

Virgin Relic Mania Reaches Fever Pitch

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Crowds of pilgrims queuing up near the Christ the Savior Cathedral. **Vladimir Filonov**

Braving freezing cold temperatures and ice-covered sidewalks, some 82,000 faithful stood in line Thursday to see and kiss a newly arrived relic of the Virgin Mary in the country's largest Orthodox cathedral in Moscow.

☒ The Virgin Mary's Cincture, a belt that Christians believe was worn by Jesus' mother, was brought to Russia last month on loan from Mount Athos, a monastic community in Greece.

☒ Kissing the relic, which is encased in an ornamental box, is believed to help barren women conceive and heal other ailments.

☒ The line of people to enter the golden-domed Christ the Savior Cathedral stretched four metro stations, from Kropotkinskaya to Vorobyovy Gory, despite subzero temperatures on Thursday, Interfax reported.

Some, however, enjoyed fast-track access to the relic: People arriving in cars with license plates of the type reserved for senior officials were let in without waiting in the line, Itar-Tass reported, citing a priest at the cathedral.

☒ Police officers announced through megaphones that it will take worshippers 24 hours to get to the relic, Interfax said. Some 80 people a minute — three to four abreast — were passing under the relic, mounted on a 2-meter arch in the temple.

☒ Hundreds of buses brought pilgrims from other Russian cities. Almost 200 buses were parked along the line with their engines running so the faithful could get warm as they waited. The city provided free tea and food and put up portable toilets.

☒ Some 1,500 police officers were deployed to prevent people from cutting in line.

☒ Traffic in central Moscow has been snarled since the relic first went on display Saturday. By Thursday, as many as 400,000 people had seen the relic, which will remain on display through Sunday.

☒ The St. Andrew's Foundation, which brought the relic to Russia, said it was viewed by 2 million people in 14 other cities before arriving in Moscow.

Curiously, a smaller part of the relic is on permanent display in the Church of Elijah on Obydensky Pereulok, several hundred meters from the Christ the Savior Cathedral, but it had never attracted such inflow of pilgrims.

(AP, MT)

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