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We arrived to Yoshkar-Ola just before the 1st of May and had a chance to start our visit by taking part in the demonstrations and celebrations. The town was grey and the trees leafless but soon we got to notice how everything turned green almost overnight. We experienced a very rainy season with muddy streets in June and July, but also spent some hot summer days enjoying the sun and the beer under Lenin's feet. Most of the time we spent in "the vibrant city of Yoshkar-Ola" (quoted from local postcards), so the trips to the countryside or to other cities were very welcome and refreshing change from daily routines.



Demonstration in 1st of May

During our visit many of the departments of the University were introduced to us – which in most cases meant having tea and cake with the staff. What we may have lacked in information we certainly gained in weight! The people were always very friendly and somehow a way of communication was found even though a common language was sometimes missing. We felt welcome and remember the people with warm thoughts. Especially unforgettable was the visit to the laboratory of radio-ecology where we prepared a traditional Russian dish akroshka with the kind guidance of Olga and Dima.



Forest cutting group – three men, one leader and one chainsaw

The people weren't friendly only at the University but almost everywhere. We found out that it is very good to be a Finn in the republic of Mari El, as the Maris seem to be very keen on meeting other Finno-Ugric people. Many times we were recognized as Finns and the "brotherhood" of Maris and Finns was a good topic of conversation. Unfortunately, the conversations didn't get much deeper because of our poor knowledge of Russian (and Mari).



Rehabilitating the capability of working

One of the best ways to see Russian nature and the forest was to take part in the field practice of the forestry students. We visited camps in Lake Yalchic and the river Volga where the students were working more or less actively. We spent nights by bonfires and made more friends. After the students started speaking English to us (usually after one day of wondering) there was no end to the questions about Finland and our lives there. “How many sisters do you have?” “Do you have any pets?” “Tell me about Finland!” “Do you have a lot of friends?”

All in all, our stay in the Mari State Technical University and in Yoshkar-Ola was a unique opportunity to experience life in Russia, to get to know Mari culture and to learn about forests and people of Russia. Without the help of our hosts Eldar, Natalia and Oleg and our lovely Russian teacher and translator Tatiana we would have been just two non-Russian speaking foreign tourists without a chance to see (or eat) much. They helped us in so many ways that we can't fully express our gratitude: they organized a trip to fish at the river Volga, joined us in a cruise on the Volga, translated our questions into Russian and showed the best places for having lunch, renting DVDs or buying woolen shoes in the middle of July. They were patient, supporting and sometimes even too caring:)



Catfish catch

We hope to meet all of our new friends again in Yoshkar-Ola. Maybe we will not stay there three months next time, but we have a funny feeling we might end up missing Yoshkar-Ola. Some day.