The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The High Bar of Moscow Kids' Birthday Parties

By The Moscow Times

January 18, 2012



I've changed my mind. On this blog last week, I wrote that the point of disconnect between cultures is music. But I've been giving it some thought, and actually I think I have another contender. It's that old favorite: kids' birthday parties.

I suspect that wherever you go in the world, the goalposts for little Johnny's birthday party have moved somewhat over the last 30 years. Even in sleepy Britain, it's no longer enough to invite his best friends, play a game of pass the parcel or British bulldogs, serve up some cheese sandwiches with crisps, and dish out the chocolate cake after a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday". No, if you are foolish enough to offer up your home to the masses nowadays, in many parts of the world entertainers are a standard, a glass of wine for any accompanying parents is expected, and party bags are non-negotiable. And don't even think about trying to get away with just putting some stickers and a piece of cake inside it, you cheapskate. Not unless you want to be unmasked as such by a pint-sized monster who rips the bag ungratefully out of your hand before commenting loudly on the contents.

But that, my friends, is nothing. That is plain vanilla. For now we are in Moscow, and you ain't seen nothin' yet...

Children's parties in this city are, to many non-residents, unbelievable. When I regale friends back in the UK with tales of incredible Russian children's birthday parties, invariably they don't believe me. Or, if they do believe me, I'm afraid it only goes to fuel the internationally held image of Russia as a country of extremes.

My back catalogue of recent party stories includes but is not limited to: those with added animal entertainment (not rabbits in hats and dogs jumping through hoops, but performing monkeys, look-but-don't-touch crocodiles and bears on bicycles; on one memorable occasion, Mummy Bear was even—heart-wrenchingly—accompanied by her cub); themed events that take all day with a 15-to-20-strong team of entertainers; 5-to-10-minute-long professional firework displays in honor of the birthday child; fully catered sit-down meals for both parents and children; sushi for the kids (in itself, not a bad idea, but I just can't get past the fact that we are many, many miles from the nearest sea); pink champagne for the parents; stunt policemen turning up complete with guns and handcuffs to arrest a wrongfully accused stunt Spiderman; 30-foot inflatable climbing walls in the back yard; and one borrowed anecdote from a friend who glanced into her neighbors' yard some time last year to see the 5-year-old birthday boy sitting resplendently in the seat of his present: a full-sized Hummer with a bow on top.

As an expat living here I couldn't hope to compete, and, indeed, I wouldn't want to. So our recent offering of a low-key party for one of my sons and his classmates consisting of snow games, pizza, chocolate cake and musical chairs was determinedly retro. The children all appeared to have a great time, and I even got a dose of exercise from jumping up and down directing musical statues. You might have almost thought we were back in 1970s Britain (except for the international backgrounds of the guests and the fact that the music was better, obviously), until one of the mums present mentioned that a couple of days previously one of her neighbors' children had had a party with not only all the requisite Moscow whistles and bells, but also the ultimate in animal entertainment.

They had a Siberian tiger, on a leash.

Ah, Moscow...

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