The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Old Russian Country Life on Offer in Mandrogi

By Peter Spinella

December 02, 2010



Reshetova working the stove in one of the village's 19th-century cottages. **Peter Spinella**

VERKHNIYE MANDROGI, Leningrad Region — Visitors to this small settlement on the outskirts of the Leningrad region can catch a glimpse of a time long-forgotten by immersing themselves in 19th-century rural Russian life.

Located 260 kilometers northwest of St. Petersburg, Verkhniye Mandrogi is a rustic, wood-crafted village that has thoroughly recreated the simple life of pre-revolutionary Russia. Surrounded by forests and flanked by waterways on both sides, this timeless settlement along the Svir River offers something for almost anyone who wants to unwind from big-city life.

There are several relaxing banyas dotted around the village, two restaurants with excellent homestyle food, a vodka museum, crafts and cooking master classes, horseback riding and, for those seeking something a little more rustic, cozy cabins offering complete immersion in 19th-century Russia.

“It’s a harmonious blend of a historical and a modern way of life,” guide Olga Reshetova said. “Here it is possible to completely unwind from the noisy big city and learn something new about Russia’s past.”

Visitors can stay in wooden cabins — a number of which are authentic, 19th-century cottages, dismantled in the Arkhangelsk region and taken to Mandrogi — without modern conveniences, such as a television, gas stove or indoor plumbing.

“We strip you down, take your cell phone and put you in traditional village clothing,” Reshetova said as she led visitors on a press tour this fall. She showed journalists a wooden cabin with two cozy bedrooms, a large living room with a loom and a stone oven, a small stable on the ground floor with a cow and a horse, and outside, a banya beside a fresh-water lake.

“In Moscow, life is like a constant battle. Every day, you feel like you are simply aging. Here one can live normally,” said Reshetova, who escaped Moscow to live in the village a little over a year ago.

The village dates back to the 19th century but burned down during World War II. It was rebuilt in 1997 and has been attracting tourists ever since.

Tourists learn how to work the loom and fire up the wood stove and banya, cooking the food themselves and even doing chores like feeding hay to horses and cows.

Vladimir Totkalo and Neonila Shklyar are in charge of the village’s immersion aspect. They teach tourists about living in the old days, about tending to cows and horses, milling flour, weaving textiles on a loom and firing up a stove and “black,” or smoke-filled, banya.

When asked about the difficulties of living in a 19th-century village, Vladimir said: “For most folks, the hardest thing is waking up in the morning,” to get out of bed to start a fire and tend to the horses and cows as their ancestors did.

The less hardy can wimp out and opt for a cabin with running water and a television.

Where to Eat

Pavel Yankovsky, a chef from St. Petersburg, heads the main restaurant in the village center. Homestyle dishes using quail, duck and bear meat are specialities. Try the local kvas or khrenovukha (vodka with horse radish).

How to Get There

Almost a four-hour drive from St. Petersburg: Take the E105 northwest. At the 213 kilometer mark, at the sign for “Lodeinoye Pole,” drive to the right down the main street in the direction of Murmansk (through Lodeinoye Pole). After 23 kilometers, just beyond the bridge over the train tracks, at the sign, “Podporozhye — 45 kilometers,” take a right toward the town of Podporozhye. After 21 kilometers, you’ll see the sign to the village “Mandrogi.” The road to the village is on the left.

Where to Stay

A cabin with two or three bedrooms costs from 9,000 rubles a night. The village also has a small hotel charging from 2,200 rubles per night.

Verkhniye Mandrogi. Podporozhsky district, Leningrad region. Tel. (812) 347-9404. www.mandrogi.ru.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/12/02/old-russian-country-life-on-offer-in-mandrogi-a3458