

Frosty Temperatures and warm Thoughts My Winter in Yoshkar-Ola

Prejudices

YOSHKAR-OLA. Even if you ask Russians themselves, hardly any one of them has ever heard of it – imagine Germans. It's not Russian sounding name comes indeed from a different language – the language of the indigenous people living in this region – the Mari. In translation the name means “Red Town” and the colour red has always been associated with beauty in the Russian language. Who would have thought that this, in the scarce populated and quite unknown region of Mari El situated town and its people would have given me five of the most beautiful, most exciting and most memorable months of my life.

I very well remember the reactions of my German fellow citizens when they heard of my decision to spend a semester in Russia. Most of them were far from supporting moreover were they terrified by the association of a frosty winter, darkness and a low living standard. Little do Germans know about Russia and if anything – they didn't understand why by all means I wanted to go to Yoshkar-Ola – why not Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

Small Town Living

Now I know that I took the right decision. In Yoshkar-Ola living is quiet and unhasty and it is far from the roaring traffics of the crowded big cities. Of course there are problems and the level of living might not always be as high as in Europe. This however is the reason I found out that happiness is not primarily depending on what car you drive or how fashioned your apartment is furnished - also it made me appreciate the many comforts of living in Germany. Besides Yoshkar-Ola is an upcoming city with many new buildings and quite a lot of cultural as well as sportive offers. So it is, that I have learned a lot in ice skating – at one of the town's two! large and modern ice rinks and that I attended some of the most thrilling ballet performances, not only because the dancers and the orchestra put on a lot of effort – but above all because the audience loved them so much and dedicated all their hart to watching the artists. In this town I have not witnessed any performance in theatre or opera which was not applauded with standing ovations accompanied by screaming and yelling.



Square of the founder of Yoshkar-Ola with newly constructed building

Russian Hospitality

Just the same love and enthusiasm people of Yoshkar-Ola dedicated to me, as a guest of their town. Where ever I came, I felt their great interest in me as a German but also in me as a person. I have never been offered so much hospitality, help and deep affection as in this small town somewhere between Moscow and the Ural. My new Russian friends involved me in their great culture as if I was one of them. I got to know the splendid tradition of having tee and sweets together with friends and family – a ritual that belongs to every invitation and considering the frost that lasts at least half a year in this country – a crucial thing to do. In order to cope with the cold, there is another tradition - the “Banja” which made me experience the unbelievable feeling of jumping right into deep snow, wearing nothing but a swimming suit at temperatures of about twenty degrees below zero - after having heated the body in this famous Russian steam sauna.

Not only was I integrated in everyday life but also was I taken to fantastic places, like one of the numerous beautiful lakes that are located in the region of Mari El, the breathtaking Volga, which we crossed walking on the ice at a spot where its width measures 6 km and to the thousand-year-old City Kazan which is about 200 km far from Yoshkar-Ola but under Russian conditions considered to be the neighbour town – incredible for someone who is used to live in a country as crowded as Germany.



Having tea on the streets of Jurina – a famous place right at the riparian of the Volga

Studying

The greatest advantage of coming to Yoshkar-Ola however is the fact that the head of the centre of international relations Eldar Kurbanov, professor of the forestry department of the State Technical University of Mari El, has long been working together with Professor Sven Wagner, head of the chair of silviculture of the Dresden Technical University. This is why my lecturers from Dresden are well known at the university in Yoshkar-Ola, which helped creating a warm and friendly atmosphere and made it easy to get to know each other. Besides attending lectures in Russian I also got involved in a joint research project on the matter of spatial distribution of natural birch regeneration on abandoned agricultural lands. The birch and pine forests typical for Mari El are beautiful and look very different from German Forests. They are light and coloured and especially in the birch forests there are to be found a lot of different accompanying tree species, shrubs and herbs. On our fieldtrips I learned about different research methods and the material we gathered I will use for writing my diploma thesis.



Fieldwork with my fellow students Lena, Irina and Sergej

Many Thanks

All in all, my stay has been a good combination of learning the Russian language, getting to know people and their culture and at the same time continuing my university studies. I am very grateful to all the people who made my stay as comfortable and enjoyable as possible and I will carry all my wonderful impressions to Germany so that future students will not hesitate to come to this beautiful country but will have enjoyable associations on its regard, as Russians are indeed filled with pleasant imaginations and welcoming thoughts towards Germans.