

## WHAT I SAW IN YOSHKAR-OLA

By Aristeidis G. Christofidis (Greece) – Forest Engineer, Post Graduate Student

Initially, the idea of traveling to Yoshkar-Ola, a city in Russian Federation, as a participant in the mobility of Tempus Project, filled me with hesitation. A vast country like Russia, far away from my country Greece, long period of staying (3 months), unknown people, habits, mentality. But all my doubts were surpassed in front of the challenge to having such a lifetime experience and I took the big decision.

Carrying two suitcases filled with clothes for three seasons (summer, autumn, maybe winter!), I arrived in Yoshkar-Ola in the morning of 9<sup>th</sup> of July, after traveling for 21 hours. Immediately I had my first meeting with my apartment and after one necessary day of rest the exploration of the city began.

### The city:

Yoshkar-Ola is the civil, economical and cultural centre of the Mari-El Republic, located in the eastern part of the East European Plain of the Russian Federation. Inhabited by approximately 250.000 people, the city tries to make some – slow – steps which lead to development. Lacking of aesthetic interest, the city still has some things, like the street names and the numerous Lenin statues that remind to everyone about its past.



View of Yoshkar- Ola and the Kokshaga River

## University:

The fundamental purpose of my trip was education. My hosts were the Department of Forest inventory and mensurations, a part of the Forestry and Ecology faculty, which belongs to the Mari State Technical University (MarSTU). During my staying here I had the opportunity to do some (not much!) research in my field of interest, which is the timber harvesting systems. For this purpose I was provided with a full – equipped office in the centre “Sustainable Forest Management”, which was funded by the Tempus project. Additionally, I had the chance to meet other departments and laboratories of the university, discuss with their stuff and get some extra information about their research and activities.

## Forests:

It is said that a good forester is not possible to be created behind an office but only in nature. For this reason I didn't have any other option but to visit several times the real fortune of the Mari-El Republic, its forests. Huge, dense forests, consisted of pine (mainly), spruce, aspen, birch and many other species cover more than the half of the Republic's area, providing an excellent experimental and practice site for both teachers and students of Forestry in the region and giving unique, exceptional beauty to the landscape. Therefore, I visited twice a *Leschoz*, the smaller unit of the Russian Forestry Service, where I could discuss and learn new things about Russian Forestry.



In the forest

## Highlights:

Of course, so many days do not pass easily without taking part in a lot of activities. In this framework I was guided to almost all Yoshkar-Ola's museums and I visited cities in neighboring Republics, such as Chebocsary, capital of the Chuvash Republic and Kazan. The capital of Tatarstan Republic celebrated its 1000 years in the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2005. To my disappointment, I couldn't visit the city at this moment, because the presence of important political persons there led to some restrictions, so my trip became a reality a few days later. A monument of cultural and historical heritage, visiting this city was one of my best experiences.

I also had the luck to be present in two very important occasions for Yoshkar-Ola. The city's birthday in 21<sup>st</sup> August and the Day of Knowledge, in September, the opening day for the educational institutions. Both these holidays were celebrated with a series of various demonstrations all over the city, like shows, concerts etc.

Without doubt, meeting new people here meant an introduction to their habits. "Bania" (the Russian version of sauna), the national drink vodka, "sashlick" (equivalent with our famous Greek souvlaki!), barbeque in a "Datcha" (small house near the city, place for rest especially in weekends), were parts of Russian ordinary life that I was lucky and simultaneously glad to discover them!



1<sup>st</sup> of September: Students of MARSTU in the city's stadium celebrating the Day of Knowledge

### Problems:

There is only one, but significant, problem that a foreigner can face in Russia. LANGUAGE! It is really a bad idea to travel in this country without speaking some Russian! This means continuous problems to eat, make some shopping, communicate and meet new people. Even in the university, I met only a handful of people who could speak satisfactory English. I tried to make an effort to learn some basics of the Russian language, but – between us – with absolutely no result!

### Impressions:

I am leaving with rather mixed impressions and emotions from Russia. While I learned and saw so many new, interesting things, I admit I expected to see more, concerning the long period of staying. But I arrived in summer; the university was closed till the end of August, people go to vacation, so...it was not possible to fulfill all my expectations. However I still believe that it was an unforgettable experience and I will have a lot of things to remember and some times be nostalgic about...!

### Thanks:

- To my supervisor professor Dr. Paul N. Efthymiou (Contact person of the Tempus project on behalf of Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki) who gave me this unique opportunity to travel in the biggest and for the most people unknown country of the world.
- To professor Mr. Eldar Kurbanov (coordinator of the project for MarSTU), who made all my arrangements and provided me with everything I asked for during my stay.
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