

At home in Yoshkar-Ola **Three seasons in the Russian province**

Never before have I heard of a city called Yoshkar-Ola, not to mention the Russian republic Mari-El. The well-known department of forestry at the Mari State Technical University (MarSTU) was new to me as well. And if it was not located near to Europe's largest stream – the Volga River - I could even now hardly explain where I have been from late July to October 2004. But travelling makes you wiser, and since I took part in the EU-Tempus-project „Promotion of sustainable forestry in Povolgie of Russia“ and combined my work at the university BOKU with experience abroad, I considered myself a very lucky fellow. By the way, I am a German university graduate preparing for a forestry-doctorate in Austria now. In between I worked as a journalist and editor of different trade journals have visited many of the European countries.



Pop-concert on Sept. the 1st at Lenin Square, Yoshkar-Ola.

Expectations

I did not prepare a lot for my three months stay, but packed stuff for summer, autumn and beginning winter, because the seasons change fast in the continental climate, and the first snow falls in September or October. Together with a handy camera and some scientific material (I am dealing with forest growth modeling) I left my hometown Vienna looking forward to learn something about Russian's forestry, nature and academic education as well as the Russians' life in general. I was not meant to work hard, but maybe I would be fortunate to start a little research work. Who knows?



City festival: me at a barbecue stand

Good advice

All right, I thought, what bad could happen to me, who even learned a little bit Russian back in the school days! And after a few night hours in the airplane that took me from Frankfurt to the one million people city of Kazan, I left in Samara. Another big town on the left bank of the Volga, by the way, but not the final destination as I found out later. Much later. After the custom declarations and some other forms were filled out and I could not find my luggage. Do not do this. You would soon recognize that there are not too many people speaking English, for example.

First contact

After all I was welcomed very warmly and could directly meet with the project's coordinating professor Eldar Kurbanov. After an opulent meal I was shown my little, but comfortable flat near the city center, that I shared with Diamantis, a nice Greek master-student from Thessaloniki's University. With the help of Eldar and his loyal, friendly and diligent staff-members (lovely greetings to Natasha and Oleg, special regards to Dima!) we were soon introduced to the university, the town's facilities and everyday life in Russia.



At a street café

New home

Russia is obviously the center of the former Eastern bloc and so are the living conditions. Our temporary home town was said to be typical of Russia. Its about 250.000 inhabitants seem to live peacefully in their loggia-flats and join the allot settlements (the “datshas”) on the weekends. Despite of the widespread unemployment, annoying bureaucracy, corruption, mafia and the still threatening secret service in the country.

Among the very few foreigners in town are americans looking for humble, staunch brides. Women of Yoshkar-Ola are known as the most beautiful in whole Russia. At least that is what many internet sites and people on the streets tell you. And certainly the town is more fun for guys than for girls, but sorry ..., I am loosing the thread.



The national theatre at Lenin Square

The town offers several theaters, discotheks, museums, restaurants, concerts and holyday-events. The food in general might not be everyone's taste, but you can buy a lot of stuff from well-known brands in the supermarkets for the rich ones (locals call these people "new Russians").

Although many people are poor they do not have to live on the streets at least. I was astonished that most people can afford frequent use of cell phones for example. And they really like to dress well. In contrast to my home countries I saw no displeasingly behaving alcoholic (I want to mention it, because vodka is known as a national drink). Unfortunately many locals, especially women, do not feel comfortable on the badly lit streets at night, but I have never heard or seen something criminal or suspicious going on. I felt safe and in the end almost integrated.



Diamantis, Dima, Aleksej, Markus

Work

At Mari State Technical University working and learning conditions seem to improve slowly but thoroughly. Not every lecturer has got an office place and not every office is equipped with a PC. But there are new computer classrooms for the students and a recently established center for sustainable forestry, that is financed with the help of the projects resources. Most of the scientific work seemed to be done with MS-office applications. In the hosting department they also develop special programmes, for example yield calculations. My Greek fellow and I sat at desks in the secretary's office (hello Sina, how are you?), where we could perfectly survey both staff and students (am I right, my friend Diamantis ;-)

The university's LAN is unstable but provides a fast internet connection. Students have access to the world wide web on chargeable terminals in the library, that contains 900.000 pieces (but only very few in foreign languages). You can meet a lot of sincere and sedulous people here, that are very interested in you personally. It was obvious and disenchanting; however, that there is not enough work for every employee.

Highlights

Now doubt about it, for me there were two highlights during my stay in Russia. First the relatively wild nature including the great Volga river and his inflows, widely extending forests of pine, birch, aspen, spruce, lime, maple and oak spotted with swamps and inviting lakes. And second the banja-sessions, what means the festive visits in a typical Russian sauna. Actually we have only been twice to private places and were refused once at a public place, where the banja was fully occupied (at about 1 a.m.). In any case this is an important social event you will never forget, and some people even claim that it is good for your health ;-)



“Theatre bridge” crossing the river “Bolshaja Kokshaga”

What to do

I advice everybody to prepare some Russian, before he enters the country. It is very helpful in some situations and can open doors and hearts for a closer look at the local people. Of course your work will benefit from it too. If you do not want to look like a rich “western” and minimize the risk of being mugged, just leave your most stylish and expensive clothes at home. Concerning business cooperation: Try not to be too demanding, expect things and people moving slowly, arrangements to be more complicated than you are used to and count on disappointments and setbacks. Appreciate rather every little success. - Following these rules you will have a gorgeous stay with lasting impressions. I say, a visit in Yoshkar-Ola is worth it in many respects. Go and find out!

Good bye, good stay and every success,

Markus Probst