and vitamins, potatoes contain a lot of sugars, and that isn’t good for human metabolism. Whole-grain foods make for a higher-energy diet. Some Russian substitutions include grechka, or buckwheat, dark breads such as Borodinsky and colorful vegetables. However, if you’re thinking that potatoes are better for you than that bag of caviar-flavored potato chips, well, you’re right. Nutrition is relative.

Don’t hold on to the subway. That is, don’t hold on to its germs once you’re home. When you come in the door, take 30 seconds to wash up. You don’t need to go Howard Hughes on your hands or scald your skin. It’s actually the action of rubbing your hands under running water that physically removes the germs. If you’re anywhere near a sink when eating lunch, then wash up before preparing food or enjoying your meal, to make sure that you don’t eat the germs off your hands. And don’t forget to wash up before handling contact lenses, each and every time. Sticking to these habits will save you from at least one major flu or cold this season, guaranteed.

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